



Journal Website:
<https://theusajournals.com/index.php/ajsshr>

Copyright: Original
content from this work
may be used under the
terms of the creative
commons attributes
4.0 licence.

THE AMERICAN PARADOX: SLAVERY AND INDEPENDENCE IN CONTROVERSIAL CONTEXTS

Submission Date: July 24, 2024, Accepted Date: July 29, 2024,

Published Date: Aug 03, 2024

Denise Kombieni

English Department/University of Parakou (Benin)

ABSTRACT

The narrative of the United States as a nation founded on liberty and equality stands in stark contrast to the reality of its deep entanglement with chattel slavery. This abstract delves into the "American Paradox," exploring the complex and often contradictory ways in which slavery and the ideals of independence coexisted throughout the nation's history. It examines the justifications used to defend slavery, the resistance movements that emerged, and the ongoing struggle to reconcile these opposing forces in the American identity.

Revolutionary Rhetoric: The founding principles of the United States, enshrined in documents like the Declaration of Independence, emphasized liberty and natural rights. However, these ideals were often selectively applied, excluding enslaved people from the very freedoms they proclaimed.

Economic Dependence: The Southern economy was heavily reliant on slave labor, particularly for the production of cotton. This economic dependence created a powerful vested interest in perpetuating slavery, even as the North embraced free labor principles.

Racial Ideologies: The development of racist ideologies justified the enslavement of Africans and their descendants. These ideologies portrayed Black people as inherently inferior, further solidifying the idea of slavery as a natural order.

Constitutional Compromise: The U.S. Constitution reflected the deep divisions over slavery. The institution was not explicitly mentioned, but compromises were made to appease Southern states, such as the three-fifths clause that counted enslaved people as a fraction of a person for purposes of representation.

Western Expansion: The westward expansion of the United States fueled debates over the expansion of slavery. The Missouri Compromise and subsequent measures attempted to maintain a balance between slave and free states, highlighting the ongoing struggle over the institution's future.

Slave Revolts and Abolitionist Movements: Throughout American history, enslaved people actively resisted their condition. Slave revolts and the rise of abolitionist movements in the North challenged the legitimacy of slavery and pushed for its eradication.

The Civil War: The Civil War, ultimately fought over the issue of slavery, marked a turning point. However, the fight for racial equality did not end with the Confederacy's defeat.

Reconstruction and Jim Crow Laws: The Reconstruction Era's attempts to establish equal rights for Black Americans were largely undermined by the rise of Jim Crow laws and segregation in the South.

The Continuing Struggle for Racial Justice: The legacy of slavery continues to shape American society. The Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century made significant strides towards racial equality, but issues like mass incarceration and economic disparities persist, highlighting the ongoing need to address the historical roots of these injustices.

Critical Race Theory: This framework helps understand how race and racism are embedded in legal and social systems, illuminating how the legacy of slavery continues to influence American society.

Republicanism and Liberalism: Examining the tensions between the ideals of classical republicanism (emphasizing civic virtue) and liberalism (focused on individual rights) can shed light on how these competing philosophies played out in the context of slavery and independence.

Understanding the American Paradox is crucial for comprehending the complexities of American history and its ongoing impact on contemporary society. Examining the justifications for slavery, the resistance movements it inspired, and the legacy of racial oppression can inform efforts to create a more just and equitable future.

Delving deeper into the experiences of enslaved people, their resistance strategies, and how they navigated the paradox of living under a system of oppression within a nation proclaiming freedom. Exploring the economic and social ramifications of slavery on both the North and the South.

Examining the role of gender and class in shaping the American Paradox and its consequences. Investigating the ongoing struggles for racial justice in the United States and how they connect to the historical legacy of slavery.

By critically engaging with the American Paradox, we can gain a deeper understanding of the nation's past and present, fostering a more nuanced and inclusive narrative for the future.

KEYWORDS

Declaration of Independence, Natural Rights, Liberty, Equality, Founding Fathers (specific names like Jefferson, Washington), American Revolution, Antebellum South, Abolitionism, Three-Fifths Compromise, Fugitive Slave Act, Thirteenth Amendment, Founding Documents and Slavery (the contradiction), Northern vs. Southern justifications for slavery.

INTRODUCTION

The American Revolution, a seminal event in the history of the United States, was characterized by a fervent pursuit of independence from British rule. The Declaration of Independence, penned by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, articulated the colonies' commitment to the principles of natural rights, liberty, and equality. This document, which proclaimed that "all men are created equal" and endowed with "unalienable Rights" such as "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," became a cornerstone of American ideology. However, the practice of slavery in the nascent nation starkly contradicted these lofty ideals, creating a profound paradox that has continued to shape American history.

The Founding Fathers, including prominent figures such as Jefferson and George Washington, were themselves deeply entangled in this paradox. Both

men were slaveholders who championed the cause of liberty while simultaneously denying freedom to the enslaved people on their own estates. This duality reflects the broader societal and political complexities of the time, where the economic and social fabric of the Southern states was inextricably linked to the institution of slavery. The Antebellum South, characterized by its agrarian economy and reliance on slave labor, stood in sharp contrast to the emerging industrial North, setting the stage for sectional tensions that would eventually culminate in the Civil War.

Abolitionism emerged as a powerful movement in the 19th century, advocating for the immediate end of slavery and challenging the moral and ethical justifications provided by pro-slavery advocates. The Three-Fifths Compromise, a political maneuver

designed to balance the power between slaveholding and non-slaveholding states, further exemplified the contentious nature of slavery in the United States. This compromise allowed states to count three-fifths of their enslaved population for representation and taxation purposes, highlighting the deep divisions within the nation.

Legislative measures such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the eventual ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 underscore the evolving legal landscape concerning slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act mandated the return of escaped enslaved individuals to their owners, reflecting the federal government's complicity in upholding slavery. In contrast, the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, marked a significant shift in the nation's legal and moral stance.

The contradiction between the principles enshrined in founding documents and the reality of slavery was a source of enduring tension. Northern and Southern states developed divergent justifications for slavery, with the North increasingly viewing it as a moral abomination, while the South defended it as a necessary institution for their way of life and economy. The debate over slavery's expansion into new territories and states intensified these divisions, contributing to the sectionalism that ultimately led to the Civil War.

Central to this debate was the issue of states' rights versus federal power. Southern states argued that they had the sovereign right to determine the legality of slavery within their borders, while the federal government sought to curtail the spread of slavery and maintain national unity. The Civil War, fought from 1861 to 1865, was the violent culmination of these unresolved tensions. The conflict fundamentally transformed the United States, leading to the abolition of slavery and setting the stage for the long and ongoing struggle for civil rights and racial equality.

This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the American paradox, examining the conflicting motives between the practice of slavery and the quest for independence. By delving into the lives and actions of the Founding Fathers, the economic and social dynamics of the Antebellum South, the rise of abolitionism, and the legislative and political battles over slavery, we can gain a deeper understanding of how these contradictions shaped the nation's history and continue to influence its present. Through this lens, we will explore the profound impact of slavery on the American ethos and the enduring legacy of this paradoxical foundation.

METHOD

To explore the American paradox between the practice of slavery and the claiming of independence, historical analysis is a fundamental methodology. This

approach involves the examination of primary and secondary sources to understand the context, motivations, and actions of key figures and events. The following steps outline the process:

Primary Sources: These include documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, personal letters, diaries, speeches, and legal documents like the Fugitive Slave Act and the Thirteenth Amendment. Analyzing these sources helps to uncover the intentions and contradictions of the Founding Fathers and other historical actors regarding slavery and independence.

Secondary Sources: These comprise scholarly articles, books, and historical analyses by reputable historians. Secondary sources provide interpretations and syntheses of primary data, offering various perspectives on the paradox. Key works by historians such as David Brion Davis, Edmund

S. Morgan, and Annette Gordon-Reed will be instrumental.

Contextualization: Situating the events and figures within the broader historical context of the 18th and 19th centuries. This includes understanding the economic, social, and political factors that influenced the practice of slavery and the pursuit of independence.

Comparative analysis involves juxtaposing different regions, ideologies, and historical figures to highlight the contradictions and diverse perspectives on slavery and independence.

Regional Comparison: Compare the Northern and Southern states' justifications for and against slavery. This involves examining economic dependencies, cultural norms, and political ideologies that influenced each region's stance.

Ideological Comparison: Analyze the writings and speeches of prominent abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates. This helps to understand the moral and philosophical arguments presented by both sides.

Biographical Studies: Detailed examinations of key figures such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Frederick Douglass. Understanding their personal beliefs, public actions, and the dichotomy between their words and deeds provides insight into the broader paradox.

Quantitative analysis can provide empirical data to support the qualitative historical and comparative analyses. This involves:

Census Data: Using historical census data to examine the demographic distribution of enslaved populations in the United States over time. This can help to illustrate the scale and geographic spread of slavery.

Economic Data: Analysis of economic data such as the value of slave labor, agricultural output, and trade statistics. This can shed light on the economic motivations behind the persistence of slavery and its impact on the American economy.

Legislative Data: Reviewing the frequency and nature of legislative actions related to slavery, such as the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, and amendments to the Constitution. This can help to map the political landscape and shifts in public policy.

Content analysis involves a systematic examination of textual information to identify patterns, themes, and biases.

Political Documents: Analyzing political speeches, party platforms, and legislative debates to understand the framing of slavery and independence in public discourse.

Media Analysis: Reviewing contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, and propaganda to gauge public opinion and media representation of slavery and independence issues.

Cultural Artifacts: Examining cultural artifacts such as literature, art, and music to understand how slavery and independence were depicted and perceived in American culture.

Legal analysis focuses on the examination of laws, court cases, and legal interpretations that shaped the

institution of slavery and the movement for independence.

Statutory Analysis: Reviewing statutes and legal codes that governed slavery, including the Three- Fifths Compromise and the Fugitive Slave Act, to understand their legal implications and societal impact.

Judicial Decisions: Analyzing landmark court cases such as Dred Scott v. Sandford to understand the judicial reasoning and its effect on the status of slavery in America.

Constitutional Analysis: Examining the constitutional debates and amendments related to slavery, such as the Thirteenth Amendment, to understand how the Constitution was used to both support and abolish slavery.

Collecting and analyzing oral histories and personal narratives provides a human perspective on the paradox of slavery and independence.

Slave Narratives: Studying firsthand accounts from former slaves, such as those collected in the Federal Writers' Project, to understand their experiences and perspectives.

Interviews: Conducting interviews with descendants of slaves and slaveholders to explore the lasting impact of slavery and the paradox of independence on contemporary society.

Memoirs and Biographies: Analyzing memoirs and biographies of historical figures involved in the slavery debate to gain insight into their personal motivations and experiences.

The final step involves synthesizing the findings from these various methodologies to construct a comprehensive narrative that addresses the American paradox of slavery and independence.

Thematic Synthesis: Identifying overarching themes and patterns that emerge from the data to provide a cohesive understanding of the paradox.

Critical Interpretation: Interpreting the findings within the broader historiographical debates on American history, slavery, and independence.

Presentation of Findings: Presenting the conclusions in a clear and structured manner, supported by evidence from the various methodologies employed.

By employing these diverse methodologies, this study aims to provide a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the American paradox between the practice of slavery and the claiming of independence.

RESULT

The analysis of the American paradox between the practice of slavery and the claiming of independence reveals a complex and multifaceted relationship. This examination provides insights into the inherent

contradictions and tensions that characterized the founding of the United States and its subsequent development. The results are categorized into several key themes that highlight the paradoxical nature of this relationship.

Founding Documents and the Contradiction of Slavery

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are foundational documents that articulate the principles of liberty, equality, and natural rights. However, the existence of slavery within a nation founded on these principles presents a stark contradiction. The Declaration of Independence, authored primarily by Thomas Jefferson, asserts that "all men are created equal" and endowed with "unalienable Rights," yet Jefferson himself was a slave owner. This inconsistency underscores the complex motivations and moral compromises made by the Founding Fathers.

Economic Dependency on Slavery

The Southern economy's heavy reliance on slavery further complicates the narrative of independence. The agricultural economy, particularly the production of cash crops like tobacco and cotton, depended on enslaved labor. This economic dependency created a powerful incentive for Southern states to maintain and defend the institution of slavery, even as they fought for independence from British rule. The prosperity and growth of the Southern economy were intrinsically

linked to the exploitation of enslaved people, making the practice of slavery a deeply entrenched institution.

Abolitionist Movements and Counterarguments

Despite the paradox, there were significant abolitionist movements that emerged in the North, advocating for the end of slavery based on moral and religious grounds. These movements highlighted the hypocrisy of a nation that claimed to value liberty while denying freedom to a substantial portion of its population. Abolitionists, including prominent figures like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe, utilized powerful rhetoric and literature to expose the moral failings of slavery. However, these movements faced strong opposition from pro-slavery advocates who argued for the economic and social necessity of the institution.

Political Compromises and Legislative Actions

The political landscape of the early United States was marked by numerous compromises and legislative actions aimed at balancing the interests of slaveholding and non-slaveholding states. The Three-Fifths Compromise, for example, counted each enslaved person as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of representation and taxation. This compromise allowed Southern states to maintain significant political power in Congress. Additionally, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 mandated the return of escaped enslaved people to their owners, further

entrenching the institution of slavery and highlighting the federal government's complicity in its perpetuation.

Impact of the Civil War

The unresolved tensions between the principles of independence and the practice of slavery ultimately culminated in the Civil War. The war was a direct result of the deep-seated divisions and contradictions within the nation. The conflict forced a reckoning with the paradox of a nation that espoused liberty while perpetuating slavery. The eventual Union victory and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, marked a significant step towards resolving this paradox. However, the legacy of slavery and the racial inequalities it produced continued to shape American society long after the war's end.

Enduring Legacies and Contemporary Reflections

The paradox of slavery and independence has left an enduring legacy in the United States. The historical contradictions continue to influence contemporary discussions on race, equality, and justice. The struggle to reconcile the ideals of the nation's founding with the realities of its history remains an ongoing challenge. Modern movements for civil rights and social justice draw on the unresolved tensions of the past to advocate for a more equitable and inclusive society.

The examination of the American paradox between the practice of slavery and the claiming of independence reveals a nation grappling with profound contradictions. The foundational principles of liberty and equality were compromised by the economic and social realities of slavery. The struggle to address these contradictions has shaped the nation's history and continues to influence its present and future. The results of this analysis underscore the complexity of the American experience and the ongoing effort to realize the ideals upon which the nation was founded.

DISCUSSION

The American paradox of advocating for independence and liberty while simultaneously practicing slavery is a profound contradiction that has shaped the nation's history and identity. This discussion delves into the complex interplay between the ideals of the Founding Fathers, the economic and social realities of slavery, and the ideological battles that ensued.

The Founding Fathers and Slavery

The Declaration of Independence, drafted primarily by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, proclaimed that "all men are created equal" and endowed with "unalienable rights," including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." These words set the philosophical foundation for American independence, yet Jefferson himself was a slaveholder. The coexistence of such high ideals with

the practice of slavery among the Founding Fathers, including George Washington and James Madison, reveals a deep-seated hypocrisy and a pragmatic compromise to ensure unity among the colonies.

Jefferson, despite his rhetoric, owned more than 600 slaves over his lifetime. Washington, who freed his slaves upon his death, relied on their labor to maintain his estate. This dissonance highlights the moral and practical conflicts the Founding Fathers faced. Their vision of liberty and equality was limited and selectively applied, largely excluding African Americans and other marginalized groups.

Economic and Social Realities

The Southern economy's reliance on slavery for agricultural production, particularly in the cultivation of tobacco, cotton, and rice, created a powerful incentive to maintain the institution. The Antebellum South's prosperity depended on the exploitation of enslaved labor, which was justified through a variety of means, including economic necessity, racial superiority, and purported benevolence.

CONCLUSION

The American experiment in self-government stands as a beacon of liberty and equality. However, the deep stain of slavery casts a long shadow, exposing a fundamental paradox at the heart of the nation's founding. This concluding chapter delves into the

complexities of this paradox, its historical significance, and its lasting implications for American society.

The Founding Contradiction:

The Declaration of Independence, a cornerstone of American ideals, proclaims "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." Yet, this very nation was built upon the backs of enslaved people, denied these very rights. This fundamental contradiction between the ideals of liberty and the brutal reality of slavery remains a central tension in understanding American history.

Motivations and justifications:

The motivations behind the American Revolution were multifaceted. While a desire for self-governance and freedom from British rule played a significant role, the economic interests of the Southern colonies, heavily reliant on slave labor for their agricultural production, cannot be ignored. The Founding Fathers, many of whom were slaveholders themselves, grappled with reconciling these economic realities with the Enlightenment ideals that inspired the Revolution. This resulted in justifications for slavery based on race, economic necessity, and even paternalistic arguments about protecting enslaved people. However, these justifications were ultimately flawed and morally repugnant.

The Debate Over Expansion and the Road to Civil War:

The issue of slavery did not disappear after the Revolution. The debate over its expansion westward fueled political tensions and ultimately led to the Civil War. The question of states' rights versus the federal government's authority became a battleground, with the South seeking to preserve slavery as a way of life. The war exposed the inherent incompatibility of a nation divided between ideals of liberty and a system built on human bondage.

Legacy and Implications:

The Civil War may have ended slavery, but the legacy of the American paradox continues to resonate. The struggle for racial equality has been a long and arduous one, still ongoing today. The economic and social consequences of slavery continue to shape American society. Understanding this paradox is crucial for acknowledging the nation's complex past, confronting its present racial inequalities, and striving for a more perfect union that truly embodies the ideals of liberty and justice for all.

Looking Forward:

The American paradox serves as a constant reminder of the ongoing struggle for a more just and equitable society. By studying this historical tension, we can learn from the mistakes of the past and work towards a future where the ideals enshrined in the Declaration of

Independence are truly realized for all Americans. This necessitates continued efforts towards racial reconciliation, dismantling systemic biases, and promoting inclusive democracy.

Final Thoughts:

The American paradox remains a powerful narrative that forces us to confront the complexities of history and the ongoing quest for a more perfect union. By acknowledging this uncomfortable truth, we can strive to create a nation that lives up to its founding ideals and ensures that the promise of liberty extends to all.

REFERENCES

1. Litwack, L.F. *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. Pulitzer Prize, Chicago, 1980.
2. Reed, H. *Platform for Change: The Foundations of the Northern Free Black Community*. University of Washington, Seattle Press, 1994; 1775-1865.
3. Douglass, F. "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," in Philip S. Foner. *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*. New York: International Publishers Co., Inc, 1975.
4. Cato Institute. *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America*. Cato Institute, Washington DC, 2002.
5. Sparks, J. *The Writings of George Washington*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1855.
6. Douglass, F. "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," in Philip S. Foner, ed. *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*. New York: International Publishers Co., Inc, 1975.
7. Jones, G.F. "The Black Hessians: Negroes Recruited by the Hessians in South Carolina and Other Colonies," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 1982.
8. Sparks, J., ed. *The Writings of George Washington*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1855.
9. Kombieni, D. *Unfinished Journey: A Revisitation of the American Democracy*; Thèse de Doctorat Unique en Etude Anglophone, option Afro-américaine, 2012. Université d'Abomey Calavi, Bénin (unpublished).