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Podcast Script

American Paradox: Slavery in Revolutionary America

Hello listeners. My name is Jack Brown and today I am going to discuss the paradox behind slavery in revolutionary America. Slavery got its start in Colonial America in the Virginia Colony in the mid 17th Century. At first there were very few slaves in the colonies but this changed as agriculture, specifically tobacco farming, become the driving force behind the economy. As demand for tobacco grew so did the need for a cheap labor force. African slaves were brought across the Atlantic Ocean to the American colonies to cultivate the tobacco crop. The American Colonies continued to grow throughout the 17th and 18th centuries but the colonists were unhappy with the tyranny of British rule. In 1776 the colonists declared independence from the British in the name of freedom and liberty. This act of defiance led to the Revolutionary War in which the Colonial Army was able to defeat the British army. In 1783 the war ended and the colonies were granted sovereignty from British rule. A few years later, in 1787, the colonies ratify the Constitution with the Bill of Rights and become the United States of America. The American Paradox is as follows: while the United States was founded in the name of freedom and liberty it still allowed the institution of slavery, which inherently denies these principles and other human rights, to exist. I hope that from listening to my presentation you, the listener, will gain more information about the American paradox by viewing the Revolution from the perspective of the founding fathers and African Americans. I wish to present the biases in our founding documents that restrict freedom and the changes that were made to lift these restrictions. Finally, I

give you a new perspective on American history that takes into account both the positives and negatives of the American Revolution.

The Declaration of Independence, signed July 4, 1776, is one of the most important documents in American history. In the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson famously writes,

“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 Declaration of Independence also states that a government should be instituted to protect these rights. It continues by noting that if a government denies these rights the citizens have the right and responsibility to change it. Unfortunately, the Declaration of Independence has a narrow definition of “all men”. Slaves were not seen as having these unalienable rights because at the time many people viewed them as less than human. The founding fathers that signed the Declaration held this same view of slaves because they were raised in a slaveholding society. While the Declaration of Independence is seen as a major step towards American freedom, the biases held by our founding fathers limited the type of people these rights applied to.

The Constitution of the United States, ratified in 1787, establishes the basic framework for the American political system. Included in the Constitution is the Bill of Rights, which establishes the basic rights of all people that are to be protected by the United States government. The First Amendment, for example, states that Americans are granted freedom of speech, religion, assembly and press. None of the rights were extended to Blacks, free or slave, in America. Not only did the Constitution not extend

rights to Blacks, it also included several pro-slavery clauses. The most notable pro-slavery clause in the Constitution is the fugitive slave clause that says,

“No person held to service or labour in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labour, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labour may be due.”

This says that an escaped slave must be returned to their owner because they are viewed as property and have no human rights. The fugitive slave clause strengthened the institution of slavery in America. Not until the ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments in the 1860's was slavery abolished and African Americans gained protection in the Constitution.

The founding documents of the United States are often revered as the pinnacle of freedom and liberty but they also have a dark side. The Declaration of Independence marks the start of a sovereign America but ignores slaves as having any basic rights. The Constitution creates a framework for American government and lays out the rights granted to citizens, yet it does not extend these rights to Blacks. It even contains clauses that strengthen the institution of slavery. Just as the British Parliament restricted the freedoms of American colonists, the founding documents in our country restricted the freedom of slaves. I hope this short introduction to the American paradox has given you a new outlook on American history by taking a step back and looking at things from a new perspective. Thank you for taking the time to listen to my podcast.

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