**The Historiography of Equality**

Michael Bellesiles

[Please note that the following is a work in progress. Suggestions are welcome. Thank you.]

There is a disturbing irony to Americans’ disinterest in history given the keen attention shown by the founders of this nation to the study and utility of history. Once the republic was secured, it seemed as though this new people lost all curiosity in the past and looked only to their personal advancement and well-being—to make a sweeping generalization. Ideas lost their power and served only as frosting on a pretty trifle served at the end of heavy gorging on the continent’s resources.

Conservatives of the Revolutionary period feared that too many people would take the radical ideas underlying the rebellion to heart and build future movements for equality and democracy upon them. They need not have worried, as the language of the Revolution became ossified into the basest rhetoric, words emptied of meaning and devoid of impact. Even people who had lived through the Revolution appear to have forgotten its instigating values. In his third *Crisis* essay of 1777, Thomas Paine predicted this collective amnesia: “In the progress of politics, as in the common occurrences of life, we are not only apt to forget the ground we have traveled over but frequently neglect to gather up experience as we go.” Within a generation of the Revolution’s conclusion, some of the most radical language of human history had been reduced to bloviating nonsense by a nation frightened of the meaning of its own past.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Some part of the historian’s job, it seems to me, is to remind people of their past. Our duty is to speak truth to complacency and willful ignorance by bringing back to life the triumphs and tragedies of the previous generations. Unfortunately, for most of America’s history, professional historians have been a conservative lot, retelling the same heroic stories, polishing the statues of the same coterie of white male heroes and anti-heroes (by which I mean the traitors who attempted to destroy the United States between 1861 and 1865), repeating the same vapid language of the most callow politicians, neither challenging nor inspiring their readers. Their insignificance was well deserved.

There are those who spout the cliché of forgive and forget, with the emphasis on the latter. Such language is usually deployed to avoid discussing historic crimes like the Trail of Tears or slavery, lynching and land thefts, misogyny and racism. It is a very convenient position for those who seek to protect the status quo. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said at the beginning of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: “Reconciliation is not about being cosy. It is not about pretending that things were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not true reconciliation and will not last.” To move forward as a nation, we must forgive and never forget; to do otherwise is to leave room for the sort of massive ignorance that has come to endanger the very basis of our democracy. Truth must come before reconciliation.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The foundational idea of the United States, as Abraham Lincoln insisted, had been clearly stated in the Declaration of Independence. Most people have a vague notion of those words, though the majority think they are part of the Constitution and certainly have no concept of their meaning. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The understanding of these words changed over time and is the subject of my new book *Inventing Equality*. What concerns us here is how historians have presented these ideas to their readers, and how they thought that core idea of equality affected the development of the United States. So let us take a journey together through two hundred years of historical inquiry and presentation.

**America’s first historians**

The first historians of the United States were amateurs and participants in the events they described. For instance, David Ramsay (1749–1815), a South Carolina physician, served in the state legislature and Continental Congress, and spent a year as a prisoner of war after the fall of Charleston to the British. He wrote several histories of South Carolina and the Revolution, his best-known work being his *History of the American Revolution*, published in 1789.

Ramsay saw little cause for the Revolution, as the colonial connection with Great Britain had been mutually advantageous. But the Protestant tradition “nurtured a love of liberty,” which, combined with Enlightenment ideas, made the British American colonists jealous of their rights. It was only the actions of the British ministers from 1765 on that sparked an uprising. British officials were not bad people, just inflexible. Ramsay sought national unity in the context of the newly adopted Constitution, so he downplayed internal divisions, minimizing the numbers and intensity of Loyalists. [[3]](#endnote-3)

Since Americans “were all of one rank,” they preferred an egalitarian social structure. Americans, Ramsay insisted, “believed that God made all mankind originally equal,” thus Jefferson’s language in the Declaration of Independence emerged from and spoke to a common culture. Slavery and poverty seem to have not existed, though Ramsay briefly discussed the presence of slaves as having been “forced on the Southern provinces” by the “natural state of the country,” by which he meant its heat and swampy coastline. Ramsay also acknowledged that slavery led to the concentration of land and wealth in a few hands, but he saw no signs of danger since the slaves were “well satisfied with their condition.” He offered no evidence for this analysis, but warned that slavery threatened the region by devaluing industry and personal independence.[[4]](#endnote-4)

For Ramsay then, equality was something shared among prosperous white men. He saw no signs of dissent and no opposition to this new standard of human equality. Women, immigrants, the poor, Catholics and other religious minorities did not appear in any of his books as worthy of discussion. The native population strode briefly across the historical stage as an impediment to the expansion of the United States; at best a worthy military adversary, at worst a collection of barbarians resisting progress. Equality was the consensus opinion that did not require much attention.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Most others who wrote histories of the United States in its first half century shared Ramsay’s vision of a land of equality and opportunity for the common man; and like Ramsay they avoided any complexities in social analysis. At the end of the Nineteenth century the pre-eminent American proponent of the Germanic “objective” school of scholarship, J. Franklin Jameson found little of worth among this first generation of historians. It is fitting that he praised William Gordon’s history as the outstanding work of the period as it is a book totally lacking in analysis, simply documenting events, and was apparently the result of heavy editing by a publisher who refused to bring out the book until all radical and anti-British statements had been removed.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A number of state histories written in these years repeated the consensus vision of the United States as a nation unified by a love of freedom. David Ramsay’s history of South Carolina celebrated that “principles of liberty and equality pervade the constitution and laws of the state.” He of course acknowledges slavery, but insists that most of the state’s “fertile soil cannot be advantageously cultivated otherwise than by negroes”—apparently whites were too fragile for that labor. Ramsay notes the presence of class divisions in the state from its founding on, while insisting there is no class conflict as all whites are equal. However, since slavery diminished the perceived advantages of hard work, the poorest whites are indolent, limiting their own opportunities for social mobility. Women are only mentioned in the context of childbirth and child-rearing, though he does think they are very sweet.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Another physician Congressman and member of the Constitutional Convention, Hugh Williamson (1735-1819), wrote a history of North Carolina. While very opinionated on a wide variety of subjects, from the character of specific figures in the state’s history to the tendency of the poor to drink too much, Williamson had little to say on social arrangements. He evidenced a little sympathy for the native population, but still dismissed them as “savages” prone to violence and alcohol abuse, and fortunately removed from further consideration by the end of the Eighteenth century. Williamson is largely silent on slavery, except to note the tax rate on slaves, and only mentions women as living longer in the state since they stay indoors—unless of course they are black or Native American.[[8]](#endnote-8)

As Ramsay wrote Jeremy Belknap, the underlying purpose of these state histories was to introduce Americans to one another and promote national unity by placing each state’s development into the story of nation building. “We do not know half enough of each other…. Every man who is acquainted with the people of the neighboring state is I observe for the most part federal: Narrow politics are generally the offspring of insulated local views.” Supporters of the new national government sought to unite the states from New England to Georgia around the principle of equality, without specifying any caveats to this abstraction.[[9]](#endnote-9)

John Daly Burk (approx. 1772-1808), an Irish revolutionary forced to flee his native land in 1796, found the United States the embodiment of his republican ideals. Burk published several dreadful plays and a forgettable epic poem glorifying the new nation as a land of freedom. Editing a newspaper in New York, Burk became a harsh critic of the Federalists and was arrested in July 1798 under the Sedition Act. Just before being deported to Great Britain, Burk escaped to Virginia, where the followers of Thomas Jefferson gave him asylum. Perhaps in gratitude he wrote more lamentable plays and his *History of Virginia*, which held up the state as the true birthplace and protector of American liberty. His work deserves attention for its promotion of a counterfactual narrative of the colonial period as the origin of America’s commitment to freedom and equality.

Constructing a mythic vision of Virginia, Burk downplayed its roots in greed and the extreme brutality of its first fifty years in the Seventeenth century to see instead the hand of providence in preserving the commonwealth for its essential role in the creation of the United States in the last third of the Eighteenth century. Instead of adventurers seeking profit through any means, the founders of Virginia were portrayed as champions of liberty. The result, incredibly given the actual history of Virginia, was the “unfolding, in the midst of the wilderness, [of] the true principles of the representative system; universal suffrage, and equality,” which were firmly established by the mid-1620s.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Burk joined in the unifying consensus that Virginia was like all the American states in having a heritage supportive of freedom and that a pre-existing free society prepared the ground for the birth of the United States. As he put it in his first volume, “A coincidence of circumstances, as rare, as it was fortunate, contributed to afford the administration of government in the colony, a purity of which human establishments have not often been thought susceptible.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Such a statement required him to ignore the greed and corruption of Virginia’s colonial period as well as the obvious matter of human bondage, which marred Virginia from the start.

Like so many of these early historians, Burk admired the native population now that they had been eradicated from the state. Also like these other writers, Burk failed to mention that the English settlers had enslaved these freedom-loving natives “who enjoyed the blessings of a republican government.”[[12]](#endnote-12) A reader could go through all three volumes and not even realize that slavery existed at any point in the history of Virginia, except for two brief passages. The first comes in a paragraph on the “remarkable … introduction of negro slaves into the colony.” While Burk insists that the people of Virginia recognized slavery as evil, he insists they had little choice but to enslave the Africans since they are better suited to work in the hot climate and since they are “the descendants of the murderer Cain; a race which the just wrath of God had consigned to bondage.” Nothing you can do about that.[[13]](#endnote-13) Burk also mentions involuntary servitude in the context of British policies intended to reduce the Americas to a condition of slavery. When the last Royal governor of Virginia, Lord Dunsmore, offered freedom to slaves who joined the British, Burk dismisses those seeking freedom as “a party of fugitive slaves whom he had seduced or torn from their masters.” The actual number, as Thomas Jefferson later admitted, was in the tens of thousands.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Ignoring slavery was a necessity given Burk’s thesis that Americans had a uniform character, and that it existed from the earliest years of settlement in Virginia. Burk never finished his work as he was shot dead in a duel in 1808.

Generally rated the finest of these state histories, Jeremy Belknap’s (1744-98) study of New Hampshire treads the same ground as the others, though with a little more felicity of language. Belknap also promoted his history as weaving his state into the fabric of the new nation. He believed that the political system informed the character of the people, thus the importance of the colony being settled by a democratic and egalitarian people. New Hampshire, in Belknap’s telling, experienced little discord and even rejected slavery from the colony’s beginning as a violation of their principles.[[15]](#endnote-15) Unfortunately, the people of New Hampshire had not allowed principles to guide them in their relation with the colony’s native population. Like so many of these historians, Belknap mourns the passing of “the unhappy natives,” while recognizing the advantages of having their land. Belknap comes down hard on his fellow whites for routinely cheating the natives. “Had we always treated them with that justice and humanity which our religion inculcates, and our true interest at all times required, we might have lived in as much harmony with them, as with any other people on the globe.”[[16]](#endnote-16) He also points out the hypocrisy of the New Englanders who welcomed the freedom they deserved while denying rights to those who dared to dissent. He quotes from several early Puritans, such as Francis Higginson and John Cotton, who spoke out for religious liberty for themselves, while denying that equal right to others.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The only significant division Belknap perceived in New Hampshire was geographic, with the White Mountains effectively dividing the state into regions with distinctive interests. There had been some hints of class division prior to the Revolution, but the war, “which called the democratic power into action, has repressed the aristocratic spirit.” Looking around him, Belknap saw a hardy, industrious, and self-reliant people who treated all others with respect. What sets New Hampshire apart from much of the world is the opportunity for economic advancement. It only takes hard work for a young man to establish his own farm, become self-sufficient, and support a growing family. Women are notable for bearing lots of children at an early age, and Belknap boasts that in New England “women are grandmothers at forty, and it is not uncommon for a mother and daughter to have each a child at the breast, at the same time.” While guilty of many errors of judgment in their past, the people of New Hampshire reached a happy and admirable condition with the creation of the new nation.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The most vocal champion of equality among these early historians was Samuel Williams (1743-1817), whose history of Vermont anticipated the Turner Thesis. For Williams it was the frontier experience itself which taught the settlers of British North America the virtues of “equality, industry, and economy.” On the frontier, “every thing tended to produce, and to establish the spirit of freedom.” These frontier settlers did not simply believe in equality, they practiced it, working together to “preserve that equality and freedom, which nature had made.” Nature established an egalitarian system which the British “could neither comprehend or discern,” since they had broken their bond with the natural world long ago. As the fourteenth state—admitted to the Union in 1791 over the objections of New York—Vermont needed to be seen as truly part of the United States, sharing its “customs, manners, and habits.” Williams provided that connection, fitting his state into the revolutionary narrative, arguing that the frontier experience guided the United States in becoming the first great democratic nation based upon a rational order, as laid out in the Constitution.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Nature’s attitude was evident even in the life of Vermont’s beavers, who lived in a society “founded on the principle of perfect equality.”[[20]](#endnote-20) The American people learned from nature and experienced the advantages of human freedom, improving their society on a daily basis and making it more equal and therefor more natural. In the United States “the state of society coincides with the laws of nature.”[[21]](#endnote-21) In a widely circulated quotation, Williams stated, “It is not barely toleration, but equality, which the people aim at.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

However, Williams found it difficult to adhere to intellectual consistency. Since nature fostered freedom, the Native Americans must be respected as an egalitarian and industrious people, as worthy of respect as any other people. An indication of the native peoples’ greater esteem for equality can be found in their respect for the abilities and counsel of women—which far exceeded anything that could be found in Europe. Yet Williams also insists that Indian women were condemned to lives of drudgery, little better than slavery. Unfortunately, the native population had been largely crushed by the vicious machinations of the competing European powers and the American settlers had been drawn into these unnatural and irrational wars by the manipulative English monarchs. End of the Natives and of the white people’s need to feel guilty about their demise.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Like every one of these early historians, Williams avoided the subject of slavery except to speak of the efforts of Britain to reduce America to the status of colonial slavery. That evasion is particularly odd in the case of Vermont, which was, after all, the first state to outlaw slavery. The only discussion Williams offers of the actual institution of slavery comes in a paragraph of his popular 1795 history of the American Revolution, which went through multiple printings and was a popular textbook in the 1820s. In that book he discusses the disruptive influence of Governor Dunmore’s liberation of Virginia’s slaves: “As Virginia contained a great number of slaves, it was necessary that a militia should be kept constantly on foot, to keep them in awe.” Dunmore broke Virginia’s “tranquility” by “proclaiming liberty to the negroes.” As a result of this barbaric violation “of every law of honor and honesty,” the British destabilized the South, and “Negroes were seduced or forced from their masters.”[[24]](#endnote-24)

Slavery aside, the foundations of American “freedom were laid long before the nations of Europe had any suspicion of what was taking place in the minds of men.” From the first settlements, the encounter with nature taught the colonists the value of human liberty, and led to a complete commitment to the struggle for equal rights for all. In brief, the frontier experience “produced that perfect system of equality and freedom which now takes place in America.” Thus Williams, a self-proclaimed champion of equality, held up the American slave republic as a model for the world.[[25]](#endnote-25)

It took a woman to question this celebratory consensus. Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) of Massachusetts did not shy away from political involvement, despite society’s condemnation of public women. She was an active polemicist for the patriot cause during the war and wrote in opposition to the new Constitution for failing to include a Bill or Rights. Warren’s 1805 history breathed with conviction in the righteousness of the new nation and so impressed President Thomas Jefferson that he purchased copies for his entire cabinet. In contrast, John Adams, who had known Warren since he was a teenager, found the historian so radical that he exchanged a number of ill-tempered letters with her and terminated their friendship.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Warren recognized that intolerance and inequality scarred colonial America. Other writers might boast of the American heritage of equality and religious freedom, but she found the historical evidence indicating otherwise. Avarice led white settlers to treat even friendly natives violently, stealing the Indians’ property and condemning their posterity to poverty. The “aborigines” were justified in their “fears of extermination” at the hands of these terrible guests they had once welcomed into their homes. The same held in the Southern colonies, where the insatiable desire for more wealth led to the establishment of slavery, even while the slaveowners professed a love of freedom. “It may be true,” Warren wrote, “that wherever slavery is encouraged, there are among the free inhabitants very high ideas of liberty; though not so much from a sense of the common rights of man, as from their own feelings of superiority.” In the same way, the desire of the British government for ever more wealth and power led them to a series of disastrous policies and corrupt practices that tore the empire apart.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Warren believed in “natural equality” and the ideals laid out in the Declaration of Independence, but she also noticed that men too quickly forget their ideals in their pursuit of gain. People are created equal by nature, but the desire for economic gain, personal distinction, and political power quickly lead some men to push down others so that they may rise. She had hoped that the Declaration of Independence would “bind society to a strict adherence to equity.” But as a realist, Warren understood that a commitment to equality only went as far as self-interest allows. The “rage of accumulation and the taste for expensive pleasures” that followed the war’s end quickly crushed the Revolution’s egalitarian goals. She had watched as the new nation’s commitment to equality and freedom began waning as soon as the war ended. Americans were “too selfish and avaricious for a virtuous republic,” and Warren felt certain that the new federal government would soon grasp for ever more power, preventing the fulfillment of the promise of the Revolution. For Warren, “Democratic principles are the result of equality of condition.” Given the greed of men and the aristocratic structure of the Southern states, Warren held out little hope for democracy in America.[[28]](#endnote-28)

**The Jacksonian historians**

One historian towered over the profession in its first eighty years: George Bancroft. A prominent spokesman for the Democratic Party and life-long admirer of Andrew Jackson, Bancroft, who was born with the Nineteenth Century and died in 1891, devoted a half century to the publication of his massive *History of the United States*, the first volume of which appeared in 1834. Though Bancroft’s final revisions came in 1883, there is no escaping the sense that his work remained the product and voice of the Age of Jackson.

Bancroft, who received his doctorate from the University of Göttingen, considered himself a Hegelian, holding that the study of history would lead to the discovery of divine wisdom and the revelation of God’s earthly plans. Claiming “the freedom of an unbiased mind,” Bancroft confidently expected American history to expose the “moral law” that explained human progress. He saw the Revolution as a struggle between good and evil, with Britain making “war on human freedom”; their defeat was thus pre-determined “as majestically as the laws of being.” American success ended the “ages of servitude and inequality,” bringing on an era of “equality and brotherhood.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

Bancroft laid out his vision of the United States while still a young man, in a speech delivered on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1826. The justice and freedom that guided the young republic came directly from God. Jefferson’s vision of human equality was clear and indisputable, resting firmly on nature and reason. Jefferson understood that freedom “is the chorus of the whole family of nations” and that “each man’s interests are safest in his own keeping.” Talk of freedom is a safe generalization, for Bancroft it is the latter point which is most worthy of praise, as Jefferson formulated an equality based on each individual’s right to choose the best path for themselves.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Bancroft thus presented not an intellectual but a practical Jefferson, and thus a nation devoted to the real-world advantages of equality. In both this oration and his history, Bancroft lavishes most praise on the prosperity and physical growth of the United States. “There is not one desirable privilege, which we do not enjoy; there is not one social advantage that reason can covet, which is not ours. I speak not merely of our equal rights to engage in any pursuit, … I speak, also, of the advantages which we are always enjoying; security in our occupations; liberty of conscience; the certain rewards of labor.” His was a paradisiacal America where “the distribution of wealth has led to no great inequalities,” with the means of acquiring prosperity a common right, “knowledge universally diffused,” and human worth “duly respected and encouraged.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

America’s system of government, which was firmly based on “the sovereignty of the people,” protected equality of opportunity. While the United States is “a determined, uncompromising democracy,” its government is a practical rather than a theoretical democracy. Collectively, the American people turned their backs on the outdated systems of the Old World and built a New World of equal rights. “We acknowledge no hereditary distinctions and we confer on no man prerogatives, or peculiar privileges.” In the United States, Bancroft proclaimed, “no one is born to power.” The world had never before witnessed such a free, just, and beneficent country. In America, “every where there is liberty.” The country embraced freedom and equality “with unwavering consistency,” making those values the guide of every governmental policy, “cherished in our hearts, … imbedded in our soil.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

Given that perspective, Bancroft should have been the historian to emphasize and promote the struggle for equality. His actual history exposes a different project, an uncritical examination of a nation without flaws. As a true Jacksonian, he was steeped in personal self-confidence and patriotic certainty that the United States was the freest and best nation in the history of the world. He thus had that profitable ability to tell his audience exactly what they wanted to hear.

This massive historical project began by asserting that the American government is always in alignment with the people’s needs and interests, resulting in a constant happy support by the people of their government. “Even the enemies of the state, if there are any among us, have liberty to express themselves undisturbed; and are safely tolerated,” a judgment that would have shocked those who actually spoke up for equality prior to the Civil War. The United States stood forth as the premier home of freedom “and fearlessly opens an asylum to the virtuous, the unfortunate, and the oppressed of every nation.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

Such an assertion of The United States as the asylum of freedom does not mesh well with the history Bancroft actually wrote. The Natives were “savages” conspiring to limit the expansion of the white colonies, the “papists” stood in the way of free thought, women were unworthy of reference except as part of the standard “women and children” slaughtered by the Indians, and actual immigrants do not appear in the pages of this history. Bancroft entered into a fantasy world when he described Lord Dunmore’s offer of freedom to the enslaved in 1775. The English bore responsibility for slavery, having introduced it to the colonies against the wishes of the settlers, while the American slaveowners hoped to keep their workers comfortable until they could end the institution. “But, in truth, the cry of Dunmore did not rouse among the Africans a passion for freedom.” In truth, Bancroft is lying, but his was an early version of the notion of happy and loyal slaves who just wanted to be left alone to work unceasingly for their beloved masters. Though Bancroft did describe slavery as an “unjust, wasteful and unhappy system” forced on the colonies by the English, at no point does he describe the behavior of American slaveowners as anything but benign.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Bancroft wrote and rewrote his history, yet never got beyond the end of the Revolution. This early termination of his history allowed Bancroft to avoid dealing with the obvious contradictions of his claims for America as a land of brotherhood and equality. He never had to address how such a country could retain slavery and experience four years of devastating Civil War, nor why women found it necessary to struggle for legal rights, or how an anti-immigrant political party could rise to national prominence, or the possible justifications for his hero Jackson to violate the Constitution in removing the native peoples of the southeast. By avoiding the history of his own lifetime, Bancroft could retain the soaring rhetoric of his July 4th oration and remain the country’s most popular historian while doing little to advance the democracy or objective historical scholarship he claimed to champion.

Other antebellum historians followed Bancroft’s lead. For instance, Richard Hildreth (1807–1865), a New England scholar and political writer, wrote a competing six-volume history of the United States. The first three volumes follow Bancroft’s path and offers the same praise for the United States as a land of freedom and equality. But the next three volumes took the story to 1820, allowing Hildreth to explore what happened to the new nation after the writing of its perfect Constitution. Hildreth found a nation struggling with a number of significant divisions, none more threatening than that over slavery. Though an opponent of slavery, Hildreth strove to present an objective history, leading him to quote the competing arguments in excruciating detail without editorial commentary. Only in his final volume, when he addresses the Missouri Compromise, does the debate over slavery become a significant issue. But even here, Hildreth is careful to keep his judgments private, and the 1820 Compromise comes across as a wise adjustment to the geographical expansion of the republic. In the final sentences of his book, Hildreth suggests that those who support slavery have no real commitment to equality and democracy—which seems rather self-evident—and that later political divisions had their origin in the desire of slave-owners to expand their reach. Otherwise, Hildreth’s is another uncritical history in which women once more appear only as the victims of the “savages,” who deserve no sympathy, and immigrants, Catholics, and all other dissenters or outsiders do not appear.[[35]](#endnote-35)

The Virginia lawyer George Tucker (1775–1861) took a slightly different perspective in his four-volume history of the United States, published in 1856. Also seeking to claim the mantle of objectivity, Tucker rarely moved beyond the recap of key facts and documents. He also chose to end his history in 1841, so as to avoid the later agitation over slavery. Tucker, who had opposed slavery as a young man, found it personally too profitable to condemn by the time he wrote his history. Slavery was a “source of irritation” to the country, as when some “colored men of Philadelphia” had the temerity to present a petition to Congress in 1799, “which was not content with asking Congress to prevent the trade in slaves,” but also charged “that freemen were often kidnapped and sold as slaves”—an absurd accusation in Tucker’s limit view. With one dissent, the House of Representatives voted not just to reject the petition, but to discourage such communications in the future.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Tucker also worried about the expansion of democratic principles in the North, finding the language of equality dangerous. He warned that the United States was on a path to class warfare if the landed interests failed to unite in suppressing the vote and limiting office-holding to the wealthiest. In his history Tucker rejected Jefferson’s notion that slaveholding damages the slaveowner or society, maintaining that owning slaves led “to the formation of virtuous character” since the slaveholder clearly learns self-denial. After all, Jefferson himself was a slaveowner and never took advantage of his slaves. In fact, all the leading Southern politicians of the age were “remarkable for their mildness, moderation and forbearance,” with the possible exception of Andrew Jackson. Tucker dismissed as “bigoted” those who spoke out against slavery. Liberty was too precious a resource to share with just anyone. Like so many opponents of equality, Tucker used existing inequalities to justify one another. He thus defended the denial of rights to black Americans by noting that no one complained that women also had no rights.[[37]](#endnote-37)

As a historian, Tucker had little interest in any group other than white men and no patience with notions of diversity. In the four volumes of his history, women earned but a single footnote indicating that they were also patriotic during the Revolution. Similarly, he had little to say on immigrants beyond observing that they tended to make up the greatest number of paupers in the country. Tucker felt some sympathy for the Native Americans being forced off their traditional lands, but he still labelled them savages, denied them agency by portraying them as tools of foreign powers, and saw their removal from the eastern part of the continent as a sad necessity.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Up until the Civil War, American historians crafted a portrait of an egalitarian nation without actual equality, and as a democracy without diversity or dissent. Though founded on the core value of equality, the United States found it more practical to not actually extend equal rights beyond a specific group—adult white men. With the exception of Mercy Otis Warren, every antebellum historian carefully avoided the specifics and celebrated the rhetorical. Even the one explicit opponent of any form of equality, George Tucker, praised America’s “equality of condition” as the source of the young nation’s success.[[39]](#endnote-39) But once more, this was a vague formulation lacking in specific detail or supportive evidence.

This failure to have an honest discussion of the nature of equality in America led to the deepest polarization in the nation’s history and a violent civil war. That war finally produced the conversation required by a country boasting of its commitment to equality and is the subject of *Inventing Equality*. Theoretically, that extensive public debate should have motivated historians to finally explore the subject with clarity and precision. In one of the greatest betrayals in the annals of the historical profession, the opposite occurred.

**Crafting the Masters’ Narrative, 1865-1905**

The Civil War did not just end slavery, it also led to the establishment of the principle of legal equality. In the American lexicon, freedom implies choice. Historians had the freedom to choose how they would now interpret the past. They could be honest, addressing the nation’s history of inequality and brutal repression, or they could lie and construct another completely inaccurate mythology. Most historians chose the latter course. The shorthand for this approach is often “forgive and forget,” the formulation based on the false notion that the former requires the latter.

The Forgive and Forget school of history ignores political boundaries. Liberals base their call for putting the unfortunate aspects of the past behind us on the assumption that conservatives will accept liberal values, a position which defies logic.[[40]](#endnote-40) Thus, in the few years immediately after the war, a stream of former abolitionists called for reconciliation based on no longer talking about the issues that had sparked the war. In 1867, Horace Greeley, the most prominent liberal editor in the country, implored a Virginia audience which included many former slaves that the time had come “to forget the years of slavery, and secession, and civil war … and remember only that you are Virginians, and all now and henceforth freemen.” He made it sound so easy, and had the former Confederates accepted the logic of legal equality, Greeley’s call might have worked.[[41]](#endnote-41)

The one quality these one-time advocates of equality had in common was their whiteness. It was on that ground of race that one-time abolitionists agreed with their former adversaries. Robert E. Lee, leader of Confederate military forces through three bloody years, declined to attend a commemoration at the Gettysburg battlefield by claiming that it is “wiser … not to keep open the sores of war, but … to obliterate the marks of civil strife, to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered.” That is certainly a convenient way to avoid the consequences of 250 years of slavery and more than 700,000 deaths during the four years of war. The America these whites wanted was one where they did not have to think about the unpleasant parts of the past, but could move forward confident of their own virtue. It was a past untethered from reality, simply an imagined history that would make them feel better about themselves.[[42]](#endnote-42)

One may argue that it is not the task of historians to forget. Quite the contrary, historians are supposed to be guardians of the past. But that responsibility does not require that they be the truthful guardians, historians lying about history is a long-standing tradition. The project to rewrite the history of the United States began almost immediately led by no less than the former Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens.

Stephens did not just rewrite the history of the Civil War, he sought nothing less than the removal of slavery and black people from the story of America. Stephens began his vice presidency proclaiming slavery the cornerstone of the Confederacy; with his two-volume work, *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States*, published in 1868 and 1870, Stephens sought to elevate secession into a constitutional debate over states’ rights. For Stephens, secession was legal under the Constitution and but for Northern aggression there would have been no war— an interpretation that would prove very popular over the ensuing century. The only equality that mattered to Stephens was “the equality of the States.” Any effort to interfere with slavery “destroys this equality,” making the Reconstruction amendments themselves unconstitutional. Freedom could only be found by securing the sovereignty of the states; any diminishment of state sovereignty undermined the people’s liberty since they interact with the federal government through their state governments. Slavery was largely irrelevant to the Civil War; Stephens insisting that very few people who supported states’ rights cared about “the minor question of Slavery” one way or the other, they were just dedicated to preventing the expansion of federal authority. Slavery “was of infinitely less importance to the Seceding States, than the recognition of this great principle” of states’ rights.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Stephens does not restrain himself from eliminating history from his considerations. He went even further than denying the centrality of slavery to Southern politics and society, arguing that slavery did not really exist. “I say Slavery, so-called, because there was with us no such thing as Slavery in the full and proper sense of the word. No people ever lived more devoted to the principles of liberty, secured by free democratic institutions, than were the people of the South.” Clearly words as well as history have ceased to have any meaning. What then was this special institution that Northerners erroneously called slavery? It “was but a legal subordination of the African to the Caucasian race” intended to promote “the best interests of both races, the Black as well as the White, the Inferior, as well as the Superior.” There was no cruelty or tyranny in this system, since “Both had rights secured, and both had duties imposed.” This dreamworld of perfect harmony “was a system of reciprocal service, and mutual bonds.” In brief, humanity is unequal from birth and true freedom comes from knowing one’s place in the rational structure established by the benevolent and honorable Southern whites. *A Constitutional View* is a dull and stupid book, but one which exerted enormous influence.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Building on Stephens’ work, committed admirers of the Confederacy constructed a false history for the United States that would serve the interests of racists well into the 21st Century. This Masters’ Narrative maintained against all evidence that America’s slaves were happy and well cared for, that the Civil War was fought over the constitutional issue of states’ rights, and that Reconstruction was a corrupt failure, with the white heroes of the Klan “redeeming” the South by driving black people and their white allies out of the civic life of the Southern states. What we see repeatedly in the Masters’ Narrative is a sanguine description of a society that denies even the most basic forms of legal equality to a majority of the population even while the authors insist that the United States is a land of liberty, personal freedom, democracy, and equality. The contradiction is obvious, yet few contemporaries seemed to notice. This perspective on American history persists despite the best effort of two generations of historians because it makes white people feel better about the history of their nation and can be heard in the statements of a president who wants Hollywood to make more movies like “Gone with the Wind.”[[45]](#endnote-45)

An alternative positive history of the United States was readily available and made a few appearances during the period in which the Masters’ Narrative came to dominance. This more accurate framing of the history of the United States could emphasize the nation’s struggle to live up to its ideals, the revolutionary nature of the Civil War, briefly transforming society in a more democratic direction only to have all the progressive gains taken away by the racist counterattack, leading to a continuing battle against the forces of bigotry in the name of equality. But it was not so much professional historians who made this case as Union veterans. The most renowned of this group was Ulysses S. Grant, whose memoir remains one of the most evocative personal accounts of the war. Grant did not hesitate in expressing the greater morality of the Union cause as the South seceded to preserve slavery and the North fought to enhance freedom. That distinction was not difficult to understand. Grant traced a direct path from the Mexican War, which was fought to expand slave territory, and the Civil War. “The Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican war,” as the slave-owning elite saw benefits to militaristic expansion and came to expect the rest of the country to do exactly what they wanted. When much of the nation rejected their efforts to nationalize slavery, the Southern leadership moved to curse and destroy the nation built on the ideal of equality. “We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times.” But that war led the country to fight for an end to slavery, first as a military necessity, and then as a moral duty.[[46]](#endnote-46)

However, as Grant noted, “Wars produce many stories of fiction, some of which are told until they are believed to be true.”[[47]](#endnote-47) Most Confederate veterans who spoke after the war insisted that they fought for a noble cause, though the details of that cause remained vague and, in their own vision, romantic. The most influential of these apologists for treason was Jubal Early, who portrayed an almost innocent South battling for the preservation of their way of life against the brutal bully to the north. For Early and other believers in the myth of Southern purity, the war was a battle for liberty which they lost, though they reclaimed that freedom in destroying Reconstruction through violence and intimidation. The only freedom that mattered was that of white male Southerners.[[48]](#endnote-48)

One of the many serious casualties of the termination of Reconstruction was the truth. Accurate history became the enemy of “sectional harmony,” insofar as this “reconciliation” was premised on racism and white unity. Southern racists could not accept rejoining the United States unless Northern whites could agree that slavery had not caused the war and that bringing freedom to the slaves had proven a pointless endeavor. For that reason, most histories of the Civil War in the half century following its end focused almost exclusively on the war itself. As long as one spoke of battlefield tactics and heroism, it was possible to discuss the war in an alternate reality free of moral values. But there can be no doubt that the enemy of these creators of the Lost Cause ideology was equality. Nowhere was the success of this framing of the war and its meaning more evident than in the emergence of history textbooks in the last years of the Nineteenth Century.

In the 1890s, more American teenagers began attending high schools. At the same time, American historians began the process of professionalization, leading to the integration of history courses into the curriculum. With most publishers operating in the northeast, these first professional history textbooks tended to uphold a perspective of the war that placed the Confederacy in a negative light. A great many white Southerners expressed loud and continuous outrage that the national story did not take into account their version of the past, one which downplayed slavery and racism while promoting a glorious resistance to the expanding industrial North.[[49]](#endnote-49)

In the first decade of the Twentieth Century the pages of *Confederate Veteran Magazine* filled with condemnations of this version of the Civil War as having something to do with slavery. The memory of every heroic Confederate soldier was dishonored by these textbooks’ focus on slavery. Something had to be done, and the best place to start was the centralization of the purchase of textbooks. Throughout the South, the state took away the authority of individual schools or districts to determine their history textbooks, which had the double effect of controlling how the subject was taught statewide while creating a powerful single purchasing agent that could exert significant influence upon those scoundrel Northern publishers. Southern states, most particularly Texas, continue to exert this same impact today on the national textbook market, though their interest has largely shifted from history to science, which they tend to oppose.

Specifically, the new protectors of Southern honor, such as the Daughters of the Confederacy and the United Confederate Veterans, demanded that U.S. history textbooks drop all that nonsense about slavery and acknowledge that the war had been fought for “the cause of civil liberty” by “a chivalric, intelligent, proud, liberty-loving people.” In this version of the past, the Confederacy stood for “the most sacred rights of self-government” in opposition to an unconstitutional Northern aggression. Their campaign even led them to attacks on the venerable *Encyclopedia Britannica* for describing slavery as an exploitative form of labor. The United Confederate Veterans insisted that “Such a distortion of historical facts could emanate only from ignorance or malignity.”[[50]](#endnote-50)

Southern states established historical commissions to critique, reject, and approve appropriate textbooks. These committees set out specific guidelines rejecting any book “that says the South fought to hold her slaves,” or portrayed slaveholders as cruel, or “glorified Abraham Lincoln and vilifies Jefferson Davis.” They insisted that children must learn that “Southern men were anxious for the slaves to be free” and were prevented from this task by “Northern fanatical Abolitionists.”[[51]](#endnote-51) The absence of any evidence upholding this rather peculiar reading of history hardly mattered, but this history-by-assertion set the pattern of just making it up which two generations of historians would follow to a greater or lesser degree. As William E. Dodd of Randolph-Macon College observed, the Southern standard of history left no space for scholarship when “a confession of faith” in the purity of Southern white intentions and actions “is made a sine qua non of fitness for teaching or writing history.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

Many publishers gave in quickly and published histories by and for Southern whites. A fair example of this type of pro-Confederate textbook is Susan Pendleton Lee’s *Advanced School History of the United States*. Lee imagined the liberty-loving English settlers battling “savage and barbarous Indians” for control of the continent while bringing these inferior people the benefits of Christianity They then brought the African “savages” to America to give them the benefits of Christianity, making slavery “the greatest missionary agent the world had ever known.” Fortunately, the “kindest and most affectionate relations existed between the slaves and their owners.” Cruelty was almost unknown on the Southern plantation, the owners guided by a “sense of responsibility” to their slaves. Lee describes the Emancipation Proclamation as a confiscation of Southern property and “wholesale robbery” intended “to stir up the slaves, hitherto very peaceable and docile.” Avoiding any discussion of the more than two hundred thousand black troops fighting for the union, Lee mentions them only twice, fleeing from the carnage at the Battle of the Crater and being defeated at Fort Pillow. She labels the slaughter of the Union prisoners by Nathan Forrest’s troops a “slander”—all those dead black troops drowned trying to escape.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Given that Lee presents slavery as a positive good, she feels comfortable seeing Southerners consistently proving their “devotion to liberty.” Lee repeatedly insists that the Southern people respected “the liberty and rights of every one.” The Confederacy dedicated itself to “constitutional liberty,” and did all it could short of dishonor to avoid war.[[54]](#endnote-54) The Republicans created the crisis, for the Southern states would surely have eliminated slavery on their own but for Northern interference. The Republicans would never would have won public office but for the “Wicked and worthless immigrants” attracted to the Republican Party as apparently “the opponent of tyranny and the advocate of freedom. This was not actually the case.”[[55]](#endnote-55) The leaders of the secession movement, “the gravest and wisest” men, “loved the Union” and “would gladly have remained in it at any cost, save that of the freedom and honor of their States.” Unfortunately, Lee does not specify what threat these states faced, though they did everything they could to maintain peace until Lincoln had the audacity to attempt to supply the federal troops at Fort Sumter. The heroic Confederacy, overwhelmed by the industrial might of the North and the brutal methods of Ulysses S. Grant, lost the war and fell under the sway of ignorant former slaves and the corrupt whites who manipulated them for personal gain. Lee admits that the Republicans won significant majorities throughout the South in the elections after the war, but since those electoral victories were based on black votes, they could not be allowed to stand.[[56]](#endnote-56)

For a book that speaks constantly of liberty, it is curious that the Declaration of Independence earns but a single sentence in the text noting its passage. There is no discussion of its meaning. Similarly, the only reference to human equality in the entire book comes in Lee’s description of Reconstruction, in which “unprincipled” white Republicans “moulded [sic] to their will the ignorant negroes elated at their fancied equality.” On the other hand, Lee repeatedly emphasized the notion of each state being equal to every other state, and thus supreme in their independent sovereignty—a point clearly borrowed from Alexander Stephens. Reconstruction was a crime against the innocent people of the South, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments were somehow “contrary to the free spirit of the original Constitution,” apparently so much so that Lee avoided any further discussion of them.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Facing the horror of social equality, the heroic Ku Klux Klan rode forth to protect “white women and defenseless families” by preventing “the negroes from voting.” Thanks to these efforts, “the tyranny and oppression” of democracy imposed on the South by the Republicans came to an end and the Southern states returned to the “control of her own sons.” Women appear more often in Lee’s book than was typical for the time, though primarily as victims of various savage outrages and as the “women so pure and gentle and true” who supported the Confederacy. There is no reference to the women’s movement of the Nineteenth Century; Seneca Falls, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Tubman, and a dozen other prominent women do not appear in these pages. Harriet Beecher Stowe appears as the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, another slander against the benevolent salve-holders. For Lee, the history of the United States is a tale of white supremacy wrapped in the threadbare blanket of limited liberty.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Anyone who violated the racist ideology of the South was quickly punished. The leading cautionary tale was the fate of Andrew Sledd, a Methodist minister and professor of Latin at a minor Georgia college called Emory. In 1902, Sledd had the audacity to write an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* critical of lynching. While Sledd made clear his adherence to white supremacy and segregation, he felt that black Americans deserved the equal right to life and liberty. White Georgia and Emory College lost their collective minds and drove Sledd from his job and the South. Emory did make it up to Sledd sixty-three years after his death by holding a symposium.[[59]](#endnote-59)

The Sledd affair made clear that any white scholar who did not toe the racist line had best live outside the South, though even then the white supremacists could make life difficult for dissenters from the Masters’ Narrative. For instance, Henry William Elson’s *History of the United States* was roundly attacked throughout the South for daring to quote prominent antebellum Southern women who objected to the rape of slave women. The *Roanoke Times* sensibly suggested that “We had better have poison put into the food of our sons than to have them taught that their forefathers were heads of harems,” with the complicity of their grandmothers, “and that the soldiers of the Confederacy fought to maintain human slavery.” Instructors who violated the white community’s standard by assigning Elson’s book were driven into submission or exile. As A. H. Lankford of the Tennessee chapter of the United Confederate Veterans said of Elson’s book, it promoted “an uncontrollable love for the colored race and a desire on the author’s part … to place them in every particular upon terms of equality with the better class of whites of the South and entirely over and above our ‘poor white trash.’” The idea of such equality clearly was too much for the sensitivities of Southern whites.[[60]](#endnote-60)

It is worth looking more closely at Elson’s *History of the United States* in order to get a sense of its contrast with the work of Susan Lee. In many particulars, the two texts share a world view of white supremacy. For instance, Elson found little to admire in the native population of North America. Physically “equal to any other race,” the Indians were mentally weak, essentially a “child, he was an animal, and yet he was a man.” Elson accepted “the eternal principle of equal human rights,” which he perceived as essential for the success of the United States. Nonetheless, the English were more equal than other humans, the early colonists possessing a high level of morality and commitment to freedom. Elson never questioned the virtue of the nation’s founders nor the results of their endeavors in the Constitution.[[61]](#endnote-61)

To this point, Elson echoes Lee’s perspective. His swerve off the path of acceptable scholarship came when he turned to the subject of slavery. Sharing the original Republican position that it was the avarice of the slaveowners that drove the country to civil war, Elson saw slavery as a blight on the nation that held back the South economically, since no rational person would choose to settle in a region where slave labor denigrated the work of poor whites, keeping them in eternal poverty. Elson had the numbers to back up his statement that few immigrants went to the South, where opportunities for advancement remained limited. Still, Elson sought to be fair, crediting the Southern leadership with sincerity and praising the military prowess of the Confederates. Repeatedly he insists on the equality of the two sides in the war; each army had brilliant commanders and heroic soldiers, but the Union had morality on its side.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Elson ends his history of the United States with an analysis of “the so-called race problem, the most serious and menacing question before the American people to-day.” [801] He acknowledges that with the end of Reconstruction “the equality of the negro with the white man was recognized in law, though not in fact.” That gap between law and reality was, he argues, for the best, as “The rule of the white man is essential to southern progress.” Elson sides with his race over his stated beliefs. “The writer of this volume believes himself to be as nearly without race prejudice as a nominal white man can be; but he believes that all thoughtful people will agree that the great development of the South since the war … could not have been, except under the domination of the white race.” Even though he chronicles the many laws passed to keep black people in subjugation to the whites, Elson felt it absurd to pass laws to promote equality, for “Nature seems to have drawn a line between the races that man has no power to obliterate.”[[63]](#endnote-63)

Elson praises the Constitution for its protection of “individual liberty in a degree so remarkable as to attract the world’s attention.” Elson recognizes that the United States has failed to live up to it ideals, but white people are not to blame. Rather, the fault lies with nature and the blacks themselves, for they have not seized the opportunity to advance themselves. Their future is in their own hands, the only problem is “the want of ambition to do something and to be somebody.” Again, though Elson briefly notes the existence of the Ku Klux Klan, he insists that “The negro is quite safe and his happiness quite secure under the white man’s government,” reports of white violence against blacks are just “rumors.” Elson accepts the Masters’ Narrative on Reconstruction, which he saw as entirely corrupt. “Unscrupulous” carpetbaggers controlled the freedmen, who were totally ignorant and not qualified to participate in politics. Like nearly every historian for the next sixty years, Elson noted that the states ran up large public debts, never bothering to record what the people of those states received in return, from education to infrastructure projects. Then when the Redeemers claimed power, those debts vanished, as did education and infrastructure, allowing the South to sink back into its primitive poverty. This return of white supremacists to power “was most natural. Nothing else could possibly have been expected,” despite the fact that the Fifteenth Amendment “imposed negro suffrage” on the country. The end of democracy in the South and the establishment of a one-party state is simply the price to pay for keeping poor blacks in line. “In no case, aside from … the franchise, do the laws now discriminate against the black man.” Blacks are fully equal before the law and all black children enjoy access to an equal education. When reality contradicts theory, go with the theory. Repeatedly, white liberals claimed to study the issue objectively and came to the conclusion that white men rocked.[[64]](#endnote-64)

We can tell a lot about a work of history by the absences. Elson bent every subject in an effort to not antagonize Southern whites. He has nothing to say about Fort Pillow and only noted that “Toward the close of the war many black regiments were raised for the northern armies, and they were conspicuous in the fighting at Fort Wagner, … and other places.” Elson also has nothing to say about women, who appear in the context of “women and children,” or being “busy with their knitting or sewing.” Even though this book was published in 1904 and discusses the Spanish War, there is no reference to the Plessy decision, the establishment of segregation, lynching, the struggle for women’s suffrage, or the violent racism that marked the U.S. occupation of the Philippines. The Declaration of Independence gets short shrift, noted for its unstated “defects,” but otherwise ignored as irrelevant, not even its most famous passage is quoted.[[65]](#endnote-65) America is and always has been a golden land. By 1830 “Democracy reigned supreme.” With the rise of Andrew Jackson, equality triumphed. “There were few rich men and almost no poverty.” [479] Jackson is the hero of the book’s first half. The removal of the eastern Indian nations in the 1830s is presented in the passive voice as “the Indian lands were secured to Georgia.” Unlike Lee, Elson indicated sympathy for some immigrants, making a typical exception for the Chinese, “a most undesirable class” of people. Otherwise he wanted to make certain that the students reading his book appreciated that everything is great.[[66]](#endnote-66)

It is evident that Elson agreed with Lee on nearly every generalization concerning American history. The modern reader would be excused for failing to see why white supremacists expressed such outrage over this history. Elson ameliorated his insistence on the immorality of slavery by largely buying into the new narrative of slavery, insisting that a great many slaveowners were humane and that the slaves better off than they would have been free. Though he had already stated that it was illegal to teach slaves to read, Elson writes that slaves often had a strong attachment to their owners, as “the slave was educated and taught religion, and was practically a member of the family,” having “little desire for freedom.” Sure slavery was wrong, but he found it difficult to distinguish between the negative impact of slavery on blacks and that race’s inherent inferiority. “[Slave] women were without a vestige of womanly chastity, and the men were almost universally dishonest. This may have been partly due to the natural tendencies of the race; but it was in a great measure due to the natural evils of the system.” Elson identified the “most revolting feature of slavery in America” as its tendency to make slave women “a prostitute to her master.” Since these women were not paid, that seems an inaccurate description. Nonetheless, this was the passage that so upset Southern whites, for quoting prominent Southern white women who recognized that they were complicit in their husbands’ harems. Even if the offspring produced had pale skin, they were still held to slavery by their vicious fathers. There was no way that Southern whites could forgive Elson for raising this issue, and they succeeded in driving his book from the market.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Like so many historians of this period, Elson and Lee demonstrated little interest in equality, even as a rhetorical device. Both authors, like most historians in the decades after the Civil War, held an ethnic vision of race. Lee and Elson both refer to the “English race,” the “Iroquois race,” the Anglo-Saxon race, the Scotch-Irish race, the Philippine “races” (Elson: “There are more than twenty races” in the Philippines), even the Swedish race.[[68]](#endnote-68) Elson crafted a nationalist history of steady progress and prosperity, and had no difficulty seeing the United States as a functioning democracy from 1830 on. Lee spoke for Southern nationalism, based on white supremacy and regional pride, with literally not a single reference to democracy. They certainly also agreed that the United States is a great country, so long as white men stay in charge. Their only real difference was on the morality of slavery, which Lee promoted and Elson denied. In the years ahead, most historians would split the difference, seeing slavery as wrong yet somehow good, immoral yet romantic, somehow important to understanding American history but better left to historical fiction. If you don’t like some aspect of your nation’s past you can either deny it, ignore it, or bury it under make believe.

**The Age of Make Believe, 1905-1945**

A pair of films highlight the cultural triumph of the Masters’ Narrative: *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. In 1915, D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Clansman*, portrays the Ku Klux Klan as a band of heroes using extralegal means to protect white women and bring correct racial order to the South. President Woodrow Wilson, an historian, allowed it to premier in the White House and gave it his enthusiastic endorsement. Twenty-four years later, *Gone with the Wind* offered the same racist vision of Reconstruction while giving more screen time to the “romantic” Old South of happy slaves, noble masters, and feminine yet feisty white women. Anyone with the slightest bit of knowledge of American history will find both films nauseating, yet we cannot understate the massive cultural impact of these two films, which continues to this day.[[69]](#endnote-69) The persistent belief in an imagined South where only white people matter is the direct consequence of these hugely popular films.

Few historians stepped forward to question either of these films, but then the historical profession had played a major role in crafting the fantasies portrayed on the screen. A good example of the complicity of historians can be found in the writings of the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson.

Wilson never disguised his racism, letting it guide his policies as President as well as his work as a historian. Wilson’s 1893 *Division and Reunion* was a successful college textbook and still in print. Wilson painted the rosiest possible portrait of America, a country made up of noble public figures motivated by sincere concern for humanity. For instance, he described the life of the Southern slaveowner—though he preferred the word “planter”—this way: “There was abounding hospitality and generous intercourse; but the intercourse was free, unstudied in its manners, straightforward, hearty, unconstrained, and full of a truly democratic instinct and sentiment of equality.” The exact nature of that equality is not explored but appears to include the ownership of other people. Wilson frames slavery as “patriarchal,” with the gracious masters looking out for the well-being of their slaves, who “were comfortably quartered, and were kept from overwork both by their own laziness and by the slack discipline” of the plantation. The sort of brutality described in abolitionist literature was “in every sense exceptional.” To his credit, Wilson did not buy Alexander Stephens’ lie that the Civil War erupted over competing constitutional interpretations, having no patience for the states’ rights argument, and summarized the overwhelming evidence of slavery as the war’s cause.[[70]](#endnote-70)

Oddly, the Civil War did not disrupt the peaceful balance of Southern society. The slaves continued to work happily for their absent masters throughout the war, proving “both their docility and their contented faithfulness by keeping quietly and obediently to their tasks.”[[71]](#endnote-71) Reading Wilson, one would never know that black troops had fought for the Union Army. There is no reference to the Fort Pillow Massacre, the Ku Klux Klan, or any prominent African American such as Frederick Douglass. Women are also missing from this book; Wilson has no time for the fight for women’s suffrage or those who led it. His attitude is well summarized by his use of the phrase “universal suffrage” to describe the male-only voting rights established after the Civil War.[[72]](#endnote-72)

Wilson also had little patience for the new immigrants. He displays a degree of sympathy for the Know Nothings as they responded to the stream of immigrants pouring into urban centers, leaving “its most unsavory deposits” and offering America little more than “corruption and disorder.” In the 1880s immigration became “a threat instead of a source of increased wealth and material strength, bringing … the pauperized and the discontented and disheartened of all lands, instead of the hopeful and sturdy classes of former years.” He criticizes Congress for failing to act to limit immigration, except from China.[[73]](#endnote-73)

In talking about the black codes following the Civil War, Wilson writes that “In most respects the negroes were put at once upon a footing of equitable equality with the whites in all civil rights.” This is a truly bizarre claim in the context of black codes that limited the rights and movements of black people. But then Wilson saw Reconstruction as an unfortunate aberration in American history. The governments imposed on the South introduced “an extraordinary carnival of public crime.” Once more we see the freedmen under the complete control of “unscrupulous” Carpetbaggers. Taxes were raised and debts piled up, though Wilson does not say on what the money was spent, just assuming it was stolen. Congress exercised “extra-constitutional powers” in forcing change on the South, and no one but a few Carpetbaggers benefited.[[74]](#endnote-74)

However, Wilson devotes little attention to the actual workings of Reconstruction, turning instead to the “Restoration of normal conditions” in 1876. By normal, he meant one-party white rule in the South. “Negro rule under unscrupulous adventurers” gave was to “the natural, inevitable ascendency of the whites, the responsible class.”[[75]](#endnote-75) Wilson has not a word to say about the violence, fraud, and voter suppression that marked the restoration of white supremacy. A leading progressive, Wilson limited the concept of equality to white men.

In brief, Wilson was highly selective in his histories, simply refusing to talk about anything that made him uncomfortable with the United States. His speech at the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg is particularly grating for a historian. Where Lincoln found deep meaning in the epic struggle that had taken place in the Pennsylvania countryside, Wilson declared it “an impertinence to discourse upon how the battle went, how it ended, what it signified.” The “quarrel” was now “forgotten,” excluding “the manly devotion” on both sides. The notion that the Civil War was forgotten and that we should not look for any meaning in that conflict is a remarkably unhistorical statement for a historian.[[76]](#endnote-76) Those who had grown up reading the histories of such scholars as Woodrow Wilson were well prepared to accept the faux-history of *Birth of a Nation*.

It is important to clarify that Wilson was not alone in his construction of an all-white male past for the United States. Quite the contrary, nearly every historian of the early Twentieth century accepted and furthered this vision even while proclaiming the United States a land of liberty—the liberty to deny equality to others.

By 1911, David Saville Muzzey, the most successful history textbook author of the Twentieth Century, could portray Reconstruction as a crime, Congress placing “upon the South the unbearable burden of negro rule.” Muzzey declared black Americans “utterly unfit for the exercise of political rights,” though he fails to establish the measurement for such rights. The resulting democratically elected governments were “an indescribable orgy of extravagance, fraud, and disgusting incompetence.” The Ku Klux Klan emerged as a rational response to these outrages and “took advantage of the black man’s superstitious nature to force him back into the humble social position which he held before the war,”—in other words, slavery. The Klan did a lot of joking around, playing on the simple freedmen to convince them to give up their rights, while charges of Klan violence “were greatly exaggerated.” Taking the region as a single entity, Muzzey declared that “the South” was justified in its resentment toward the North because of Reconstruction, a bitterness it never would have felt otherwise. Blame lay with the Carpetbaggers who poisoned the minds of “the colored race” against “the only people who could really help them begin their new life of freedom well,--their old masters.”[[77]](#endnote-77)

Historically, the high point of this glorification was the notorious Dunning School. Named for William Archibald Dunning, a professor at Columbia University, the Dunning School dismissed political and legal equality as contrary to the best interests of the United States. Adherents of this historical interpretation sided unequivocally with Southern Democrats who used violence, fraud, and legal trickery to deny civil rights to Southern blacks. Dunning and his many acolytes dismissed Reconstruction as not just an error, but a crime against a well-ordered society. This perspective led to an enthusiastic embrace of segregation as the best possible response to the danger of allowing blacks to vote or participate in society in any meaningful way. Giving the freedmen the right to vote had been an epic transgression against the natural order since blacks proved incapable of informed political participation, being prone to manipulation and all forms of corruption. In contrast the racist whites knew what was best for the South and they restored honest government to their region once they had disenfranchised the blacks and driven their white Republican allies—the so-called Carpetbaggers and Scalawags—from the South. Dunning’s followers published a series of monographs telling roughly the same story, that Reconstruction was a crime against the South and that the region was much better off under white supremacy. The willingness of these historians to accept racist violence and the principles of inequality warped historical scholarship for sixty years.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Dunning himself had nothing but contempt for “the extreme negrophiles, who, on abstract grounds of human equality and natural rights, demanded full civil and political privileges for the freedmen.” Republicans supported equality either because of a disordered mind or as a necessary part of their efforts to expand the powers of the central government. For Dunning, the only equality that mattered was that between the states, and the Republicans sought to destroy that balance. The Republicans aimed to terminate Southern liberty, forcing “respectable whites” to form the Ku Klux Klan because they saw no other alternative to submitting “to the political domination of the blacks.” The Republicans thus “turned every white” into a supporter of the Klan by trying to force them to interact with blacks. The Redeemer governments made “the political equality of the negro … as extinct in law as it has long been in fact.”[[79]](#endnote-79) That was as it should be, since the idea of equality “repelled the mass of white people.”[[80]](#endnote-80)

His adherents followed Dunning not just in their vision of American history, but also by inserting the most rank racism into their works. In praising the prominent white supremacist Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz, James Ford Rhodes, the author of an enormously popular multi-volume history of the U.S., wrote, "What the whole country has only learned through years of costly and bitter experience was known to this leader of scientific thought before we ventured on the policy of trying to make negroes intelligent by legislative acts."[[81]](#endnote-81) The renowned Columbia political scientist John W. Burgess left no doubt of his racism: "The claim that there is nothing in the color of the skin from the point of view of political ethics is a great sophism. A black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind." Giving blacks any access to political rights will lead to the triumph of “barbarism.”[[82]](#endnote-82) E. Merton Coulter, one of the founders of the Southern Historical Association and editor of the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* for a half century, wrote that "education soon lost its novelty for most of the Negroes"; they would "spend their last piece of money for a drink of whisky"; and, being "by nature highly emotional and excitable…, they carried their religious exercises to extreme lengths."[[83]](#endnote-83) It is worth remembering that these authors influenced another two or three generations of historians.

The book with the longest lasting influence has been Claude Bowers’ *The Tragic Era*, a 1929 best-seller which is still in print and is regularly promoted on far-right web sites. Bowers, an ambassador and leading Democrat who delivered the keynote address at the Party’s 1928 convention, wrote two popular books promoting the image of the Democratic Party as champion of the common man. His background was in journalism and politics, and his history books were based entirely on the research of others. When it came to the Reconstruction period, he relied entirely on the Dunning School for his interpretation and “facts.”

Bowers charged the Republicans with treating the Constitution “as a doormat,” following Dunning in seeing Reconstruction as a political power-grab. Confident that, left to themselves, the former slaves and slaveowners would have gotten along just fine, Bowers asserted that, but for the Carpetbaggers, “the negroes would have turned for leadership to the native whites, who understood them best.” For the blacks, freedom “meant idleness, and gathering in noisy groups in the streets.... Freedom meant throwing aside all marital obligations, deserting wives and taking new ones, and in an indulgence in sexual promiscuity that soon took its toll in the victims of consumption and venereal disease.” The freedmen refused to work for their former masters or anyone else, indulging in “A weird wave of religious fervor” marked by “a crazy frenzy.” Repeatedly Bowers faults the blacks for refusing to work, basing his assertions on the opinions of Southern racists.[[84]](#endnote-84)

The great moral victory of the Republican Party in the Civil War had been ending slavery and promoting equality. As a Democratic activist, Bowers saw his duty as undermining that accomplishment. A belief in equality became an “obsession” with Republicans, who sought to force an unnatural social unity on the South. Bowers contemptuously dismissed those who held to the “radical passion” for equality, which damaged blacks more than any white master ever had. Going further, Bowers rejected the morality of equality, since in his view a belief in human equality translated into a hatred for white men (doesn’t that sound familiar?). “The crusade of hate and social equality … was playing havoc with a race naturally kindly and trustful.” They were turned from their natural joyfully docile character by “the scum of Northern society,” the Carpetbaggers, who are the true villains of Bower’s book.[[85]](#endnote-85)

Bowers bought into every myth promoted by *Birth of a Nation*, from a vision of happy slaves to black sexual violence—“Rape is the foul daughter of Reconstruction.” Once more, the Klan appears as the heroes of the tale, defending the honor of white women. It was not until the “Klan began to ride that white women felt some sense of security.” Klansmen had no “real feeling of hostility to the blacks,” they just wanted to restore proper order, and they certainly had “never had any thought of resisting the Federal Government.” That resistance was forced upon them as President Grant acted unjustly and for political reasons in trying to end Klan violence. “Meanwhile the Southern people were fighting for the preservation of their civilization” against this lunatic insistence on equality.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Bowers crafted the most influential work on Reconstruction as a time of theft and rapine, with the South saved only by the heroic labors of the Redeemers who restored white supremacy. In Bower’s book, to even campaign for equality is to commit an act of belligerence, to commit violence against the laws of nature. It is a sad indictment of Franklin Roosevelt that he liked this book.[[87]](#endnote-87)

Just as Wilson did not limit his contempt to blacks but shared it widely among Asians and the “new immigrants” from Eastern and Southern Europe, so did most other historians work to limit those entitled to the blessings of citizenship. In the first two decades of the 20th Century, historians started defining “we” rather specifically as WASPS and “them” as the new immigrants incapable of becoming equal Americans. Assimilation into a WASP norm became a key issue as the country faced an influx of people identified as inferior.

Historians of the earliest Twentieth Century offered little indication that they had progressed as scholars from their Nineteenth Century predecessors, continuing to define race ethnically. Thus David Muzzey could speak of the “English race,” the “Scotch-Irish race,” and the “bigoted Mohammedan race,” and declare that immigration had become a “race problem,” as only Northern European immigrants could be “assimilated rapidly.” The new immigrants not only could not assimilate, they did not want to do so, thus undermining American culture and democracy. The whole country was “alive to-day to the dangers of unrestricted immigration.” Muzzey assured his readers, presumably high school and college students, that their government was taking steps to keep out “imported immigrants” being brought in as cheap labor. Retaining “sound citizenship” required further regulation. Like so many other historians of the era, Muzzey had no patience for the concept of equality, or even for the word, which he rejected as the product of the fanatics in the French Revolution.[[88]](#endnote-88)

This assertion that the new immigrants posed a fundamental challenge to the American way of life because they could not be assimilated into WASP culture appears in nearly every significant historical text of the first forty years of the Twentieth Century. Historians accused foreign governments of using the United States as “a dumping ground for convicts, paupers, anarchists, and other undesirable citizens.”[[89]](#endnote-89) In 1937, a team of scholars including the liberal icon Henry Steele Commager warned that the nation faced a major problem attempting “to absorb the millions of olive-skinned Italians and swarthy black-haired Slavs and dark-eyed Hebrews.”[[90]](#endnote-90)

Once more, we can tell a lot about scholars by significant issues they avoid. Very few historians in this period had much to say about women, even though the authors lived through an age of renewed assertions of women’s right to vote. One can search nearly any historical work published in the first half of the Twentieth Century for any reference to women free of the words “and children.” The suffrage movement gets very little attention, even when it is victorious with the 19th Amendment. Removing women from history is a political act; published texts distort history with both direct lies and silence.

Historical scholarship was not supposed to be this way. The Progressive Era began with a push toward professionalization, a concerted effort to make American society more rational and objective.[[91]](#endnote-91) J. Franklin Jameson, a founder of the American Historical Association, called for more “second-class work” which would free the profession from the amateur writers and promote technical skill.[[92]](#endnote-92) He got his wish. But a focus on footnotes does not translate into objectivity; the historians of the first half of the Twentieth Century were no better than their predecessors in putting aside their social, cultural, and intellectual biases.

To take a significant example, Sydney George Fisher considered himself the first professional historian to tackle the American Revolution with his 1908 book, *The Struggle for Independence*. He insisted on his own objectivity, striving to eschew mythologies and empty rhetoric. He boldly presented the Revolution as the product of historical forces, largely economic, beyond individual control. The result is a rather dull book that moves from one event to another with little analysis. Unlike most scholars, Fisher did give women a paragraph in his two-volume work, noting that their efforts to aid the revolutionary cause amounted to “a mere trifle.”[[93]](#endnote-93) Slavery was not an issue worthy of discussion, beyond its exotic nature. “The picturesqueness of slavery, the quaint humor of the slaves, the romantic life of the planters” imparted a certain charm to the South, but slaves themselves appear only as a form of property. There is no reference to black troops on either side.[[94]](#endnote-94) Indians appear often, usually as brutal “savages” fighting with the British against American independence, and with no real place in the future of the United States.[[95]](#endnote-95)

The one way in which Fisher differed from earlier historians is his attention to the “doctrine of equality,” devoting several pages to its intellectual background. Most of that discussion is devoted to the work of Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, a Swiss legal theorist who argued that people have a right to pursue happiness as they saw fit. Fisher maintained that this “right of self-development” forms the essence of the American revolutionaries’ understanding of equality. Jefferson “merely drafted” the Declaration of Independence; Americans shared adherence to the ideas of equality as formulated by Burlamaqui. Fisher frames America’s notion of equality as the right to social mobility, and it is this doctrine which continues to draw people to the United States. These few pages are probably the most eloquent passage in the entire book, offering a rare consideration of human equality as an admirable goal; yet Fisher observes that Americans have proved very “cautious” in applying the principle. That caution extends to Fisher, who closes his discussion of equality by stating that the Continental Congress would have done better to say that “all men are created politically equal, which was what they meant.” Failing to specify their limited meaning of equality led later generations to misunderstand the concept and seek to apply it beyond the political sphere.[[96]](#endnote-96)

The one great scholarly exception to the Dunning School was W. E. B. Du Bois. Putting aside the fact that he was one of the few African American historians until the 1970s and the first to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard (1895), Du Bois stood out for many reasons as a scholar. Almost alone among scholars of Reconstruction, Du Bois returned to the source documents in an effort to tell an accurate story of the period. He was also nearly alone among American historians of the first half of the 20th Century in taking human equality seriously. His 1903 work, *Souls of Black Folks*, is often credited as a seminal text in the new field of Sociology and also was one of the few works to challenge the Masters’ Narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Du Bois reminds his readers that no matter what former Confederates claimed, everyone knew they marched to war because of slavery. He went further and challenged the portrait of Reconstruction as an abject failure, drawing special attention to the Freedmen’s Bureau as an admirable attempt “by a great nation to grapple with vast problems of race and social condition.” Du Bois insisted that the history of this noble crusade for human progress had not yet been written.[[97]](#endnote-97)

Correct on the latter point, Du Bois did not tackle the subject himself until nearly thirty years after the publication of *Souls of Black Folks*. In 1929, Anna Julia Cooper—a truly remarkable woman, born into slavery, who worked her way to a history doctorate from the Sorbonne—asked Du Bois to write a response to Bowers’ *The Tragic Era*. Bowers’ book had just come out, and struck Cooper as the capstone of the Dunning School with its dismissal of African Americans as unworthy of citizenship. Du Bois accepted the challenge, throwing himself into the archives, and in 1935 bringing out one of the most important historical works of the century, *Black Reconstruction in America*.[[98]](#endnote-98)

A massive work of original scholarship, *Black Reconstruction* explores the period in detail. Du Bois begins by observing the failure of Americans to live according to their own stated ideals until the Civil War. The war brought together for the first time whites and blacks “on terms of essential social equality and mutual respect.” He notes the contribution of black men and women to the Union cause, a subject uniformly ignored by contemporary white historians.[[99]](#endnote-99)

Du Bois did not just reject the Dunning School, he repeatedly proved that they had deliberately manipulated the sources to create an inaccurate portrait of Reconstruction, most particularly in failing to note the wide-spread support for the post-Civil War governments among Southern whites as well as blacks. Reconstruction was a revolution in social relations that briefly brought the United States close to being a true democracy; its defeat was not just a heavy blow to the freedmen, it inflicted serious damage on the very concept of freedom for all Americans. In rejecting equality, white Americans rejected democracy.

By demonstrating that white supremacists did more than just drive the freedmen back into a limiting caste system, Du Bois put forth one of the most significant arguments in the history of this country: that limiting freedom to one group of people damages the freedoms of everyone. It was not just blacks who lost their votes and right to free speech when the so-called Redeemers seized power through violence and intimidation; poor Southern whites suffered as well. Du Bois correctly identified a core use to which the elite put racism: to keep the poor divided and weak. He made the insightful observation that when white labor “refused to recognize black labor as equal and human, [it] had to fight to maintain its own humanity and ideal of equality.” The white elite could accentuate and manipulate this existing racism to prevent alliances such as those that appeared in the early years of the Populist movement. “So long as the Southern white laborers could be induced to prefer poverty to equality with the Negro, just so long was a labor movement in the South made impossible.”[[100]](#endnote-100)

Rejecting the glib racist generalizations of the Dunning School, Du Bois documented the ways in which poor whites benefitted from Reconstruction through the establishment of public education, the opening of full civil rights such as voting and jury duty to white men as well as black, the increase in the general welfare through infrastructure projects, longer lives as a consequence of public health departments and improved sanitation, jobs through public works, and an end to the barbaric legal punishments of the antebellum period. The Redeemers turned back the clock on all these progressive developments. Inequality thus turned the South “into a center of poverty and suffering, … an abode of ignorance among black and white more abysmal than in any modern land.”[[101]](#endnote-101)

Also unlike the Dunning School, Du Bois most certainly did not glorify the Ku Klux Klan. They did not ride forth to bring order and safety to the South. Like so many proclaimed efforts to restore “law and order,” the Klan sought nothing less than the end of democracy in the name of white supremacy. Du Bois thus correctly identified the Klan as a counter-revolutionary criminal organization that committed outrageous acts of violence. He also showed that when a state had a forceful governor who enforced the law, such as Arkansas under Powell Clayton between 1868 and 1873, that the Klan could be brought to heal.

At every turn, Du Bois challenged the manufactured truths of the Masters’ Narrative. He dared to discuss that great forbidden subject, “the concubinage of black women to white men” under slavery. Du Bois may have been too polite to call it rape, but not to mention that often these sexual attacks were incestuous, as the slaves could very well be the rapists’ half-sisters. The Klan fought to restore this system of racist sexual violence, committing numerous rapes and viewing black women as “the legitimate prey of white men” and not subject to the protection of the law.[[102]](#endnote-102) But then the law had abandoned not just blacks but all those deemed inferior. Du Bois noted the limitations Northern whites put on immigrants and women, limiting their civil rights with the same ardor as their Southern brethren did those of blacks. The court system acted on behalf of the elite, working to ensure that the experiment of equality would never gain legal support. Northern elites used the law to control workers, while Southern elites manipulated the law to punish any whites or blacks who attempted to make real the promises of the Reconstruction amendments.

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois offered a vision of a democratic United States that briefly worked to make justice and equality real. He had no doubt that if the federal government had responded forcefully to the violence targeting Republicans in the South, that a majority of whites would have come to see the benefits of the new system and “democracy could have been established in the South.”[[103]](#endnote-103) Instead, the counter-revolution of 1876-77 destroyed freedom and every hope for economic, social, and cultural progress in the South. White supremacists could not accept their defeat in the Civil War nor the idea of freedom for black Americans. In fury they turned on their fellow Americans and created “a new dictatorship of property in the South through the color line. It was a triumph of men who in their effort to replace equality with caste and to build inordinate wealth on a foundation of abject poverty had succeeded in killing democracy.” It was “nearly inconceivable in 1876 that ten years earlier most men had believed in human equality.”[[104]](#endnote-104)

Du Bois left no doubt that the Dunning School worked to undermine not just the historical reputation of Reconstruction, but also the very concept of equality. The final chapter of *Black Reconstruction* with the provocative title “The Propaganda of History,” is a stunning take down of the work of these white supremacist scholars. Du Bois towered over the white dwarfs of the Dunning School, and it is his scholarship which has stood the test of time.

Yet historians mostly chose to ignore this masterpiece of careful historical research, which slipped into obscurity until the 1970s. Instead the Dunning School slogged away into the 1960s. For instance, the U.S. history textbook available to my Los Angeles high school class in the late 1960s, written by the prominent historians Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, had a two-page section on slavery[[105]](#endnote-105) that began: “As for Sambo, whose wrongs moved the abolitionists to wrath and tears, there is some reason to believe that they suffered less than any other class in the South from its ‘peculiar institution.’” This risible assertion is followed by assurances that the slaves were happy, sang and danced, and learned a lot from their masters, who never used violence. We were supposed to believe that. Similarly, a friend showed me the text from his Alabama high school in the early 1970s which blandly called slavery “the earliest form of social security in the United States,” as if slavery had been little more than a benign social program intended to care for slaves into their dotage. Once more we have happy slaves and loving masters; the system only broke down because fanatical abolitionists disrupted the peace of the Union. Both books turn to the Dunning School for their version of corrupt Reconstruction governments terminated by the Redeemers. Defining democracy as the denial of rights to large segments of the population, the works of these historians informed the world-view of far too many young people—assuming they read their textbooks.[[106]](#endnote-106)

Such admittedly extreme histories of the United States are not simply a relic of the past, though the biases may have shifted. In 2010, the state of Texas passed a new history curriculum assigning textbooks that emphasized the “positive” aspects of America’s history, dismissed slavery as a “side issue” in bringing on the Civil War, argued that segregation did little real harm, and denied any ill intent in the government’s treatment of the Native Americans.[[107]](#endnote-107)

It is important to recognize that historical works celebrating inequality were not limited to the Dunning School’s racism. For seventy years women battled for the right to vote, briefly coming close in the late 1860s but failing to win over sufficient men to make it happen. Yet histories written prior to the final adoption of the 19th Amendment in 1920 almost never mention this struggle, and even those written over the following two decades rarely grant more than a passing nod to this long struggle for equality.

A good example of this sweeping contempt for equality can be found in the Pulitzer Prize winning history *The Age of Jackson* by liberal stalwart, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Andrew Jackson is the hero of this tale of democratic expansion. Jackson’s America was a free country, “a democratic nation, rich and magnificent, stretching from sea to sea.” Schlesinger’s America borders on utopia, “a democracy which preserved sufficient equality of opportunity” to avoid violent political conflict.[[108]](#endnote-108) Sure, there were political distinctions, but they proved incidental to America’s Manifest Destiny. For instance, in discussing South Carolina, Schlesinger noted that their opposition to the Whig’s American System led them to the Democratic Party, as “Jeffersonianism constituted the only available tradition of democracy and equality.” Given that the majority of South Carolina’s population was enslaved, that is a curious choice of words. Choosing to largely ignore slavery, Schlesinger insists that Jackson offered America a revised Jeffersonianism based on social and political equality. Much of the country experienced “substantial equality with limitless vistas of economic opportunity.” Describing Manifest Destiny as “a glowing faith in democracy and a passionate desire that it rule the world,” Schlesinger displays an almost touching willingness to accept every aspect of “Jacksonian democracy” on its stated terms.[[109]](#endnote-109)

But what of some of the most important events from this period which call Schlesinger’s glowing vision into question? Let’s take the example of South Carolina’s 1822 Negro Seaman’s Act, passed in response to white panic over Denmark Vesey’s rebellion. This law forbade black seamen—even those serving in the U.S. Navy or on foreign vessels—from stepping ashore under threat of being sold into slavery. South Carolina did not care that the Supreme Court declared this law unconstitutional in 1823, and enforced the act through the Civil War.[[110]](#endnote-110) Schlesinger does not mention it. Or how about the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, at which a number of prominent female reformers claimed that women should enjoy equal rights? Not a word, even though his book runs up to the start of the Civil War. Ah, but surely he references Jackson’s Indian removal policies that led to the Trail of Tears and his refusal to enforce the decision of the Supreme Court which in turn led so many people to join the new Whig Party. And there it is, two sentences noting that the Indian removal was one reason that “clerical groups” opposed Jackson. Otherwise Schlesinger has nothing to say about the Native peoples and how their experience may call the egalitarian age of Jackson into question.[[111]](#endnote-111)

Though Schlesinger devotes a great deal of discussion to the working class as political supporters of Jackson, he has little to actually say about them. He speaks of “new complexities … weakening the faith of even some democrats” in democracy. What led so many democrats—with a small “d”—to fear the working class was their conviction that democracy could easily get out of hand and lead to true equality. Schlesinger, who is tying some impressive knots of contradiction, identifies a number of dangerous developments, “the most serious was the rise of a rootless, bewildered, unstable population, the creation, on the one hand, of the spread of industrialism, and, on the other, of the rapid increase of immigration.” Who were these immigrants? “Starting on a large scale in the eighteen-forties, thousands of Europeans, ill-educated, tractable, used to low economic standards, unused to political liberty, began flocking to American shores.” Urbanization drove these new arrivals “into a herd, imprinted with the same mold.” The arrival of these ignorant and unstable Irish and German troublemakers thus threatened this age of the common man.[[112]](#endnote-112)

The word democracy appears on nearly every page of this book, repeatedly in the context of “Jacksonian democracy.” Yet at no point does Schlesinger define his meaning of that term, and it is pretty clear that he does not understand it in any way we would. He seems to accept John O’Sullivan’s definition of democracy as “the political ascendancy of the people”; though that in turn begs the question of who are the people. Schlesinger’s reticence is a bit odd since he offers many other definitions, such as that of Locofoco.[[113]](#endnote-113) Schlesinger’s book contains six chapters explicitly titled “Jacksonian Democracy” without ever telling us exactly what is meant by this key phrase or by equality.

Schlesinger’s Jacksonian democracy is an exclusive club. Most of the true advocates of democracy and equality in this period fail to make an appearance. You will search in vain for the Grimké sisters or any of the leaders of the first feminist movement, or for Frederick Douglass or any other black abolitionist. Schlesinger completely ignores women like he ignores the Indians, but he does find fault with slavery. “Slavery was the most accusing, the most tragic and the most dangerous of all questions.” However, Schlesinger is primarily concerned with how slavery impacted white men and their political debates. The wisest counsel of the age avoided the issue, recognizing that it was absolutely necessary to do so in order to preserve the Union. The historian faults “the Religious antislavery men” for caring “more about the Negro than about the white man,” and by the 1840s they “were infecting large sectors of the Whig party.” Note the verb “infecting,” implying that the desire for equality was some form of contagion. The Abolitionists disrupted the peace of the Second Party System, which for Schlesinger was a tragedy. In contrast, the Democrats “were primarily concerned for the future of white labor,” a much more sensible and realistic goal. In this context it is not surprising that “slavery” appears in the index only as “becomes political issue.”[[114]](#endnote-114)

Arthur Schlesinger may not have acknowledged the influence of the Masters’ Narrative or the Dunning School, but he clearly accepted their vision of the past, and many of their racial and gender attitudes. From the 1850s through the end of the century, many leading figures and historians saw the Mexican War as one of the most significant events of the period, undertaken by the slave-owning elite and their Democratic Party allies to expand the realm of slavery. However, Schlesinger treats the Mexican War as he does slavery, purely as a political issue. He sides with President James K. Polk in stating that the war had nothing to do with the extension of slavery and in many ways was forced upon the United States by the conduct of Mexico. Schlesinger’s sensitivity to women and race can be observed in his statement that Vice President Richard M. Johnson “had two daughters by his housekeeper, a mulatto” and then “took up with another high-yellow girl.” In brief, this historian’s vision of equality is little different from that of his subject, Andrew Jackson, essentially limited to native-born white men.[[115]](#endnote-115)

What Schlesinger so well represents is a more subtle yet equally devastating form of bigotry: exclusion. Pretending that blacks, Chinese, Hispanics, women, Native Americans, et al. were never part of American history damages not just the value of the historical scholarship but our very understanding of our nation.

This examination of the treatment of equality in history books published between the Revolution and the end of World War II draws attention to two points primary points. First, even books which reject the concept of equality as somehow contrary to nature promote the United States as a land of freedom, democracy, and equal opportunity for all, while demonstrating the complete opposite. Second, most of the American histories written into the 1960s devote considerable attention to political events and movements in which white men were the primary subject while ignoring social movements and major events that impacted the lives of women and non-whites, no matter how significant. One just has to compare the treatment of the women’s suffrage movement with, say, the Greenback Party to recognize this disconnect. The former involved millions of people over a seventy-year period while the latter drew support from tens of thousands over twelve years. The suffrage movement sought nothing less than the enfranchisement of a majority of the people in the United States while the Greenback Party sought paper currency. The former changed the Constitution and extended democracy while the latter withered and died without effecting any noticeable long-term change. Which tended to be mentioned the most in American history texts? Obviously the Greenback Party, which appears in nearly every textbook written after 1890.

Even books which focused specifically on reform efforts tended the slight the suffrage movement. For instance, two books appeared in 1934 that covered the sweep of reform movements through American history: Lilian Symes and Travers Clement, *Rebel America*, and Charles A. Madison, *Critics and Crusaders*. Symes and Clement devote much of a chapter to the Greenback Party while the women’s movement gets only part of a sentence referring to “women’s unions, organized and led in the main by intellectual, leisure-class women.” Madison has absolutely nothing to say about the suffrage movement while briefly discussing the Greenback Party and devoting an entire chapter to Henry George.[[116]](#endnote-116) One could go on in this fashion through piles of old books stored on forgotten library shelves. The point remains that for at least the first 175 years of the United States, historians ignored the majority of Americans and wrote only about white men.

That is not an incidental matter. Remove a group of people from history and you remove them from the country. I challenge anyone to find a reference in a mainstream textbook published prior to the 1960s to those 270,000 black troops who fought for the Union during the Civil War, or to segregation and the mass lynchings after the end of Reconstruction, or the Chinese Exclusion Act, or *Bradwell v. Illinois*, or any of a number of highly significant people and events in American history that concern those other than white males. What does it say of our nation that most people first heard of the most outrageous race riot in our history, the Tulsa Massacre of 1921, from a superhero TV show aired on 2019? How many people first read of the Japanese Internment Camps in a college history class? How many people still do not know that women did not enjoy full civil rights until the 1970s or that the Chinese Exclusion Act guided American immigration policy until 1965? How many nonwhites and females literally did not see themselves in the history of the United States until relatively recently?

This ignorance of American history is the result of a self-conscious policy promoted by the nation’s leading historians prior to 1970. Equality as a democratic goal was only truly recognized with the increasing number of historians from previously excluded groups—women, African Americans, Hispanic, and Asian. To be blunt, white male historians cannot be relied upon to speak historical truth unaided. The entire field of history has benefitted enormously from this increased scholarly diversity.

Now, after a half century of trying to fix the debilitating myopia of the historical profession, the white supremacists are pushing back. Their racism and misogyny could not be clearer than in the effort on the part of certain politicians to negate the advances in human equality by promoting a triumphalist “Patriotic” state-sponsored official history of the United States that seeks to turn back the clock to the fantasized good old days of heroic white male history.

Americans continue to struggle with the historical place of equality. Excuses are contrived to explain the many contradictions, the most common of which is “the context of the times.” That approach works by giving life to an era, as though time itself determined values. History is not a master that sets rules, rather it is the consequence of thousands of individual decisions. For example, the classic justification for the presence of slavery in the new republic which I learned in school was that it was “a necessary evil.” This position is still often restated, as when Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton attacked the New York Times’ 1619 project “the necessary evil upon which the union was built.” What made it necessary? Cotton has no answer, offering instead the standard rhetorical trope: “America is a great and noble country founded on the proposition that all mankind is created equal. We have always struggled to live up to that promise, but no country has ever done more to achieve it.”[[117]](#endnote-117) Do the many contradictions uphold that perspective? Where is the evidence that a commitment to equality motivated the United States at any time prior to the Civil War? The standard answer is that, having removed slavery, the U.S. then became committed to equality. How then to explain the violent defeat of Reconstruction, the Chinese Exclusion Act, segregation, the decades-long resistance to granting women the vote, and on to a President clearly opposed to any possible form of equality?

Historians are responsible for crafting an accurate portrait of the past that gives voice to those who have gone before us. We therefore have a duty to promote an egalitarian history which considers the experience of all those who have fought for the right of full citizenship in the United States. Inequality is a failure of democracy—a moral failure. What the history of this country demonstrates is that democracy requires equality.

1. Daniel Edwin Wheeler, ed., *Life and Writings of Thomas Paine* (10 vols.; New York: Vincent Parke & Co., 1908) 3: 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report* (5 vols.; The Commission, 1999) 1: 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. David Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution* (2 vols.; Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1989) 1: 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*. 1: 23-24, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This conservative position particularly informed his *History of the United States: From Their First Settlement as English Colonies, in 1607, to the Year 1808* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1816). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America* (4 vols.; London: Charles Dilly, 1788); Hezekiah Niles, *Principles and acts of the Revolution in America* (Baltimore: William Gordon Niles, 1822), 482; J. Franklin Jameson, *The History of Historical Writing in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 83. Another book praised by historians in the late Nineteenth century that is little more than a chronicle of events was Benjamin Trumbull, *A Complete History of Connecticut* (2 vols.; New Haven, CT: Maltby, Goldsmith and Co., 1818). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. David Ramsay, *History of South Carolina, from its First Settlement in 1670, to the Year 1808* (2 vols.; Charleston: David Longworth, 1809) 2: 38, 115-16, 142, 411-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hugh Williamson, *History of North Carolina* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1812). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Robert L. Brunhouse, ed., “David Ramsay, 1749-1815: Selections from his Writings,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 60 (1965): 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. John Burk, *The History of Virginia: From Its First Settlement to the Present Day* (3 vols.; Petersburg, VA: Dickson & Pescud, 1804-5) 1: 303. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*. 1: 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*. 1: 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*. 1: 211-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*. 3: 438. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. An inaccurate statement on Belknap’s part. New Hampshire had slaves by 1645, shortly after its founding, and its merchants played as active role in the slave trade through its prohibition by Congress in 1808. The colony passed its first black code in 1714 and did not officially end slavery until 1857; the last slave recorded in the state appeared on the 1840 census. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Jeremy Belknap, *The History of New-Hampshire* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: J. Mann and J. K. Remick, 1812) 1: 11, 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*. 1: 69-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid*. 3: 193-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (2 vols.; Burlington, VT: Samuel Mills, 1809) 1: 6-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (1809) 1: 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid*. 2: 372. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This quote appears in the 1794 single-volume edition but was removed from the 1809 edition. Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (Walpole, NH: Thomas and Carlisle, 1794), 336. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid*. 1: 169-70, 219, 269-72, 467-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Samuel Williams, *History of the American Revolution* (11th edition; New Haven, CT: William Storer, 1830), 65-66, 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* 2: 426, 460 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Rosemarie Zagarri, A *Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (2d ed.; Malden, MA: John Wiley, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Mercy Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* (3 vols.; Boston: Manning and Loring, 1805) 1:20, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid*., 1: 4, 22, 216, 3: 309, 370. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. George Bancroft, *History of the United States* (New York: D. Appleton, 1916) 3: 482; ibid. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1875, 1878) 7: 21, 8: 117-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. George Bancroft, *An Oration Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1826, at Northampton, Mass* (Northampton: T.W. Shephard, 1826), 7, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid*., 17, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid*., 19, 23-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. George Bancroft, *History of the United States* (Boston: Charles Bowen, 1834) 1: 2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid*. 1: 23; 8: 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Richard Hildreth, *History of the United States* (6 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871-80). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. George Tucker, *The History of the United States* (4 vols.; J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1856-57) 2: 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *Ibid*. 1: 98-99; 4: 429-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid*. 1: 279; 4: 43-46, 62-63, 423. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*. 1: 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
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41. L. D. Ingersoll, *The Life of Horace Greeley* (Chicago: Union Pub., 1873), 644. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Army and Navy Journal* 7 (Aug. 28, 1869): 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Alexander Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1868, 1870) 1: 12, 539, 631. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. 1: 539. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
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46. Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (2 vols.: New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1885) 1: 56. See also Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1870); Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies: An Account of the Final Campaign of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915); Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies: An Account of the Final Campaign of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Grant, *Personal Memoirs* 2: 488. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
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55. Ibid., 315, 322, 328, 549. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
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57. Ibid., 174, 544. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 315, 335-36, 363, 420, 551-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
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61. Henry William Elson, *History of the United States* (2 vols; New York: Macmillan, 1904) 27, 158, 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
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64. Ibid., 332, 799-03, 814, 844. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 204, 253-54, 746. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 471-72, 479, 846. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 557-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Lee, *Advanced School History*, 20, 41, 119; Elson, *History of the United States*, 56, 60, 142, 204, 326, 896. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
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100. Ibid., 237 680. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid., 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Ibid., 35, 699. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid., 632. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
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111. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, 350. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Ibid., 507. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. Ibid., 313, 418. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. Ibid., 424, 453-54, 574. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. Ibid., 212, 452-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
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