DAVID BARTON: THE BIG LIE OF THE 1619 PROJECT

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David Barton is founder and president of WallBuilders, a national pro-family organization that presents America’s forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on our moral, religious, and constitutional heritage.

In 2019, the New York Times, on what they claimed (incorrectly) was the four hundredth anniversary of slaves being brought to America, published the 1619 Project. It sought to reframe all American history into the narrative that “out of slavery . . . grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional.”

The 1619 Project is now a curriculum used in classrooms in all fifty states, and the propaganda has been so influential that the massive riots during the summer of 2020 were often called the “1619 Riots.”

The curriculum has many dangerous historical errors. Perhaps the biggest is that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery.” (This falsehood forms the foundation of their other errant accusations.) This claim is so laughably dishonest that even the most liberal progressive textbooks don’t make it.

A brief investigation into the War for American Independence quickly reveals that rather than being motivated by a desire “to protect the institution of slavery,” many Founding Fathers instead actively sought to end it. Just check the Declaration of Independence—perhaps the single most important document in our history.

Written primarily by Thomas Jefferson, it outlined the principles upon which America was founded, including that:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Although anti-slavery activists from across the world have for centuries invoked these words in their own struggles for liberty, the 1619 Project and many revisionist historians instead claim that these words were a “lie,” and that the phrase applied only to white men. But again, this is not true.

In Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration submitted to the Continental Congress, the longest grievance was devoted entirely to the extermination of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. He criticized and condemned King George III and the British government for vetoing every anti-slavery law that had been passed in America, further denouncing the King because he:

Has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.

Jefferson specifically wrote the word “MEN” in all caps to emphasize that both blacks and whites were equal in terms of humanity. And his clause had further alluded to the dozens of anti-slavery laws that had been passed by America’s colonial legislatures, but which were vetoed or overturned by the King, royal governors, or English judges.

Sadly, Jefferson’s strong grievance against the slave trade did not appear in the final draft, which required the unanimous agreement of all thirteen colonies before anything was included. Eleven of the thirteen wanted to keep the anti-slavery grievance, but as Jefferson later lamented, “the clause . . . was struck out, in compliance to South Carolina and Georgia.”

The views it expressed clearly represented the view of a supermajority of American colonies, and once free from Great Britain, many of those colonies banned not only the slave trade, but also slavery.

The actions not only of states but of numerous Founding Fathers further confirm the strong and growing anti-slavery sentiment of that period. For example, a group of delegates led by George Washington announced that “we take this opportunity of declaring our most earnest wishes to see an entire stop to such a wicked, cruel, and unnatural [slave] trade.” George Mason, a principal framer of the Virginia Constitution in 1776 and later a framer of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, reported that opposition to the slave trade “was one of the great causes of our separation from Great Britain.” Benjamin Franklin affirmed that “a disposition to abolish slavery prevails in North America.” Significantly, nearly two-thirds of America’s political leaders in that period expressed opposition to slavery, freed their own slaves, or worked with anti-slavery societies.

Here are a few of their statements:

Thomas Jefferson (Declaration author and signer): “The minds of our citizens may be ripening for a complete emancipation . . . preparing them, under the auspices of Heaven, for a total emancipation.”

Oliver Ellsworth (Constitution framer): “All good men wish the entire abolition of slavery.”

James Iredell (an original Supreme Court Justice): “When the entire abolition of slavery takes place, it will be an event which must be pleasing to every generous mind and every friend of human nature.”

Patrick Henry (famous orator and early patriot): “I repeat again, that it would rejoice my very soul that every one of my fellow-beings was emancipated.”

Noah Webster (Revolutionary War veteran, called the “Schoolmaster of America” for his textbooks and famous dictionary): “Let every benevolent heart rejoice at the progress already made in restraining the nefarious business of enslaving men, and pray for the glorious period when the last slave who fights for freedom shall be stored to the possession of the inestimable right.”

The American War for Independence launched the first major anti-slavery movement in the world. After it was won, from 1790 to 1810, the number of free blacks in America increased from 59,466 to 108,395 (a growth rate of 82 percent), and the next decade saw that number expand another 72 percent to 186,446. By 1804, all New England states (as well as Vermont, New York, and New Jersey) had either completely abolished slavery or enacted laws for its gradual abolition, and within only six more years, 99 percent of the population in those northern states were completely free.

The claim that the American Revolution was started to preserve slavery is just one of the many lies found in the 1619 Project. The Bible declares that the Lord hates both “A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren” (Prov. 6:19). The 1619 Project does both.

We must push back against the fake history being promoted by the 1619 Project and instead present the true history of our incredible nation. America, like every other nation, was not perfect, but we have an amazing story of people from all backgrounds coming together to advance the principles of liberty. If we want to continue enjoying freedom, we must not only know but also teach the truth about America’s remarkable founding.

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. — John 8:32, English Standard Version