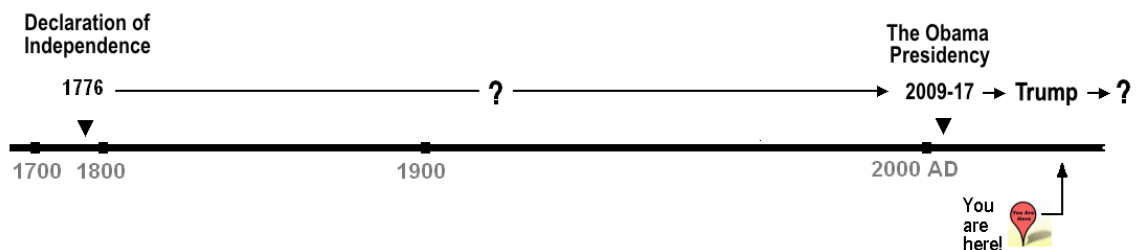


III. The Original United States of America

A. The Birth of the United States: The Declaration of Independence (1776)

1. If you truly want to understand a person, you must learn the story of their life, starting when they were born. In the same way, to understand the United States today, we must go back to its beginning, to its “birthday” and learn its life story.
2. As a distinctive culture, the United States has a dramatic beginning, marked by the issuance of the *Declaration of Independence* by America’s leaders, known as the Founding Fathers, on the 4th of July, 1776.
3. The *Declaration of Independence* is part of a period of American history known as the American Revolution, which deserves close attention, but for now, the *Declaration* itself will serve as a placeholder for the revolution to get us started.
4. The *Declaration*, written mainly by Thomas Jefferson, stated the reasons why a new country known as the “United States of America” sought to establish itself, by breaking away from the control of its mother country, Great Britain.
5. The *Declaration* states that governments are justified only if they protect the “unalienable” (today, most people say “inalienable”) *natural rights* of individuals to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
6. This statement is the core of the original American social contract, and the original impulse to the story of the United States.



B. The Inheritance of Slavery

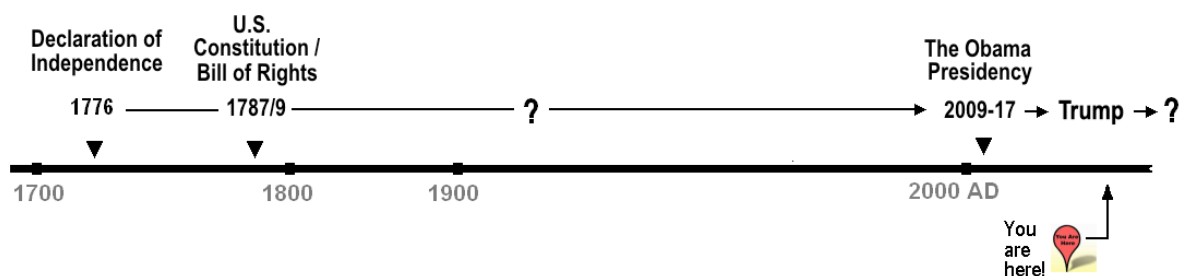
1. Although the *Declaration of Independence* asserted that “all men are created equal” and that all individuals possess the same natural rights, the colonies that became the United States had been formed in a time when slavery was still practiced throughout the world and was considered normal.
2. To the modern student of history, living in a time when slavery is no longer viewed as normal, and seems plainly wrong, it is difficult to imagine what it would be like to live in a time when that was not true.
3. Even so, starting in ancient times, in an unbroken succession of cultures from ancient Egypt & Mesopotamia, including Greece and Rome, and through to medieval Europe, it was such a common practice for human beings to enslave one another that it had gone essentially unquestioned.

4. Slavery either arose when tribes or archaic kingdoms conquered one another, or as peasants fell into debt, or when people simply did not have enough food to survive and chose to sell themselves to someone richer and more powerful in order to live whatever manner of life they could.
5. Ancient codes of law, such as the Jewish *Talmud* and the *Code of Hammurabi* simply explain how slavery was to be conducted and how slaves were to be treated.
6. Likewise, the Christian Bible and texts of Islam treat slavery as merely a fact of life.
7. When faced with the backbreaking labor of having to claim the wilderness of America and transform it into a livable place, the English relied in part on a practice called “indentured servitude,” where poor persons could leave England, be shipped to America, and then labor for a term of approximately seven years on behalf of wealthy colonizers, and only then to gain their own claim to a parcel of land *and begin again—to labor, tortuously, unrelentingly, for themselves, for the rest of their lives*. Or, if they could afford it, they might resort to purchasing slaves on shipments being brought from Africa by European slave traders, to impose the dismal challenges of subsistence agriculture on someone even more less fortunate.
8. By the time of the American Revolution, the use of slave labor had gradually fallen off in some colonies, but in others, especially in the southern colonies, where growing crops such as tobacco and cotton required large pools of labor and was part and parcel to colonial life, the practice had been continued.
9. The peculiar challenge of the founding of the United States as a country with a revolutionary social contract of natural rights enunciated in the *Declaration of Independence* was what to do about inheritance of slavery.

C. A Moral Compromise in the Name of a “More Perfect Union”

1. After the *Declaration of Independence* was issued in 1776 some of the thirteen colonies went even further down the path towards a society fully honoring the idea of individual rights.
2. Five colonies—which were now the *states* of New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts—abolished slavery within their *states*.
3. In eight of the states that became independent through the American Revolution, however, slavery continued at that time.
4. This difference, among others—such as the acceptance of different forms of Christianity in different communities, and simply the great distances that separated them, given the limited transportation and communications technologies of the time—lent themselves to the rise of thirteen separate *countries* once their ties with Britain had been broken.
5. Based on their knowledge of history, however, the Founding Fathers realized that such an arrangement would be unsustainable. Some states would naturally gravitate back into a close relationship with Britain. Others might be lured into a dependency on France or Spain, and due to commercial or territorial rivalries with one another, conflicts would surely arise that would threaten their ability to maintain their independence. (The

- examples of the ancient Greek city-states and the medieval German kingdoms clearly showed the truth of the maxim “United we stand, divided we fall.”)
6. In the thinking of the Founding Fathers, therefore, finding a formula for uniting the states into a single country was paramount.
 7. To combine into a truly *United* States of America, the leaders of the states would have to focus on their common ground and common ideals, while making allowances for the differences, like slavery, that might otherwise keep them apart.
 8. The new set of laws they made is known as the Constitution, devised in 1787, which provides for a “federal” government, with a congress of representatives to make laws for the whole country, along with a president, and a court system, each independent of the other and bound together by a system of laws laid out in the *Constitution* itself that they would all be sworn to uphold.
 9. In creating a new set of laws to bind them into a single, permanent country, the Founders omitted any direct references to slavery, leaving that issue to be dealt with mainly by the states themselves, with two major exceptions.
 - a) A separate agreement between the states known as the “Northwest Ordinance” designated all territories north of the Ohio river, but not yet assigned to any state, as off limits to slavery.
 - b) The Constitution contained a restriction on the federal government that it would not prevent the importation of “persons” (slaves) by any state until 1808.
 10. This compromise between natural rights and slavery was also maintained in the additions to the *Constitution* known as the *Bill of Rights*, created in 1789, which protected the rights of American citizens (such as freedom of speech, and the “right to bear arms”) from violation by the government itself, but said nothing of the rights of the individuals still held as slaves within the new country.
 11. Together, the *Constitution* (1787) and the *Bill of Rights* (1789) thus became the social contract for a truly *United* States of America.



12. The challenge of American history, in light of the great gulf between the original America of Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers and the America of Barack Obama and Donald Trump is to explain how the original American social contract of natural rights *and* slavery *was* abandoned in favor of the social contract of today, which focusses on what are commonly known as “civil rights.”

D. The Rise of Independent America

1. When George Washington was elected the first president of the United States according to its new constitution in 1789, the fate of the newborn country was still uncertain.
2. Just as America was getting started France, a country which had helped America to fight Great Britain in the revolution, was itself swept up by a revolution. Its European enemies worried that if France could copy America, it would represent the beginning of an unstoppable trend, whereby the social contract of the Middle Ages—the social contract of monarchy—would be overthrown everywhere in Europe.
3. A long series of wars ensued, and America struggled to maintain its political separation from these wars, because the Founding Fathers were convinced that becoming entangled in European politics would endanger the rights of Americans.
4. The United States was even able to take advantage of the wars when Napoleon took over France and president Thomas Jefferson (the third president, after Washington and John Adams) offered to buy France's Louisiana territory from him. Jefferson warned him that if the French empire tried to hold territory next to America, it would naturally lead to conflicts between them (which would drive America back into an alliance with Britain) and that Napoleon was better off taking the money for it. The *Louisiana Purchase* doubled the territory of the United States, and brought its land claims all the way to the Pacific ocean.
5. The larger, more populous and more confident United States, under fourth president James Madison, was even willing to fight its mother country again in the *War of 1812*, because Britain was kidnapping America sailors to serve in the British navy against France.
6. By the end of the war, Americans felt that the great objective of securing American independence was achieved. The "Era of Good Feelings" was the name given to the period, with the country united in a sense of achievement and hope.