

A Divided Perception

My descriptions of the nation's founding have thus far been straightforward. But if you've consumed any media at all in the last ten years, you know that opinions regarding our founding fathers, the American Revolution, and even the Constitution are anything but unified.

Like most of our modern conflicts, the issue of our founding is split between the political Left and the political Right. The very vocal minorities on the fringes of each ideology have staked out opposing, mutually exclusive positions, with most average American voters not quite sure which side they should be on, or why they should be asked to choose at all.

The Left's View of the Founding

Perhaps the best encapsulation of the far-left take on America's founding and its foundational documents can be found in the 1619 Project,¹ a *New York Times* project directed by Nicole Hannah Jones. A quote from Jones is featured prominently on the project's page: "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true."

The 1619 Project gives a scholarly voice to the long-held idea that America's entire history was built on the back of slavery and genocide and thus its institutions and traditions should not be upheld. Black American and Native American activists have often joined in protests, in legal action, and in lobbying lawmakers to fundamentally change our nation's laws and institutions.

Several of the founding fathers, including our first president George Washington, were slaveholders themselves. This fact, in the eyes of some, discredits their ideas about what a country should be and how it should operate. The disgust with the founding fathers has gotten to

¹ Jones, N.H. (2019). The 1619 Project. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>

such a state that statues have been vandalized and toppled.² A statue of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, was officially removed in New York as a rebuke to his involvement in the slave trade.³ In addition to being a slave holder, Jefferson was known to have had several children by one of his slaves, Sally Hemmings.

In both official and unofficial capacities, left-wing voices have risen up to state that the founding was flawed, the men who founded it were flawed, and the country, however well-meaning its current residents, are simply perpetuating those same flaws. Better to throw out the Constitution and start over.

It isn't just the black-clad anarcho-communists in Portland who hold this idea. Far from it. Removing ourselves from the shackles of our founding documents and the need to ensure our laws are constitutional has been met with approval from many respected voices in the Democrat party and in academia. Georgetown law professor Mike Seidman wrote in *the New York Times*:

The people who wrote the Constitution lived in a small rural country, huddled along the Eastern Seaboard — a large part of which was financed by slave labor. ... Many of them believed that it was okay to own other human beings. Almost all of them believed that women should have no role in public affairs. Almost all of them believed people ... without property have no role in public affairs. Why on earth would anybody think that their decisions ought to bind us now?⁴

On local, state, and federal levels, people and organizations with these beliefs are working to pass new laws and change existing ones with the intention of remaking the entire country. In their view, the foundation upon which our country was built can never produce a righteous legal or legislative system.

² Ellis, R. (2020). George Washington statue toppled in Portland. *OPB News*.
<https://www.opb.org/news/article/george-washington-statue-toppled-portland/>

³ Sharp, J. (2021). Statue of US President Thomas Jefferson removed from New York City Hall over slavery links. *Sky News*.
<https://news.sky.com/story/statue-of-us-president-thomas-jefferson-removed-from-new-york-city-hall-over-slavery-links-12476201>

⁴ Op-Ed: We The People Should Throw Out The Constitution (2013). Talk of the Nation. *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/2013/01/03/168549290/the-constitution-just-a-poetic-piece-of-parchment>

The Right's View of the Founding

Far from their counterparts' assertion that the founding was inherently flawed, the activists and personalities on the Right often indicate that the founding documents are the *only* source of legitimate authority in the U.S. In the most recent appointment of Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney-Barrett, part of what made her so appealing to the Right was the fact that she was "an originalist," meaning that in her interpretations of law, she only considered what the framers had in mind. This, to those on the Right, is exceptionally appealing.

The reason for this is that they hold the creation of the United States to be special, perhaps even sacred. Politically-engaged Christian pastors such as Billy Graham and later Jerry Falwell have often made the claim that the U.S. is under God's protection, that God was present at the founding, and that the U.S. is unequivocally a Christian nation. Not all people on the Right are aligned with the Evangelical movement, but most of them view the founding documents and the government formed by the Founding Fathers to be the best possible government in the world. The Right very much aligns with Ronald Reagan's designation of the U.S. as a "shining city on a hill."