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Analysis: From History To Healing: An American Journey on Race

by SOPHIA A. NELSON



circa 1965: Americans demand racial equality on a civil rights demonstration. MPI / Getty Images file

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“We have seen the mere distinction of colour made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.”

— President James Madison, author of the U.S. Constitution, 4th President of the United States and Owner of Slaves

Color. What is it about “color” that causes men to hate other men? What is it about color that causes some to see themselves as superior and others as inferior?

What is it about the color of our skin that caused fifty-five of the most brilliant, brave and forward-thinking men ever to walk the earth in 1776 to declare their own independence from oppression and yet, at the same time legalize the enslavement of their fellow man in brutal bondage for hundreds of years in a land founded on the principles of liberty, equality and unalienable rights for all?

If you ask many white Americans today in the 21st century what they think about “color,” they will respond honestly, yet naively that they “do not see color” and that they teach their kids in kind.

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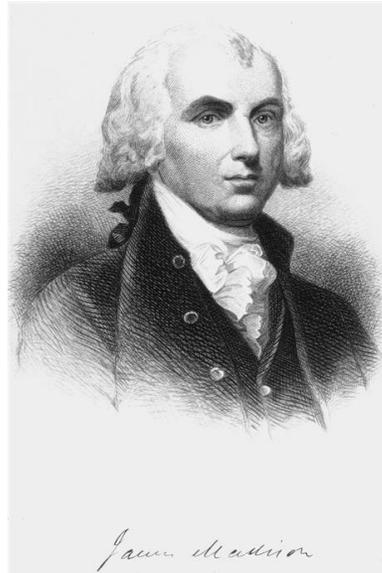
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US President James Madison (1751 - 1836), circa 1790. © Getty Images

But the truth is, as President James Madison opined centuries ago, “the mere distinction of color” matters a lot. It is, as he understood, a great dividing line. He understood that he and his cohorts were at once enlightened men, but that they also did not hesitate to oppress other men because of their color differences. A very profound admission for a man who is the father of the greatest document ever penned: The United States Constitution.

The fact is, in America color has always mattered. To be “white” is to be pure, good, benevolent and privileged. To be “black” is to be bad, tainted, less than, malevolent and disenfranchised.

damaging and hurtful legacy that still haunts us right now, in real time. All one need do is turn on the television set or go to Twitter and it feels like we have stepped back into a time warp on race.

We are very divided as a nation. We are very angry. Seemingly at war with one another. Yelling from our keyboards and bending our knees in protest of racial inequalities and a President who seems utterly clueless on just how much “color” still impacts our lives as individuals and as a nation.

Color is a legacy in America. A very

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Our founding fathers long ago set this nation on a collision course around the issue of “color” and race.

They set America up to win when they declared their independence from the British Crown in 1776, but they also set America up to lose when they refused to

tree the slaves in the colonies, and honor the soul stirring words penned by Thomas Jefferson: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”



Protestors march through Midtown Manhattan as they rally against white supremacy and racism, August 13, 2017 in New York City. © Drew Angerer / Getty Images

Instead, these great and complex men chose instead to embark upon a path of human trafficking, physical and sexual brutality, and human degradation, the likes of which the world had never seen.

In one of the great cases on racial equality before the United States Supreme Court, Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 (which established the “separate but equal” doctrine) Justice Harlan’s dissent speaks with power and clarity on just how much color mattered then and now:

“The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. But in the view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. . . .”

Justice Harlan’s dissent over 125 years ago tells a profoundly disturbing truth of how race plays out in American history and in our present. One race will always see itself as “dominant”—which is why in Charlottesville this summer, young white men marched angrily with torches as they chanted, “you will not replace us.” We hear talk of “taking back our country.” Or “making America great again” as if somehow, she is no longer great.





Neo Nazis, Alt-Right, and White Supremacists encircle counter protestors at the base of a statue of Thomas Jefferson after marching through the University of Virginia campus with torches in Charlottesville, Va., USA on August 11, 2017 © NurPhoto via Getty Images

As we look at the state of America right now, in 2017, color still matters. And we still have not made our peace with what is past, and with who we now need to be as Americans when it comes to race.

There are clearly still two Americas: One that sees America as a place that belongs to them and their ancestors. One that sees the social and criminal justice systems as fair and equitable; despite overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary. One that sees America as a nation in decline due to the influx of immigrants and people of “color” on the social dole at their expense.

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And the other America: predominately black persons who see an America that they love -- and have fought for in every war since the revolutionary war -- still treat her with disdain, disregard, and racial inequity.

So, the question becomes what part does our history play in where we find ourselves right now? Our nation has been in turmoil as of late over the issue of racial justice and equity. After the events of Charlottesville, Virginia we sat down with Kat Imhoff, CEO of the James Madison Foundation in Orange Virginia, for a candid conversation about race, slavery, James Madison, the U.S. Constitution and how we can use truth telling about our history as a tool to heal.

“What our founders set in motion can never really be undone, it can only be survived. History is who we come from. History lives in us as we descend from it. History shows us the path of our ancestors. History teaches us lessons. History informs. It teaches. It can help us find a way forward.”

The past is of value in only that it helps us understand the present. One of the great discussions of our time right now is the issue of confederate monuments and their relevance and appropriateness to be displayed. Along the same lines, many, including President Donald Trump have openly questioned what we do with founding fathers like Madison, Washington and Jefferson who owned slaves. Brilliant men, visionaries, who helped this great nation begin, and yet they owned hundreds of slaves in their lifetimes.



People light candles in the form of a peace sign in front of the White House on August 13, 2017 in Washington, DC for a vigil in response to the death of a counter-protestor in the August 12th "Unite the Right" rally that turned violent in Charlottesville, Virginia. 📷 ZACH GIBSON / AFP - Getty Images

How could men like Madison who believed so deeply in God and religious liberty be so barren and void of humanity at the same time?

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For her part, and that of her team, Kat Imhoff is on a mission to help “we the people” see James Madison, the founding fathers, and the Constitution through a different lens.

The following is an excerpt of our conversation at James Madison’s Montpelier with Kat Imhoff, CEO of the Montpelier Foundation. It has been edited and condensed for clarity.



Sophia Nelson interviews Kat Imhoff, CEO of Montpelier Foundation 📷 Courtesy of Sophia Nelson

Who Was James Madison And How Did He Really View Slavery?

Kat Imhoff: James Madison, writes about freedoms, the freedoms that we hold dear as Americans. And as a young man, he's writing to friends saying, "I'm going to go live in New York. I don't want to be supporting the institution of slavery. But he slides into the comfortable life, and also the difficulty he saw of how could people really live with one another when one had been held or others had been held as property.

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...When I think about Montpelier and James Madison's legacy, of course he's known as the father of the Constitution and the architect of the Bill of Rights. And people say, "Why are you casting these aspersions on history? You know, we have the U.S. Constitution. It's so great." And yet, if you go back and you know the full story, you understand that, from the very beginning, our country was based on slavery, and that the Constitution is really set up to not explicitly but very implicitly defend this practice.

So, it's in our DNA. It is part of who we are as a people. And to not know that, not acknowledge that, and not to think about the repercussions today I think is the point of the past couple of months. And where we hope, at James Madison's Montpelier, we can offer some opportunities for people to dig deep and to learn.



Montpelier, the home of James Madison, fourth President of the U.S., stands in Montpelier Station, Va.  ASSOCIATED PRESS

Why does the issue of slavery and race continue to divide us in 2017?

I do think we are at a point in American history where our past and our present are colliding together. For us to kind of impact the story, we started in June opening the exhibition that you talked about, it's permanent, *Mere Distinction of Colour*. But it was a long time coming to this point where we're really talking about the legacy of race, not only here at Montpelier, but in the United States.

And then to have the situations develop in Charlottesville in July and August, and the tragedy of the young woman's death, I think just really brings that fine focus that we as Americans really do need to take responsibility for knowing our truth, for understanding our history, and understanding the repercussions of it. Because, as you said, we are definitely hearing and seeing those today.



A demonstrator is overcome with emotion during a march in reaction to a potential white supremacists rally on August 18, 2017 in Durham, North Carolina.  Sara D. Davis / Getty Images

What is your new exhibit 'The Mere Distinction of Colour' all about and why is it considered by some as controversial?

So, in 1787, Madison is writing secretly during the constitutional convention. And he's writing. it's secret. no one knows what's happenina. It's in this hot room in

Philadelphia. He writes basically that the mere distinction of Colour, at this most enlightened time period of man, he sees it as the most repressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.

And I find those words so poignant because basically he is acknowledging how horrible it is that people have the prejudice because of color of their skin, and they're writing about these freedoms that we're all going to enjoy, but they're codifying slavery without ever mentioning it. And this is a theme that comes up over and over in Madison's life.

He knows it's wrong. But to pass and get the votes, and already just the value of slavery and the-- work that people were receiving from that was so hard that the moral imperative was overwhelmed by the political and the financial.

Finally, what is it that you want Americans who come to Montpelier to learn



James Madison, Fourth President of the United States 1809-1817. Portrait by Gilbert Stuart.  Getty Images

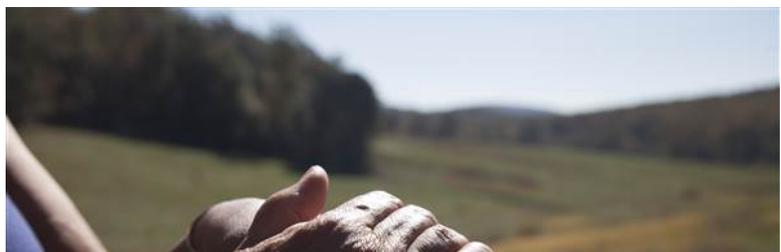
community, and their descendants. Why do they matter so much to history and to our healing?

I call it a “confounding contradiction” when you begin to realize you can admire Madison for the Constitution, and you can admire his political savvy, and all the sacrifices and work he did to really establish our founding documents, and you can also acknowledge that he was a slave owner and he did this third generation at Montpelier.

And you can learn the stories of the people who were here and made his life possible, and their stories are brave, and they're resilient. And their

stories are also to be admired and to be known by us as Americans. So, for me, it's not an either/or, it's an "and" and an "and" and an "and." They're all sources of inspiration, in different ways.

I think places like Montpelier and other cultural institutions, we have a real responsibility for truthfulness. And in that truthfulness, is telling these complete stories. We have never been in a better time in this country.





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TOPICS EDUCATION, NBCBLK

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A descendant of the community Madison enslaved looks upon Montpelier. Courtesy Northern Light Productions

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