

# The sorry legacy of the founders

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In 1784, five years before he became president of the United States, George Washington, 52, was nearly toothless. So he hired a dentist to transplant nine teeth into his jaw--having extracted them from the mouths of his slaves.

That's a far different image from the cherry-tree-chopping George most people remember from their history books. But recently, many historians have begun to focus on the role slavery played in the lives of the founding generation. They have been spurred in part by DNA evidence made available in 1998, which almost certainly proved Thomas Jefferson had fathered at least one child with his slave Sally Hemings. And only over the past 30 years have scholars examined history from the bottom up. Works by Gore Vidal, Henry Wiencek, and Garry Wills reveal the moral compromises made by the nation's early leaders and the fragile nature of the country's infancy. More significant, they argue that many of the Founding Fathers knew slavery was wrong--and yet most did little to fight it.

More than anything, the historians say, the founders were hampered by the culture of their time. While Washington and Jefferson privately expressed distaste for slavery (Jefferson once called it an "execrable commerce"), they also understood that it was part of the political and economic bedrock of the country they helped to create.

**Political capital.** For one thing, the South could not afford to part with its slaves. Owning slaves was "like having a large bank account," says Wiencek, author of *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*. The southern states would not have signed the Constitution without protections for the "peculiar institution," including a clause that counted a slave as three fifths of a man for purposes of congressional representation.

And the statesmen's political lives depended on slavery. The three-fifths formula handed Jefferson his narrow victory in the presidential election of 1800 by inflating the votes of the southern states in the Electoral College. Once in office, Jefferson extended slavery with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803; the new land was carved into 13 states, including three slave states.

Still, Jefferson freed Hemings's children--though not Hemings herself or his approximately 150 other slaves. Washington, who had begun to believe that all men were created equal after observing the valor of black soldiers during the Revolutionary War, overcame the strong opposition of his relatives to grant his slaves

their freedom in his will. Only a decade earlier, such an act would have required legislative approval in Virginia. He suspected the country would eventually come to its moral senses and find the notion of owning other human beings repugnant, says Joseph Ellis, author of the bestselling *Founding Brothers*. "He knew his legacy depended on it. He knew that we were watching."

Yet how should we view other framers of independence such as signer of the Declaration of Independence Richard Henry Lee and Patrick Henry, who traded and whipped their slaves? Or James Monroe, who, as governor of Virginia in 1800, after rushed trials, executed nearly 30 slaves after an attempted revolt? For some historians, such actions cloud their legacy. "The other founders resisted emancipation, not because it was a mad scheme but because they did not want to relinquish the wealth which slave sales poured into their coffers," says Wiencek.

Other scholars believe the Founding Fathers can best be seen squarely within their time. "To contextualize is not to excuse," says Rutgers University historian Jan Lewis. "It's to show the complexity." Understanding the early leaders' severe lapse in judgment over slavery, say Lewis and other historians, makes their ability to found a new and democratic nation all the more incredible.

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