

The Founders and Slavery: Three Perspectives

Questions to Consider

1. To what extent do you see conflicting or mixed motives within the thinking of each of these individuals in these writings?
2. What are the similarities and differences among these three individuals regarding slavery?

GEORGE WASHINGTON ON SLAVERY

George Washington to Robert Morris, Mount Vernon, 12 April 1786

I give you the trouble of this letter at the instance of Mr. Dalby of Alexandria; who is called to Philadelphia to attend what he conceives to be a vexatious law-suit respecting a slave of his, which a Society of Quakers in the City (formed for such purposes) have attempted to liberate. The merits of this case will no doubt appear upon trial; but from Mr Dalby's state of the matter, it should seem that this Society is not only acting repugnant to justice so far as its conduct concerns strangers, but, in my opinion extremely impolitically with respect to the State—the City in particular; & without being able (but by Acts of tyranny & oppression) to accomplish their own ends. He says the conduct of this society is not sanctioned by Law: had the case been otherwise, whatever my opinion of the Law might have been, my respect for the policy of the State would on this occasion have appeared in my silence; because against the penalties of promulgated Laws one may guard; but there is no avoiding the snares of individuals, or of private societies—and if the practice of this Society of which Mr Dalby speaks, is not discountenanced, none of those whose *misfortune* it is to have slaves as attendants will visit the City if they can possibly avoid it; because by so doing they hazard their property—or they must be at the expence (& this will not always succeed) of providing servants of another description for the trip.

I hope it will not be conceived from these observations, that it is my wish to hold the unhappy people who are the subject of this letter, in slavery. I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it—but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, & that is by Legislative authority: and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting. But when slaves who are happy & content to remain with their present masters, are tampered with & seduced to leave them; when masters are taken at unawar[e]s by these practices; when a conduct of this sort begets discontent on one side and resentment on the other, & when it happens to fall on a man whose purse will not measure with that of the Society, & he loses his property for want of means to defend it—it is oppression in the latter case, & not humanity in any; because it introduces more evils than it can cure.

I will make no apology for writing to you on this subject; for if Mr Dalby has not misconceived the matter, an evil exists which requires a remedy; if he has, my intentions have been good though I may have been too precipitate in this address.

G: Washington

George Washington to John Francis Mercer, Mount Vernon, 9 September 1786

I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted, by the legislature by which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptible degrees.

George Washington, Undated Memorandum

The unfortunate condition of the persons, whose labour in part I employed, has been the only unavoidable subject of regret. To make the Adults among them as easy & as comfortable in their circumstances as their actual state of ignorance & improvidence would admit; & to lay a foundation to prepare the rising generation for a destiny different from that in which they born; afforded some satisfaction to my mind, & could not I hoped be displeasing to the justice of the Creator.

THOMAS JEFFERSON ON SLAVERY

Thomas Jefferson to Jean Nicolas D meunier, Paris, 26 June 1786

What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! Who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment or death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment be deaf to all those motives whose power supported him thro' his trial, and inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose. But we must await with patience the workings of an overruling providence, and hope that that is preparing the deliverance of these our suffering brethren. When the measure of their tears shall be full, when their groans shall have involved heaven itself in darkness, doubtless a god of justice will awaken to their distress, and by diffusing light and liberality among their oppressors, or at length by his exterminating thunder, manifest his attention to the things of this world, and that they are not left to the guidance of a blind fatality.

Thomas Jefferson to Messrs. Thomas, Ellicot, and Others, 13 November 1807

Whatever may have been the circumstances which influenced our forefathers to permit the introductions of personal bondage into any parts of these states & to participate in the wrongs committed on an unoffending quarter of the globe, we may rejoice that such circumstances, & such a sense of them, exist no longer, It is honorable to the nation at large that their legislature availed themselves of the first practicable moment for the arresting of the progress of this great moral & political error: and I sincerely pray with you, my friends, that all the members of the human family, may in the time prescribed by the Father of us all, find themselves securely established in the enjoyments of life, liberty & happiness.

Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, Monticello, 25 August 1814

Your favor of July 31. was duly recieved, and was read with peculiar pleasure. the sentiments breathed thro' the whole do honor to both the head and heart of the writer. mine on the subject of the slavery of negroes have long since been in possession of the public, and time has only served to give them stronger root. the love of justice & the love of country

plead equally the cause of these people, and it is a mortal reproach to us that they should have pleaded it so long in vain, and should have produced not a single effort, nay I fear not much serious willingness to relieve them & ourselves from our present condition of moral and political reprobation. from those of the former generation who were in the fulness of age when I came into public life, which was while our controversy with England was on paper only, I soon saw that nothing was to be hoped. nursed and educated in the daily habit of seeing the degraded condition, both bodily & mental, of those unfortunate beings, not reflecting that that degradation was very much the work of themselves & their fathers, few minds had yet doubted but that they were as legitimate subjects of property as their horses or cattle. the quiet & monotonous course of colonial life had been disturbed by no alarm, & little reflection on the value of liberty. and when alarm was taken at an enterprise on their own, it was not easy to carry them the whole length of the principles which they invoked for themselves. in the first or second session of the legislature after I became a member, I drew to this subject the attention of Colo Bland, one of the oldest, ablest, and most respected members, and he undertook to move for certain moderate extensions of the protection of the laws to these people. I seconded his motion, and, as a younger member, was more spared in the debate: but he was denounced as an enemy to his country, & was treated with the grossest indecorum. from an early stage of our revolution other and more distant duties were assigned to me, so that from that time till my return from Europe in 1789. and I may say till I returned to reside at home in 1809. I had little opportunity of knowing the progress of public sentiment here on this subject. I had always hoped that the younger generation, receiving their early impressions after the flame of liberty had been kindled in every breast, and had become as it were the vital spirit of every American, that the generous temperament of youth, analogous to the motion of their blood, and above the suggestions of avarice, would have sympathised with oppression wherever found, and proved their love of liberty beyond their own share of it. but my intercourse with them, since my return, has not been sufficient to ascertain that they had made towards this point the progress I had hoped. your solitary but welcome voice is the first which has brought this sound to my ear; and I have considered the general silence which prevails on this subject as indicating an apathy unfavorable to every hope. yet the hour of emancipation is advancing in the march of time. it will come; and whether brought on by the generous energy of our own minds, or by the bloody process of St Domingo, excited and conducted by the power of our present enemy, if once stationed permanently within our country, & offering asylum & arms to the oppressed, is a leaf of our history not yet turned over.

As to the method by which this difficult work is to be effected, if permitted to be done by ourselves, I have seen no proposition so expedient on the whole, as that of emancipation of those born after a given day, and of their education and expatriation at a proper age. this would give time for a gradual extinction of that species of labor and substitution of another, and lessen the severity of the shock which an operation so fundamental cannot fail to produce. the idea of emancipating the whole at once, the old as well as the young, and retaining them here, is of those only who have not the guide of either knolege or experience of the subject. for, men, probably of any colour, but of this color we know, brought up from their infancy without necessity for thought or forecast, are by their habits rendered as incapable as children of taking care of themselves, and are extinguished promptly wherever industry is necessary for raising the young. in the mean time they are pests in society by their idleness, and the depredations to which this leads them. their amalgamation with the other colour produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent.

I am sensible of the partialities with which you have looked towards me as the person who should undertake this salutary but arduous work. but this, my dear Sir, is like bidding old Priam to buckle the armour of Hector 'tremantibus aevo humeris et inutile ferrum cingi.' no. I have overlived the generation with which mutual labors and perils begat mutual confidence and influence. this enterprise is for the young; for those who can follow it up, and bear it through to it's consummation. it shall have all my prayers, and these are the only weapons of an old man. but in the mean time are you right in abandoning this property, and your country with it? I think not. my opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed & clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them. the laws do not permit us to turn them loose, if that were for their good: and to commute them for other property is to commit them to those whose usage of them we cannot controul. I hope then, my dear Sir, you will reconcile yourself to your country and it's unfortunate condition; that you will not lessen it's stock of sound disposition by withdrawing your portion from the mass. that, on the contrary you will come forward in the public councils, become the Missionary of this doctrine truly Christian, insinuate & inculcate it softly but steadily thro' the medium of writing & conversation, associate others in your labors, and when the phalanx is formed, bring on & press the proposition perseveringly until it's accomplishment. it is an encouraging observation that no good measure was ever proposed which, if duly pursued, failed to prevail in the end. we have proof of this in the history of the endeavors in the British parliament to suppress that very trade which brought this evil on us. and you will be supported by the religious precept 'be not wearied in well doing.' that your success may be as speedy and compleat, as it will be of honorable & immortal consolation to yourself I shall as fervently & sincerely pray as I assure you of my great friendship and respect.

Th: Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, Monticello, 22 April 1820

. . . But this mementous question [the Missouri Compromise], like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. it is hushed indeed for the moment. but this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. a geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would, to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any *practicable* way. the cession of that kind of property, for it is so misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and *expatriation* could be effected: and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. but, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one state to another would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation; by dividing the burthen on a greater number of co-adjutors. an abstinence too from this act of power would remove the jealousy excited by the undertaking of Congress; to regulate the

condition of the different descriptions of men composing a state. this certainly is the exclusive right of every state, which nothing in the constitution has taken from them and given to the general government. could congress, for example say that the Non-freemen of Connecticut, shall be freemen, or that they shall not emigrate into any other state?

I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves, by the generation of '76. to acquire self government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it. if they would but dispassionately weigh the blessings they would throw away against an abstract principle more likely to be effected by union than by scission, they would pause before they would perpetrate this act of suicide on themselves and of treason against the hopes of the world. to yourself as the faithful advocate of union I tender the offering of my high esteem and respect.

Th: Jefferson

JAMES MADISON ON SLAVERY

James Madison to James Madison, Sr., Philadelphia, 8 September 1783

Mr. Jones & myself being here transacting some private business which brought us from Princeton the end of last week, I here receive[d] your letter of the 22d. ulto. The favorable turn of my Mothers state of health is a source of great satisfaction to me, and will render any delay in my sitting out for Virga. the less irksome to me. I shall return to Princeton tomorrow; my final leaving of which will depend on events, but can not now be at any very great distance. On a view of all circumstances I have judged it most prudent not to force Billey back to Va. even if could be done; and have accordingly taken measures for his final separation from me. I am persuaded his mind is too thoroughly tainted to be a fit companion for fellow slaves in Virga. The laws here do not admit of his being sold for more than 7 years. I do not expect to get near the worth of him; but cannot think of punishing him by transportation merely for coveting that liberty for which we have paid the price of so much blood, and have proclaimed so often to be the right, & worthy the pursuit, of every human being.

James Madison to Edmund Randolph, Orange, 26 July 1785

I keep up my attention as far as I can command my time, to the course of reading which I have of late pursued & shall continue to do so. I am however far from being determined ever to make a professional use of it. My wish is if possible to provide a decent & independent subsistence, without encountering the difficulties which I foresee in that line. Another of my wishes is to depend as little as possible on the labour of slaves.

James Madison to Robert J. Evans, Montpelier, Va., 15 June 1819

I have recd. your letter of the 3d. instant, requesting such hints as may have occurred to me on the subject of an eventual extinguishment of slavery in the U. S.

Not doubting the purity of your views, and relying on the discretion by which they will be regulated, I can not refuse such a compliance as will at least manifest my respect for the object of your undertaking.

A general emancipation of slaves ought to be 1. gradual. 2. equitable & satisfactory to the individuals immediately concerned. 3. consistent with the existing & durable prejudices of the nation.

That it ought, like remedies for other deep rooted, and wide spread evils, to be gradual, is so obvious that there seems to be no difference of opinion on that point.

To be equitable & satisfactory, the consent of both the Master & the slave should be obtained. That of the Master will require a provision in the plan for compensating a loss of what he has held as property guaranteed by the laws, and recognized by the constitution. That of the slave, requires that his condition in a state of freedom, be preferable in his own estimation, to his actual one in a state of bondage.

To be consistent with existing and probably unalterable prejudices in the U. S. the freed blacks ought to be permanently removed beyond the region occupied by or allotted to a White population. The objections to a thorough incorporation of the two people, are with most of the Whites insuperable, and are admitted by all of them to be very powerful. If the blacks, strongly marked as they are, by physical & lasting peculiarities, be retained amid the whites, under the degrading privation of equal rights political or social, they must be always dissatisfied with their condition as a change only from one to another species of oppression; always secretly confederated agst. the ruling & privileged class; and always uncontrouled by some of the most cogent motives to moral and respectable conduct. The character of the freed blacks, even where their legal condition is least affected by their colour, seems to put these truths beyond question. It is material also that the removal of the blacks be to a distance precluding the jealousies & hostilities to be apprehended from a neighboring people stimulated by the contempt known to be entertained for their peculiar features; to say nothing of their vindictive recollections, or the predatory propensities which their State of Society might foster. Nor is it fair, in estimating the danger of collisions with the Whites, to charge it wholly on the side of the Blacks. There would be reciprocal antipathies doubling the danger.

The Colonizing plan on foot, has as far as it extends, a due regard to these requisites; with the additional object of bestowing new blessings civil & religious on the quarter of the Globe most in need of them. The Society proposes to transport to the African Coast, all free & freed blacks who may be willing to remove thither; to provide by fair means, & it is understood with a prospect of success, a suitable territory for their reception; and to initiate them into such an establishment as may gradually, and indefinitely expand itself.

The experiment under this view of it, merits encouragement from all who regard slavery as an evil, who wish to see it diminished and abolished by peaceable & just means; and who have themselves no better mode to propose. Those who have most doubted the success of the experiment must at least have wished to find themselves in an error.

But the views of the Society are limited to the case of blacks already free, or who may be gratuitously emancipated. To provide a commensurate remedy for the evil, the plan must be extended to the great Mass of blacks, and must embrace a fund sufficient to induce the Master as well as the slave to concur in it. Without the concurrence of the Master, the benefit will be very limited as it relates to the Negroes, and essentially defective, as it relates to the U. States; And the concurrence of Masters, must for the most part, be obtained by purchase.

Can it be hoped that voluntary contributions, however adequate to an auspicious commencement, will supply the sums necessary to such an enlargement of the remedy? May not another question be asked? Would it be reasonable to throw so great a burden on the individuals distinguished by their philanthropy and patriotism.

The object to be attained, as an object of humanity, appeals alike to all: as a national object, it claims the interposition of the nation. It is the nation which is to reap the benefit. The nation therefore ought to bear the burden.

Must then the enormous sums required to pay for, to transport, and to establish in a foreign land all the slaves in the U. S. as their Masters may be willg to part with them, be taxed on the good people of the U. S. or be obtained by Loans swelling the public debt to a size pregnant with evils next in degree to those of slavery itself?

Happily it is not necessary to answer this question by remarking that if slavery as a national evil is to be abolished, and it be just that it be done at the national expence, the amount of the expence is not a paramount consideration. It is the peculiar fortune, or rather a providential blessing of the U. S. to possess a resource commensurate to this great object, without taxes on the people, or even an increase of the Public debt.

I allude to the vacant territory the extent of which is so vast, and the vendible value of which is so well ascertained.

Supposing the number of slaves to be 1.500,000. and the price to average 400. drs the cost of the whole would be 600 millions of dollrs. These estimates are probably beyond the fact; and from the no. of slaves, should be deducted 1. those whom their masters would not part with. 2. those who may be gratuitously set free by their Masters. 3 those acquiring freedom under emancitating [sic] regulations of the States. 4. those preferring slavery where they are, to freedom in an African settlement. On the other hand, it is to be noted that the expence of removal & settlement is not included in the estimated sum; and that an increase of the slaves will be going on during the period required for the execution of the plan.

On the whole the aggregate sum needed may be stated at about 600 Mills. of dollars.

This will require 200 Mills. of acres at 3 dolrs. per acre; or 300 Mills. at 2 dollrs. per acre a quantity, which tho' great in itself, is perhaps not a third part of the disposable territory belonging to the U. S. And to what object so good so great & so glorious, could that peculiar fund of wealth be appropriated? Whilst the sale of territory would, on one hand be planting one desert with a free & civilized people, it would on the other, be giving freedom to another people, and filling with them another desert. And, if in any instances, wrong has been done by our forefathers to people of one colour in dispossessing them of their soil, what better atonement is now in our power than that of making what is rightfully required a source of justice & of blessings to a people of another colour?

As the revolution to be produced in the condition of the negroes must be gradual, it will suffice if the sale of territory keep pace with its progress. For a time at least the proceeds wd. be in advance. In this case it might be best, after deducting the expence incident to the surveys & sales, to place the surplus in a situation where its increase might correspond with the natural increase of the unpurchased slaves. Should the proceeds at any time fall short of the calls for their application, anticipations might be made by temporary loans to be discharged as the lands should find a Market.

But it is probable that for a considerable period, the sales would exceed the calls. Masters would not be willing to strip their plantations & farms of their laborers too rapidly. The slaves themselves, connected as they generally are by tender ties with others under other Masters, would be kept from the list of emigrants by the want of the multiplied consents to be obtained. It is probable indeed that for a long time a certain portion of the proceeds might safely continue applicable to the discharge of the debts or to other purposes of the nation, or it might be most convenient, in the outset, to appropriate a certain proportion only of the income from sales, to the object in view, leaving the residue otherwise applicable.

Should any plan similar to that here sketched, be deemed eligible in itself, no particular difficulty is foreseen from that portion of the nation which with a common interest in the vacant territory has no interest in slave property. They are too just to wish that a partial sacrifice shd. be made for the general good; and too well aware that whatever may be the intrinsic character of that description of property, it is one known to the constitution, and as such could not be constitutionally taken away without just compensation. That part of the nation has indeed shewn a meritorious alacrity in promoting by pecuniary contributions, the limited scheme for colonizing the Blacks, & freeing the nation from the unfortunate stain on it, which justifies the belief that any enlargement of the scheme, if founded on just principles, would find among them its earliest & warmest patrons.

It is evident however that in effectuating a general emancipation of slaves in the mode which has been hinted, difficulties of other sorts would be encountered. The provision for ascertaining the joint consent of the masters & slaves; for guarding agst. unreasonable valuations of the latter; and for the discrimination of those not proper to be conveyed to a foreign residence, or who ought to remain a charge on masters in whose service they had been disabled or worn out, and for the annual transportation of such numbers, would require the mature deliberations of the national Councils. The measure implies also the practicability of procuring in Africa, an enlargement of the district or districts, for receiving the exiles, sufficient for so great an augmentation of their numbers.

Perhaps the Legislative provision best adapted to the case would be an incorporation of the Colonizing Society or the establishment of a similar one, with proper powers, under the appointment & superintendence of the national Executive.

In estimating the difficulties however, incident to any plan of general emancipation, they ought to be brought into comparison with those inseparable from other plans and be yielded to or not according to the result of the comparison.

One difficulty presents itself which will probably attend every plan which is to go into effect under the Legislative provisions of the National Govt. But whatever may be the defect of the existing powers of Congress, the Constitution has pointed out the way in which it can be supplied. And it can hardly be doubted that the requisite powers might readily be procured for attaining the great object in question, in any mode whatever approved by the nation.

If these thoughts can be of any aid in your search of a remedy for the great evil under which the nation labors, you are very welcome to them. You will allow me however to add that it will be most agreeable to me, not to be publickly referred to in any use you may make of them.