

# Slavery was then, but race is now

By William C. Kashatus

**W**hen asked if he thought that posterity would forgive the founding fathers for neglecting the issue of slavery in their Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin allegedly replied, "It doesn't matter; we won't hear a thing. We'll all be long gone. Besides, what will posterity think we were, demigods? We're men — no more, no less — trying to get a nation started against greater odds than a more generous God would have allowed. If it does matter, the history books will clean it up!"

Don't count on it, Ben.

Last spring, when President Clinton raised the question of whether the United States should formally apologize for your indiscretion, he stirred a debate that has raged ever since.

But apologizing for your role in slavery is a mistake, for at least two big reasons: It misreads history, and it distracts us from the real work we need to do about race in this country.

Apologizing for slavery has become a controversial issue not only because few understand what it will accomplish, but also because today, more than a century after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, slavery still haunts the national soul.

That is why Steven Spielberg's new film, *Amistad*, promises to be a blockbuster; why the idea of a slave memorial on the Washington Mall is becoming more popular. A school board in New Orleans erased the name of President — and slaveholder — George Washington off of one elementary school.

Folks here in Philadelphia are hoping that our own school district continues to overlook the fact that the author of *Poor Richard's Almanac* kept slaves for nearly 30 years. Either that or this city is in for some seri-

*Apologizing for the founding fathers distorts history and distracts from our real work.*

ous name-changing!

In this age of political correctness, as our current dilemma over race relations compels us to ask pointed questions about the past, the founding fathers have come under greater scrutiny. Often at issue is the consequences of their failures rather than the benefits of their successes. We don't know whether to honor them for establishing an independent nation or to reject them for the sins of omission.

To be sure, slavery was not only a moral injustice, but also a disgrace to humankind and must never be forgotten. We should always re-examine the past and those institutions that shaped it, for better or worse. In no other way can we understand how slavery continues to

define contemporary attitudes on race.

At the same time, however, it is irresponsible to apply contemporary standards to the past without making appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions.

Founders like Franklin, Washington, and Thomas Jefferson relied on the tacitly understood moral conventions of their time in deciding what they could and could not do to help others. The concept of equality, which today we almost universally regard as a basic tenet of democracy, had its beginnings only in the 18th century; it did not emerge full-blown from the Declaration of Independence.

Nevertheless, Jefferson felt compelled to write a clause into the Declaration of Independence condemning slavery, and Franklin, as president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, signed a petition to Congress recommending abolition. Had these measures been adopted, they would have committed the United States to emancipation much earlier than 1865. Instead, both measures were rejected because most Southern statesmen were unwilling to commit themselves to abolition at

the time. To pursue the issue any further would have jeopardized American independence from Great Britain.

If we revere the founding fathers, then, we should do so for their genuine attempt to push the moral conventions of their time past the double standard that justified slavery. If, on the other hand, we fault them for the sins of omission, we should at least acknowledge that they were products of the 18th century and, as such, were limited by the ethical standards of the time.

But apologizing for their inability to abolish slavery is not only historically irresponsible. It is also lazy, not to say dishonest. It is the easy way out of a much more complex racial dilemma that only we ourselves can resolve.

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