

# Will the Right's Fake History Prevail?

**Exclusive:** Tea Partiers have convinced millions of Americans that they are standing with the Constitution's Framers in a common disdain for a strong, activist federal government. That is false history but it is undergirding the expected Republican congressional victories on Tuesday, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If most polls are correct and voters elect a Republican-controlled Congress on Tuesday, a principal reason is that many Americans have been sold on a false recounting of the nation's Founding Narrative. They have bought the Right's made-up storyline about the Constitution's Framers detesting a strong federal government and favoring states' rights.

This notion of the Framers as enemies of an activist national government is untrue but has become a popular meme as promoted through the vast right-wing media and accepted by the timid mainstream press, which is unwilling to fight for an accurate portrayal of what the Federalists who wrote the Constitution intended.

So, without much pushback from those who know better, the Tea Partiers, Libertarians and many Republicans have successfully walled off much of the U.S. population from the actual history, which would reveal the American Right to be arguably the opposite of true patriots in its disdain for the assertive national governance devised in 1787.

Plus, the Right's fake interpretation of the Constitution cannot be disentangled from the disgraceful history of slavery, segregation and today's renewed efforts to prevent black and brown Americans from voting.

Indeed, race has always been an intrinsic element in the American Right's history, which can be roughly divided into four eras: the pre-Confederate period from 1787 to 1860 when slave owners first opposed and then sought to constrain the Constitution, viewing it as a threat to slavery; the actual Confederacy from 1861 to 1865 when the South took up arms against the Constitution in defense of slavery; the post-Confederate era from 1866 to the 1960s when white racists violently thwarted constitutional protections for blacks; and the neo-Confederate era from 1969 to today when these racists jumped to the Republican Party in an attempt to extend white supremacy behind various code words and subterfuges.

It is true that the racist Right has often moved in tandem with the wealthy-elite Right, which has regarded the regulatory powers of the federal government

as a threat to the ability of rich industrialists to operate corporations and to control the economy without regard to the larger public good.

But the historical reality is that both the white supremacists and the anti-regulatory corporatists viewed the Constitution as a threat to their interests because of its creation of a powerful central government that was given a mandate to “promote the general Welfare.” The Constitution was far from perfect and its authors did not always have the noblest of motives, but it created a structure that could reflect the popular will and be used for the nation’s good.

The key Framers of the Constitution the likes of George Washington, James Madison (who then was a protégé of Washington) Alexander Hamilton and Gouverneur Morris (who wrote the famous Preamble) were what might be called “pragmatic nationalists” determined to do what was necessary to protect the nation’s fragile independence and to advance the country’s economic development.

In 1787, the Framers’ principal concern was that the existing government structure the Articles of Confederation was unworkable because it embraced a system of strong states, deemed “sovereign” and “independent,” and a weak central government called simply a “league of friendship” among the states.

The Constitution flipped that relationship, making federal law supreme and seeking to make the states “subordinately useful,” in Madison’s evocative phrase. Though the Constitution did make implicit concessions to slavery in order to persuade southern delegates to sign on, the shift toward federal dominance was immediately perceived as an eventual threat to slavery.

### **Fearing for Slavery**

Key Anti-Federalists, such as Virginia’s Patrick Henry and George Mason, argued that over time the more industrial North would grow dominant and insist on the elimination of slavery. And, it was known that a number of key participants at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, including Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton, were strongly opposed to slavery and that Washington was troubled by human bondage though a slaveholder himself.

So, Henry and Mason cited the threat to slavery as their hot-button argument against ratification. In 1788, Henry warned his fellow Virginians that if they approved the Constitution, it would put their massive capital investment in slaves in jeopardy. Imagining the possibility of a federal tax on slaveholding, Henry declared, “They’ll free your niggers!”

It is a testament to how we have whitewashed U.S. history on the evils of slavery that Patrick Henry is far better known for his declaration before the Revolution, “Give me liberty or give me death!” than his equally pithy warning,

“They’ll free your niggers!”

Similarly, George Mason, Henry’s collaborator in trying to scare Virginia’s slaveholders into opposing the Constitution, is recalled as an instigator of the Bill of Rights, rather than as a defender of slavery. A key “freedom” that Henry and Mason fretted about was the “freedom” of plantation owners to possess other human beings as property.

As historians Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg wrote in their 2010 book, *Madison and Jefferson*, Henry and Mason argued that “slavery, the source of Virginia’s tremendous wealth, lay politically unprotected.” Besides the worry about how the federal government might tax slave-ownership, there was the fear that the President as commander in chief might “federalize” the state militias and emancipate the slaves.

Though the Anti-Federalists lost the struggle to block ratification, they soon shifted into a strategy of redefining the federal powers contained in the Constitution, with the goal of minimizing them and thus preventing a strong federal government from emerging as a threat to slavery.

In this early stage of the pre-Confederacy era, the worried slave owners turned to one of their own, Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and a charismatic politician who had been in France during the drafting and ratification of the Constitution and enactment of the Bill of Rights.

Though Jefferson had criticized the new governing document especially over its broad executive powers, he was not an outright opponent and thus was a perfect vehicle for seeking to limit the Constitution’s reach. Even as Washington’s Secretary of State, Jefferson began organizing against the formation of the new government as it was being designed by the Federalists, especially Washington’s energetic Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton.

The Federalists, who were the principal Framers, understood the Constitution to grant the central government all necessary powers to “provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the United States.” However, Jefferson and his fellow Southern slaveholders were determined to limit those powers by reinterpreting what the Constitution allowed much more narrowly. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Right’s Made-Up Constitution.”](#)]

## **Partisan Warfare**

Through the 1790s, Jefferson and his Southern-based faction engaged in fierce partisan warfare against the Federalists, particularly Alexander Hamilton but also John Adams and implicitly George Washington. Jefferson opposed the

Federalist program that sought to promote the country's development through everything from a national bank to a professional military to a system of roads and canals to support for manufacturing.

As Jefferson's faction gained strength, it also pulled in James Madison who, for reasons of political survival and personal finances, embraced the slave interests of his fellow Virginians. Madison essentially moved from under Washington's wing to under Jefferson's. Then, with Madison's acquiescence, Jefferson developed the extra-constitutional theories of state "nullification" of federal law and even the principle of secession.

Historians Burstein and Isenberg wrote in *Madison and Jefferson* that these two important Founders must be understood as, first and foremost, politicians representing the interests of Virginia where the two men lived nearby each other on plantations worked by African-American slaves, Jefferson at Monticello and Madison at Montpelier.

"It is hard for most to think of Madison and Jefferson and admit that they were Virginians first, Americans second," Burstein and Isenberg said. "But this fact seems beyond dispute. Virginians felt they had to act to protect the interests of the Old Dominion, or else, before long, they would become marginalized by a northern-dominated economy.

"Virginians who thought in terms of the profit to be reaped in land were often reluctant to invest in manufacturing enterprises. The real tragedy is that they chose to speculate in slaves rather than in textile factories and iron works. And so as Virginians tied their fortunes to the land, they failed to extricate themselves from a way of life that was limited in outlook and produced only resistance to economic development."

Because of political mistakes by the Federalists and Jefferson's success in portraying himself as an advocate of simple farmers (when he was really the avatar for the plantation owners), Jefferson and his Democratic-Republicans prevailed in the election of 1800, clearing the way for a more constrained interpretation of the Constitution and a 24-year Virginia Dynasty over the White House with Jefferson, Madison and James Monroe, all slaveholders.

By the time the Virginia Dynasty ended, slavery had spread to newer states to the west and was more deeply entrenched than ever before. Indeed, not only was Virginia's agriculture tied to the institution of slavery but after the Constitution banned the importation of slaves in 1808, Virginia developed a new industry, the breeding of slaves for sale to new states in the west. Jefferson even wanted all the new states from the Louisiana Territories to be slave states. [For details on this history, see Consortiumnews.com's ["The Right's](#)

Dubious Claim to Madison” and “Thomas Jefferson: America’s Founding Sociopath.”]

## **Toward Civil War**

Thus, America’s course to the Civil War was set. Ironically the warnings of Patrick Henry and George Mason proved prescient as the growing industrial strength of the North gave momentum to a movement for abolishing slavery. When Abraham Lincoln, the presidential candidate for the new anti-slavery Republican Party, won the 1860 election, southern slave states seceded from the Union, claiming they were defending the principle of states’ rights but really they were protecting the economic interests of slave owners.

The South’s bloody defeat in the Civil War finally ended slavery and the North sought for several years to “reconstruct” the South as a place that would respect the rights of freed slaves. But the traditional white power structure reasserted itself, employing violence against blacks and the so-called “carpetbaggers” from the North.

As white Southerners organized politically under the banner of the Democratic Party, which had defended slavery since its origins in Jefferson’s plantation-based political faction, the North and the Republicans grew weary of trying to police the South. Soon, southern whites were pushing blacks into a form of crypto-slavery through a combination of Jim Crow laws, white supremacist ideology and Ku Klux Klan terror.

Thus, the century after the Civil War could be designated the post-Confederate era of the American Right. This restoration of the South’s white power structure also coincided with the emergence of the North’s Robber Barons the likes of Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan who amassed extraordinary wealth and used it to achieve political clout in favor of laissez-faire economics.

In that sense, the interests of the northern industrialists and the southern aristocracy dovetailed in a common opposition to any federal authority that might reflect the interests of the common man, either the white industrial workers of the North or the black sharecroppers of the South.

However, amid recurring financial calamities on Wall Street that drove many Americans into abject poverty and with the disgraceful treatment of African-Americans in the South, reform movements began to emerge in the early Twentieth Century, reviving the founding ideal that the federal government should “promote the general Welfare.”

With the Great Depression of the 1930s, the grip of the aging Robber Barons and their descendants began to slip. Despite fierce opposition from the political

Right, President Franklin Roosevelt enacted a series of reforms that increased regulation of the financial sector, protected the rights of unions and created programs to lift millions of Americans out of poverty.

After World War II, the federal government went even further, helping veterans get educated through the GI Bill, making mortgages affordable for new homes, connecting the nation through a system of modern highways, and investing in scientific research. Through these various reforms, the federal government not only advanced the "general Welfare" but, in effect, invented the Great American Middle Class.

### **Civil Rights**

As the nation's prosperity surged, attention also turned to addressing the shame of racial segregation. The civil rights movement led by remarkable leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and eventually embraced by Democratic Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson rallied popular support and the federal government finally moved against segregation across the South.

Yet, reflecting the old-time pro-slavery concerns of Patrick Henry and George Mason, southern white political leaders fumed at this latest intrusion by the federal government against the principle of "states' rights," i.e. the rights of the whites in southern states to treat "their coloreds" as they saw fit.

This white backlash to the federal activism against segregation became the energy driving the modern Republican Party, which abandoned its honorable legacy as the party that ended slavery. Instead, it became home for Americans who feared social change and resented policies that disproportionately helped racial minorities. The smartest right-wingers understood this reality.

On the need to keep blacks under white domination, urbane conservative William F. Buckley declared in 1957 that "the white community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically."

Sen. Barry Goldwater, R-Arizona, who wrote the influential manifesto *Conscience of a Conservative*, realized in 1961 that for Republicans to gain national power, they would have to pick off southern segregationists. Or as Goldwater put it, the Republican Party had to "go hunting where the ducks are."

Then, there was Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" of using coded language to appeal to southern whites and Ronald Reagan's launching of his 1980 national presidential campaign with a states' rights speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the notorious site of the murders of three civil rights workers. The two strands of historic conservatism, white supremacy and "small government" ideology, were

again wound together.

In New York magazine, Frank Rich summed up this political history while noting how today's right-wing revisionists have tried to reposition their heroes by saying they opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 simply out of high-minded "small-government principles." But Rich wrote:

"The primacy of [Strom] Thurmond in the GOP's racial realignment is the most incriminating truth the right keeps trying to cover up. That's why the George W. Bush White House shoved the Mississippi senator Trent Lott out of his post as Senate majority leader in 2002 once news spread that Lott had told Thurmond's 100th-birthday gathering that America 'wouldn't have had all these problems' if the old Dixiecrat had been elected president in 1948.

"Lott, it soon became clear, had also lavished praise on [the Confederacy's president] Jefferson Davis and associated for decades with other far-right groups in thrall to the old Confederate cause. But the GOP elites didn't seem to mind until he committed the truly unpardonable sin of reminding America, if only for a moment, of the exact history his party most wanted and needed to suppress. Then he had to be shut down at once."

### **Unholy Alliance**

This unholy alliance between the racists and the corporatists continues to this day with Republicans understanding that the votes of blacks, Hispanics, Asians and other minorities must be suppressed if the twin goals of the two principal elements of the Right are to control the future. That was the significance of the 2013 ruling by the Supreme Court's right-wing majority to gut the Voting Rights Act. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Supreme Court's War on Democracy."]

Only if the votes of whites can be proportionately enhanced and the votes of minorities minimized can the Republican Party overcome the country's demographic changes and retain government power that will both advance the interests of the racists and the free-marketeers.

That's why Republican-controlled statehouses engaged in aggressive gerrymandering of congressional districts in 2010 and tried to impose "ballot security" measures across the country in 2012 and 2014. The crudity of those efforts, clumsily justified as needed to prevent the virtually non-existent problem of in-person voter fraud, was embarrassing to watch.

As Frank Rich noted, "Everyone knows these laws are in response to the rise of Barack Obama. It is also no coincidence that many of them were conceived and promoted by the American Legal Exchange Council, an activist outfit funded by heavy-hitting right-wing donors like Charles and David Koch.

“In another coincidence that the GOP would like to flush down the memory hole, the Kochs’ father, Fred, a founder of the radical John Birch Society in the fifties, was an advocate for the impeachment of Chief Justice Warren in the aftermath of *Brown [v. Board of Education]* Fred Koch wrote a screed of his own accusing communists of inspiring the civil-rights movement.”

Blaming the Democratic Party for ending segregation and coyly invited by opportunistic Republicans like Nixon and Reagan to switch party allegiances racist whites signed up with the Republican Party in droves. Thus, the Democratic Party, which since the days of Jefferson had been the party of slavery and segregation, lost its southern base, ceding it to the new Republican Party.

### **A Flip of Allegiance**

This flip in the allegiance of America’s white supremacists from Democrat to Republican also put them in the same political structure as the anti-regulatory business interests which had dominated the Republican Party from the days of the Robber Barons. These two groups again found themselves sharing a common interest, the desire to constrain the federal government’s commitment to providing for “the general Welfare.”

To the corporate Republicans this meant slashing taxes, eliminating regulations and paring back social programs for the poor or in Ayn Rand vernacular the moochers. To the racist Republicans this meant giving the states greater leeway to suppress the votes of minorities and gutting programs that were seen as especially benefiting black and brown Americans, such as food stamps and health-care reform.

Thus, in today’s neo-Confederate era, the American Right is coalescing around two parallel ideological motives: continued racial resentment (against black and brown people getting welfare to the presence of a black family in the White House) and resistance to government regulations (from efforts to control Wall Street excesses to restrictions on global-warming emissions).

Though the white racist element of this coalition might typically be expected to proudly adopt the Stars and Bars of the Old Confederacy as its symbol, the modern Right is too media-savvy to get boxed into that distasteful imagery of slavery.

So, instead the Right has opted for a rebranding as Revolutionary War-era patriots calling themselves Tea Partiers, donning tri-corner hats and waving yellow banners with a coiled snake declaring “don’t tread on me.” Instead of overtly defending the Confederacy, the Right proclaims its commitment to the



Founding Principles found in the Constitution.

But this sly transformation required the Right to rewrite the Founding Narrative, to blot out the initial interpretation of the Constitution by the Federalists who, after all, were the ones who primarily crafted the document, and to pretend that Jefferson's revisionist view representing the pre-Confederate position of the southern plantation owners was the original one. [For more, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Right's Made-Up Constitution.](#)"]

Now this doctored history accepted by millions of Americans as true has become the driving force for what many pundits predict will be a "wave election" for the Republicans and the Right.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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