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AND TO THE REPUBLIC

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The founding principles of the United States are under attack – not only from historical revisionists, but also from a growing popularity of socialist ideology. Two contemporary ideological trends are picking up steam in the contemporary political landscape, and experts say they challenge even the bedrock principles upon which the United States was established. In one troubling trend, historical revisionists are proposing that the continent’s long history of institutional slavery – which they say predated the Revolutionary War by more than a century and a half – indicates the American experiment was fatally flawed before it began. In another, recent years have witnessed the increasing embrace of socialist ideology in the United States, which critics say is a dangerous philosophy that is irreconcilable with the nation’s standing as a free republic.

UP FROM SLAVERY?

The so-called 1619 Project, a *New York Times* initiative launched last year, began as a series of essays “demonstrating that nearly everything that has made America exceptional grew out of slavery,” as *Times* editorialist Mara Gay tweeted in August 2019. The 1619 refers to the year a ship bearing 20 slaves were brought to the Virginia colony, said

to be the first enslaved Africans to arrive on our shores. *The Times* explained initially that the project “aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are.” At its launch, the 1619 Project went as far as to claim that the American colonists declared independence from Great Britain largely to protect the institution of slavery at a time when the British Empire was seeking to abolish it. *The Times* more recently walked back its most outrageous allegations, but not before damage was already done through newspaper and magazine essays, podcasts, and a widely distributed curriculum intended to recast how American history is taught in U.S. schools. Former House speaker Newt Gingrich derided the 1619 Project at its launch, by tweeting in August 2019 that the traditional *Times* motto should be altered to “All the propaganda we want to brainwash you with.” After some media blowback to the effect that the project does raise awareness of the nation’s tragic history of slavery, Gingrich clarified his position: “Slavery was AND IS terrible (there are slaves today who need liberating.) A 1619 history of slavery project is great. Insisting that slavery is THE defining reality of America is simply factually wrong.”



A MATTER OF PRINCIPLES

Robert R. Reilly, director of the Westminster Institute and author of *America on Trial: A Defense of the Founding*, said the primary threat to the idea of a free republic “is a loss of belief in the principles that made our republic possible.” Those founding principles, he pointed out, were characterized well by John Adams, a founding father and second U.S. president, when he described them as “those general principles of Christianity” which “are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God.” The preamble to the Declaration of Independence articulates them in words familiar to us still today. Appealing to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” the Declaration proclaims the “self-evident” truths “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.” While the key words are still cited often, trends toward secularization and relativism have led many away from acknowledging the natural-law basis — and therefore the self evidence — for these statements. “The problem today,” said Reilly, “is that so many do not believe that there are any immutable, eternal principles, nor are they able to articulate them.” Paul Kengor, political scientist and executive director of the think tank The Center for Vision & Values, sees

the threats to our republic’s foundation as cultural and spiritual in practice. “What matters most are not issues like, say, tax cuts or Social Security reform — though those are certainly important issues — but matters of the soul,” Kengor said. People can reasonably debate how to handle a municipality’s trash collection without putting anyone’s soul in jeopardy, he explained in illustration, but whether or not one supports the protection of unborn human life “is a decision of eternal consequences, not only for the child but those making public policy.” The “Religious Left” often insists that issues such as climate change or immigration are as important as abortion or religious liberty, Kengor explained. Although these other issues have importance, “Reasonable people can disagree over hydraulic fracking vs. windmills, or over the precise number of people from Nicaragua that the United States believes it can assimilate on an annual basis,” Kengor said. “But it’s totally unreasonable to demand that your pro-life, Catholic grandmother or the Little Sisters of the Poor be forced to pay for other people’s abortions.”

MOVEMENTS TO CHANGE

Critics point out that although the Declaration and the Constitution proclaimed these fundamental human rights, these principles were

not always supported by law. Institutionalized slavery, for example, is a glaring example of how the right to liberty was not guaranteed to all. The movers behind the 1619 Project are among those who would conclude that the founding principles were flawed from the beginning — or at least that they were a “work in progress” that ultimately didn’t work.

REILLY DISAGREES

“It’s not the principles that are a work in progress, since they are timeless, but their application,” said Reilly. That’s why the Constitution allows for an amendment process that allows these principles to be applied more perfectly during time, he indicated. Kengor said modern attacks on the founding principles constitute “utter nonsense.” The founders of our nation “believed that all human beings were made in the imago Dei — that is, in the image of God” — in stark contrast to the founders of Marxism, who believed that humans evolved from apes “through a brutal process of Darwinian-evolutionary determinism,” Kengor said. That fundamental belief of the founders “made possible the very elimination of slavery that the people pushing the 1619 project rightly condemn. It was Abraham Lincoln who fulfilled that promise of the Declaration.” Our

16th president expressed this principle in the Gettysburg Address when he recalled that the United States republic was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” “The United States of America absolutely did not begin in 1619,” said Kengor. “It literally, technically, and philosophically began in 1776.”

SOCIALISM REARS ITS HEAD

Movements espousing socialist ideals have been around awhile, but socialist ideology has gone mainstream in recent years with the ascendancy of figures like Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), runner-up for the Democratic nomination for president in 2016 and 2020, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). Ocasio-Cortez is the leading advocate for the Green New Deal, a package of proposed environmental and economic reforms that critics have called a “radical, socialist wish list” and “a Trojan horse for socialism.” The mainstreaming of socialist thought has been abetted by talking heads and published sources that attempt to rehabilitate socialism from its association with Marxism and communism. Last year, for example, *The New Yorker* published an essay on “The Many, Tangled American Definitions of Socialism,”



while a series of articles in *The Guardian* — one of which was titled “Socialism used to be a dirty word” — proposed that perspectives on socialism were changing. “Half of Americans under 40 say they would prefer to live in a socialist country,” it proclaimed. Neither Reilly nor Kengor are persuaded in the least that socialism has any place at all in a free republic, which almost by necessity espouses capitalism. “Private property is good; socialism is bad,” Reilly said unequivocally. “Socialism is state control of private resources. The extent to which the state controls your property is the extent to which you have lost your freedom. The new enthusiasts for socialism should be sent to Venezuela without any toilet paper.” Kengor stated that socialism is “entirely incompatible” with a free republic founded upon God-given rights and natural law. In support, he cited the words of Marxist and communist leaders such as Vladimir Lenin, who said there is “nothing more abominable than religion” and that everyone must be free to “be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule.” “In Marxist-Leninist theory,” said Kengor, “socialism is the final transitional step to full communism.”

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL

The key to combatting such threats to the republic is largely a matter of education, said both experts. “The first thing we have to do is recall what the founding principles are and then come to understand why they are true always, everywhere, and for everyone,” Reilly said. “This would require a massive re-education effort to reverse the horrendous miseducation that has taken place in our schools in recent decades.” Kengor pointed to present trends in this election year with alarm. “Here we are in the United States in 2020, and young people are praising communism, voting for socialists, and Catholic publications are publishing articles making a ‘Catholic Case for Communism,’” he wrote in a recent article in the *National Catholic Register*, referencing a 2019 article in the Jesuit-run *America* magazine. “This is a highly disturbing trend, prompting many of us to wonder if we really did defeat these ideologies when we won the Cold War. “We defeated socialism and communism in the war room, but not in the classroom.”

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