

A Right Wing Man Named Cotton

from the Land of Cotton Tells the Truth About Racialized Capitalism

Frank Joyce

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As the story goes, Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the bestselling and game changing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "So," he said, "you're the little lady who started all the trouble."

Historian Gerald Horne started some trouble too. His book, *The Counter Revolution of 1776*, published in 2014, brought into the light of day the long suppressed truth about the so called revolution. More recently, the 1619 Project featured in *The New York Times* expanded awareness of how much the commitment to enslavement drove the violent secession from British colonial rule.

White power has taken notice.

The 1619 Project has been attacked by liberals and the right. What has the defenders of the fairy tale version of the history of the revolution most concerned is that the project is being used as a study guide for schools.

For those new to these developments, the perspective that has finally emerged after 250 years of myth-making is that the majority of leaders of the rebellion against the British were not entirely motivated by high falutin' ideals of democracy and freedom. To the contrary, the white, male property owning, including human property, organizers had other concerns in mind.

Apprehension over the rise of a powerful abolitionist movement in Britain was one of them.

The fear was that as a colony, if slavery was outlawed in England, the colonial enslavers would be required to do so as well, forfeiting a fortune invested in human property that was the basis of their wealth.

Anger over British placing obstacles to the colonists' unfettered seizure of territory beyond the original 13 colonies was another grievance. So were alliances between British troops and some Native nations.

Fast forward to a July 26, 2020 interview by the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* with a 21st Century white supremacist, Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton. "We have to study the history of slavery and its role and impact on the development of our country because otherwise we can't understand our country," Cotton told the paper.

"As the Founding Fathers said, it was the necessary evil upon which the union was built, but the union was built in a way, as Lincoln said, to put slavery on the course to its ultimate extinction," he continued. Given that it took 750,000 deaths in the Civil War to make it happen, the slavery-on-course-to-ultimate-extinction claim is obviously utter nonsense.

That aside, Cotton's confirmation of slavery being at the very foundation of the United States as a nation is quite remarkable. While conceding the very point at issue—the centrality of slavery to the founding of the United States, Cotton also wants to double down on the centuries old cover up.

He has introduced the Saving American History Act of 2020 which would financially penalize any school district using 1619 Project material in its curriculum. (Pardon me for asking, but is that what's meant by cancel culture?)

It is hard to overstate just what Cotton's admission to the truth could mean. Reliance on just five words in the Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal," has distorted the political landscape since 1776. As a result, one of the biggest problems with living up to those ideals has always been the ideals. People get all bent out

of shape about Donald Trump's lying. This is a means of avoiding the fact that he is the logical culmination of the web spun from the founding lies, including the whopper that white male skin makes you a superior creature.

I have written in the *Fifth Estate* and elsewhere about the intrinsic limits of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Neither the documents nor the motives behind them were created to secure democracy. The country was founded to transfer colonial power from Britain to a small elite group of white property owning men.

As Nicole Hannah-Jones, the lead creator of the NYT 1619 Project points out in her introductory essay, it is the vision and struggle of Black people that significantly accounts for the limited democracy that we do enjoy. The founders intended that it be extremely difficult to diminish the power of the elite men.

That Black people and other advocates for peace, justice and equality have made anything at all out of "created equal" and some other very thin language is an astounding achievement.

Ending slavery, voting rights for women, dismantling Jim Crow, recognition of and bargaining rights for unions, health care, not for all, but for anyone, resisting endless war—all of these have required protracted, difficult and often fatal struggle and sacrifice.

Could it have been different in the before times? A tantalizing question. Can it be different in the future? A critical question.

As to the past, there were times and places in the history of what is now the United States when peace, harmony and justice sought a foothold. For example, there were instances of social and economic cooperation between settlers and Native nations and peoples.

Scholar Claudio Saunt explains in his book *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory* (Note: this would have been around 1830), "In Indiana, John Metoxen, a Stockbridge Mahican missionary, noted that his people were 'farmers and macanics,' who possessed 'considerable farms.' It is my true wish and desire to be settled in some part of the world whare I can Injoy the Blessings of the soil that Gave me Birth, he wrote, and see my Children and family connection and all nations of people Injoying the same Priviledge with helth."

But the forces of colonialism were too powerful. Nowhere in either the northern or southern part of what is now called America did anything resembling an anti-colonial nation last for very long. (Cuba is the longest enduring exception.)

Saunt puts it this way, "The ways of living pursued by indigenous Americans and U.S. citizens in the Southeast increasingly overlapped, a trend that John Clark, the governor of Georgia, found alarming, since the longer the two peoples were "suffered to intermix," the more difficult it would become for the state to appropriate native lands.

While U.S. officials would continue to complain about the bonds forming between their citizens and native peoples, they also insisted with growing urgency and dwindling evidence that the two ways of living were fundamentally irreconcilable. In truth, only one thing was truly irreconcilable: native and white ownership of the same land."

That was then. Are we at a transformational point now? It's too soon to tell, but we have seen times like this before.

Yes, the vocabulary is evolving. Systemic racism is now somewhat displacing institutional racism as shorthand for a problem to be solved. And yet most people, Black people included, remain deeply attached to the structure created by the Constitution and other foundational concepts such as the rule-of-law and Euro-American assertions of what distinguishes civilization from anything else.

Fix it, don't nix it rules the public discourse. Tepid reforms are exaggerated across the political spectrum to appear far more radical than they really are. For example, ending the filibuster in the Senate is portrayed in mainstream media as drastic, even though abolishing the Electoral College and, for that matter, the Senate itself would do far more to produce real shifts in power and policy.

Inertia sustains the status quo all by itself. But white power does not trust to that alone. A vast network of think tanks, foundations and media outlets work with schools, churches and other institutions to keep the conversation within narrow limits. If I have learned anything in decades of work against white supremacy it is that this juggernaut will not easily go away.

Tom Cotton, bless his oh-so-Christian heart, has given us some help. It was the slavery all along. And, of course, stealing the land to begin with so that there would be a place to keep and work the enslaved people in order to build the wealth that still sustains the whole patriarchal white supremacist capitalist machine.

Finally, we can all agree on where we need to start over.

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