
AMERICAN
SOCIETY FOR
18TH-CENTURY
STUDIES

ASECS Repudiates Report of 1776 Advisory Commission

Approved by ASECS Executive Board, 22 January 2021

The American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies stands in solidarity with other academic organizations that condemn the Trump Administration’s “1776 Report,” issued on January 18, 2021. We reject the report’s caricature of the transformative period of American and global history that we study. The report proffers a facile myth of cardboard great men creating a Utopian nation and fails to represent the fullness, the complexity, and, critically, the failures of the American experiment in instituting Enlightenment philosophical ideals. We decry in particular the following distortions and falsehoods:

- **Government:** The report ignores the ways in which the American experiment in republican form of government emerged in crisis and conflict and disagreement in 1776 and 1789. Those events—winning independence from the British Empire and founding a new federal republic on principles of liberty and equality—seeded the new nation with democratic ways of mediating conflict and negotiating difference. This enabled the early reform movements like Abolition and Women’s suffrage.
- **Religion:** The report advances the false belief that the Founding established a “common American morality” by promoting religious faith and revelation as components of political discourse. The Founders did not fuse but separated church and state.
- **Slavery:** We deplore the report’s *minimization* of slavery’s role in the formation of our nation and the creation of its wealth and power in the modern world. It *ignores* the role of racism in perpetuating slavery, as well as slavery’s persistent effects in American society today. We reject the false *characterization* of the Founders as uniformly opposed to slavery; of course, many prominent Founders owned slaves and enshrined slavery in the Constitution.
- **Indigenous First Nations:** We denounce the glaring omission from the report of any mention of indigenous peoples, as well as the failure to acknowledge the oppression, violence, and erasure done to our First Nations, who, as the report evidences, continue to be banished from our collective history.

We support the decision by the new administration inaugurated on January 20, 2021, to remove this report from the White House website and to dissolve the 1776 Commission. The rejection of the report by the new administration, however, has not prevented other institutions from posting it on their websites, and the false narrative that it promotes may still be exploited.

The history of the United States is often a painful one. Rather than ignore or underplay its dark side, we hope that future scholars will interrogate comforting narratives of America’s greatness and replace them with a clear-eyed understanding of our history in all its complexity. Our wish can be summed up in the words of Amanda Gorman: “It’s because being American is more than a pride we inherit, it’s the past we step into and how we repair it.”