

1619 PODCAST EXCERPT

Somehow, miraculously, these 13 scrappy colonies managed to defeat one of the most powerful empires in the world, and we become a new nation. And so, the colonists gather, and they try to figure out the language that they are going to create in the founding document that we, of course, come to know as the Constitution.

But now they have a problem. They were trying to leave behind an old country that they believed was antithetical to freedom and create a new one that they believe will be defined by freedom. This was a country that was going to be based on individual rights, on a government of the people, for the people, and by the people, but this was also a place that, at this time, was still practicing the institution of slavery.

And so, the colonists have a choice to make. Are they going to be the country of their ideals, the ideals that they were putting to paper, a country based on the idea that all men were created equal? And if they were going to be that country, then they were going to have to abolish the institution of slavery. Or were they going to be wedded to the institution of slavery because they depended so heavily on the wealth that was being generated from it? And in that case, they can't really write the document that they want to write.

And so, what they do is they decide that they are going to try to have it both ways, and they bake that contradiction right into the Constitution, both codifying and protecting the institution of slavery but never actually mentioning the word. And so, they have written what is perhaps the most radical constitution in the world, and from the beginning, they knew they were going to violate its most essential principles. They call this new country a democracy, but it wasn't one, not yet.

Anderson, L., Tobin, L., & Chow, L. (2019, August 23). The fight for true democracy [Audio podcast episode transcript]. In 1619. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/23/podcasts/1619-slavery-anniversary.html>