

American Disrupters: How the Founders Defined Freedom

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

I graduated from high school in 1976—50 years ago. It was the year of our nation's bicentennial celebrations. I remember many of my classmates, like me, were underwhelmed by the bicentennial.

We were the product of American history lessons that were more about patriotism, about American exceptionalism, than about history. There was a lot of pressure for my generation to understand that our nation of “liberty and justice for all” was way better than the godless Communism practiced in the Soviet Union. Good vs. evil, no nuance. The history we learned was whitewashed. The only “critical” message about our founding fathers I remember, beyond the fable of George Washington cutting down a cherry tree when he was a boy, was that Aaron Burr and Benedict Arnold were bad. In fifth grade, I was embarrassed in front of my class because I said the Civil War was about slavery, and my teacher very firmly said I was wrong. The war was about taxation, she told us.

By the time I was in high school, I was pretty cynical. I read the daily newspaper, and it was hard to reconcile the “Right or wrong, it's my country” mindset with the news from Southeast Asia, where too many poor and BIPOC American boys were sent to carry out what looked like an imperialist mission. Also, and I can't overstate the importance of this for me, I listened to a lot of protest music. Like many kids my age, I identified with and knew the lyrics to songs like Fortunate Son, Marvin Gaye's What's Going On, and the Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag.

The bicentennial celebrations didn't inspire me. Even so, I've noticed over the years that some of those patriotic lessons stayed with me. I felt betrayed when DNA tests proved the monumental hypocrisy of Thomas Jefferson. I really wanted to believe he was honorable. And I still—even now—sometimes find myself thinking that our

constitution's system of checks and balances will protect us from corruption and authoritarianism, like the Supreme Court is going to ride in to the rescue. Any day now.

So, I have feelings about the country's upcoming 250th anniversary celebrations. We can meet the anniversary with renewed dedication to our own ideals and values. We can resist the current administration's attempts to whitewash American history. And in this moment, we can make history, all of us, by refusing to go quietly along with attacks on liberty and justice in our community and around the world.

Sermon by Tracy Reilly Kelly

In the new year, we seek resistance to the worst impulses of humans – greed and avarice. We have much to resist against. Let me tell you the American backstory....it is a cautionary tale.

Good morning – Happy America's 250th Birthday year Hero Worship! Philosopher George Santayana said that *those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it* – and there are some serious signs we are doing so now.

The Founders listed 27 “grievances” against Britain in the Declaration of Independence – and I encourage you to read them for their chilling relevance in 2026. We do not want kings in America. Our theme this month is “Practicing Resistance” – resistance was exactly what the colonists were practicing in overthrowing unjust authoritarianism in 1776.

But rather than the grievances, I wish to focus on another section: *“we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”*,

How can we reconcile these words with the fact that these men held enslaved people in captivity – what in the world did the Founders mean by this? Aren't these two concepts entirely in opposition to each other? This sermon is my attempt to explore that paradox so that we might understand our current political situation with more context.

During the American Revolution Britain's witty Samuel Johnson famously said: *"How is it we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of Negroes?"*

Our continent was peopled by roughly two types, both looking for their own definition of freedom – those fleeing religious persecution, and those seeking economic prosperity. In the new land, neither was concerned with the Indigenous residents. Colonists did not believe that Indigenous people should have dominion over the New World. Rights – schmights! Talk about dehumanization, Natives were savages, barbarians. History would prove you could try genocide instead.

Liberty was the word of the day in 1776 – it remains the hallmark of our national belief system along with religious freedom. When our ancestors fought for liberty, did they also fight for equality and freedom? Are liberty and freedom the same?

I think that in our era, the answer is yes. Liberty is freedom from an oppressor. If all men are created equal, all of them deserve freedom.

Of course. Yet, in our American past these ideas did not mean the same thing. Why? To figure this out, I want to introduce a term that you might have heard of: *"Presentism"*. When practicing presentism, we view the past using present day perspectives and values. For example, in Presentism, the enslavement of people is always, totally, wrong. It seems ridiculous to think otherwise. Our ancestors lived in a different world.

The Founders recognized that this liberty had to be justified by a universal ideal of justice that was rooted in the moral order of the universe, not merely created by man. Religion is quite involved in the moral order of the universe. Luckily for the Planter class Christianity appeared to offer salve to the enslaver. There are at least seven passages in the Bible where God is depicted as directly permitting or endorsing slavery. Two of these are in the Law of Moses: God permitted the Israelites to take slaves from conquered peoples permanently, and the Israelites could sell themselves into slavery temporarily to pay off debts, the other five passages are in the New Testament, where slavery as a social institution is endorsed and slaves are called to obey their masters "in everything".

It will take a segment of Christians using different biblical teachings, willing to be shamed and vilified, even fighting a bloody civil war to have our present view of morality to win out. But in my story for today, that hasn't happened yet.

In Philadelphia, liberty was the clarion cry. Liberty was less about personal freedom – in those days – who had that? – than about freedom to live where you wanted or not be taxed. Freedom to practice your own kind of religion. Most colonials would be thinking - “How could men be equal when they were plainly not?”. Whaat? I don't know about you, but until I started researching the American Revolution – I am teaching a class at Clark College about this – it never occurred to me that a basic idea like equality was actually nuanced rather than clear.

Eyler Robert Coates says, *“Freedom usually means to be free from something, whereas Liberty usually means to be free to do something, although both refer to the quality or state of being free. The thought of “limitations to freedom” in its general sense was never addressed as such because freedom was not used in the sense of our being free to do anything we want”.* REPEAT

Liberty did mean due process. Due process, in danger today, was the number one aim of the colonists asking to form a new nation. Due process for the land of immigrants. In 2026 we can practice resistance by focusing on this as our most core value.

Let's add equality to the questions. July 2nd was the actual date that Thomas Jefferson submitted his final, edited Declaration as a member of a committee that included John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson, who never spoke in public, never ever, was highly regarded for his writing.

Wordsmith Franklin did edit one line – a line that was not regarded at the time to be important – to offer the words self-evident, as in: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...*

In 1776, Jefferson decided to be lyrical. He borrowed the Life, Liberty concept from radical Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* – the small book that ignited the Revolution, still one of the most popular of all time. Paine took his ideas from English Common Law's natural rights foundation, established back in Magna Carta days. These are the year

1216 ideas such as due process, no inhumane treatment, no taxation without representation.

In the context of 1776, what did this all men are created equal aspiration mean? It was not a statement about individual rights to equality because people were constrained by class, tradition and rules. It certainly didn't include women. It was meant to say that Americans should have the same rights of self-government as did other peoples. So, they could declare independence, be a new country, create a new government - and assume a separate but equal status among other nations. The American republic would be equal to other nations.

If actual freedom was rare - and remember – it was! Let's try to understand what the colonists thought about enslavement, the opposite of freedom. Neither Jefferson nor most of the others thought Blacks and whites were equal. No one did at that time. Tragically, enslaving others was something everyone had witnessed for ages. In any war, that's what happened to prisoners, that's what happened to the Irish with Cromwell.

I do have welcome news for you – our religious ancestors were the good guys. John Adams and the Puritans, the Congregationalist people we are descended from religiously, were absolutely opposed to enslavement. While some of the early Puritans had purchased subjugated people, it was a minority. By the late 18th Century, few people in Massachusetts still held a slave. Our two UU religions began after the 1783 Constitution was written, Universalism in 1793 and Unitarianism in 1825, but all the players were meeting congregationally.

Did you know that Quakers also held enslaved people? Bostonians were way more abolitionist than Pennsylvanians. Their anti-slavery talk only began in the early 1700's, and they were still talking about it, increasingly angry about it, but with no official position, in the 1770's. Penn had imported enslaved people to build the original colony.

Interestingly, our UU religious ancestors were capitalists who saw wage labor as the only equitable way to form a society - with fair competition. For Bostonians, being against enslavement was not only to decry holding humans in servitude, but bondage labor offered unfair economic competition to the working man. It was also in 1776 that

The Wealth of Nations, the book that introduced the concept of capitalism, was written by Britain's Adam Smith.

Back to the Declaration - the Continental Congresses' delegates submitted 80 changes to Jefferson's draft document. None of those men foresaw the expansive implications of *"all men are created equal"*.

Jefferson had inserted one line about the immoral slave trade – a grievance against the enslaver King George III, the single reference to holding humans. South Carolina and Georgia would not sign the document if that line was in.

Northerners do not get a Hall Pass at this time, they didn't oppose the Southerners, as even in that era, it was noted that the northern Constitutional Convention delegates *"were a little tender"* on this subject as well. In the northern colonies, it was said that *"People have very few slaves themselves yet are considerable carriers"*. At the Declaration's editing, all references to enslavement would be deleted.

Let's go to those times - understand – in the Thirteen Colonies - everybody is *"in"*. Making money off the products produced for free by enslaved people. It was surprising that Jefferson even wrote that line, as he held hundreds of enslaved people himself.

What held all the disparately geographical Founders together was bondage. Out of a 1776 American population of 2.5 million, 1 in 5 colonists were enslaved - 500,000 people. 41 of the 56 Declaration signers and 25 of the 55 men who wrote the Constitution owned enslaved people. Among the first 18 U.S. presidents, 12 owned humans at some point, and nine of those had enslaved people working in the White House

Jefferson radically realized that if slavery could be dissolved, it must be now, when the iron was hot. It wasn't that crazy to suggest ending the immoral practice, there was no cotton industry yet, the Cotton Gin wasn't invented until 1793, smaller plantations were in tobacco, and indigo and rice in the Carolinas.

What dreamer that guy was! Imagine the profits you can get when you are not paying for labor! When everyone is profiting, as every entitled white person is, whole new ways

to look at enslavement were created in North America. A new idea - Chattel slavery – lifelong, inheritable enslavement, will begin in Virginia in 1705. Before this, enslavement more ran along the lines of indenture hood, with ultimate freedom reachable in seven years. By creating a system of forever chattel, Indentured Servants went by the wayside in favor of lifelong servitude.

In the vast American continent, the amount of work to plant crops is immense. White planters call out that they cannot be expected to do this punishing level of work. Imagine the brutal sugarcane field operations in the Caribbean! They must create a supra-human African somehow genetically there to do more work than any white man can possibly do. We return to dehumanization in order to justify not only enslavement but barbarism.

We wanted economic freedom to plunder and kidnap. Freedom to take over all of the continent, restive Americans wanted that land! Britain wanted to keep the land west of the Appalachians for the natives, in compensation of what had been stolen. Colonists could care less about what happened to, in their eyes, murderous Indians. You can't believe the economic speculation that went on for western lands.

The Constitution would go on to preserve exactly those kinds of rights. The Bill of Rights may be all full of important freedoms, but still none of those were for Blacks or Natives. *"The Constitution"*, later opined Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, *"is a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell"*,

Historian Joseph Ellis says, *"the entire history of liberal reform in the United States can be written as a process of discovery, within Jefferson's words, of a mandate for ending slavery, providing rights of citizenship to Blacks, women, and gays, and protecting a full range of individual freedoms."*

The Abolition movement would take many years to push a civil war and subsequent rights Amendments. The Fourteenth Amendment that gave so many new rights, including birthright citizenship, is said to be a mini-Constitution all by itself.

It would come to Abraham Lincoln to say, at the Gettysburg Address, *"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in*

Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal", that this nation could – and would - end enslavement. Even Lincoln took a long time to get to that place. And as we know, it would take another 100 years to even begin to live out these statements. Today, we are shocked to hear another President proud of white supremacy and all in for imperialism. How can it be so?

CLOSING WORDS

- *He that would make his own liberty secure, must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty, he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.* **Thomas Paine**
- *I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love.* **W.E. B. DuBois**