

How America's 'Sacred Heritage' Shaped Martin Luther King Jr.'s Vision

Writing in 1963 from the Birmingham City Jail where he had been incarcerated, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed his conviction that his fight for civil rights would succeed because of America's unique and godly heritage. He wrote, "Our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America . . . We will win our freedom because the 'sacred heritage' of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands."

Calling America's heritage "sacred" indicated that King believed that there was something special and godly in the founding of America. He obviously considered the Jim Crow South where he lived and worked to be a sharp departure from America's founding vision.

Frederick Douglass (1816-1895), the former slave and abolitionist, came to the same conclusion 100 years before King. In his early years, Douglass felt he had no part in America, but after years of research he completely changed his thinking. In a July Fourth speech in 1852, he called the U.S. Constitution "a glorious liberty document," and declared, "I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men too—great enough to give fame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men."

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Douglass called the founders "brave men" because they took a bold stand against slavery at a time it was accepted and practiced in most of the world. The eminent Black scholar, Dr.

Thomas Sowell, has said,

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Slavery was just not an issue, not even among intellectuals, much less among political leaders, until the 18th century—and then it was an issue only in Western civilization. Among those who turned against slavery in the 18th century were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and other American leaders. You could research all of 18th century Africa or Asia or the Middle East without finding any comparable rejection of slavery there (Hyatt, “1726: The Year that Defined America,” 90).

It was the Great Awakening (1726-1770) in Colonial America that shattered racial and cultural barriers and unleashed antislavery outrage throughout the Colonies. This Christian Awakening resulted in virtually every Founding Father, even those who owned slaves, taking a public stand against it.

For example, in an April 12, 1786 letter to Robert Morris, George Washington wrote, “There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of slavery” (Hyatt, “Abolitionist Founding Fathers,” 41).

By the time of the writing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the U.S. Constitution in 1787, virtually every founder agreed with John Adams, America’s second president, who declared, Every measure of prudence ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States. I have throughout my whole life held the practice of slavery in abhorrence” (Hyatt, “Abolitionist,” 36).

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Because of this cosmic shift, America's founders formulated founding documents that contain no classifications based on race or skin color. The words "slave" and "slavery" are nowhere to be found. Instead, the Constitution speaks of "citizens," "persons" and "other persons."

America's founders believed they had set the nation on a course for the soon elimination of slavery at a time it was practiced throughout the world. They did not, however, anticipate the invention of the cotton gin in 1798 or how succeeding generations would backtrack on their vision of liberty for all.

Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) understood this and insisted that his fight against slavery was a continuation of the fight begun by America's founders. He said, "In the way our Fathers originally left the slavery question, the institution was in the course of ultimate extinction ... All I have asked or desired is that it should be placed back again upon the bases that the Fathers of our government originally placed it upon" (Hyatt, 59-60).

Like Lincoln, King believed his fight for racial equality to be rooted in America's founding vision—in her "sacred heritage." Modern secularists have almost destroyed this heritage, scrubbing it from textbooks and classroom lectures. This is why this present generation must rediscover and reconnect with this "sacred heritage" if the America of Washington, Douglass, Lincoln and King is to survive.

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This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's books, "1726: The Year that Defined America" and "Abolitionist Founding Fathers," available from Amazon and his website at .