

THE MOST AMERICAN OF ALL

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
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Over the past few weeks, as I have read President Trump's increasingly bombastic storms over Twitter and heard about his increasingly invective-laced tirades in person, another rage-filled would-be master of the universe has come to mind: Captain Ahab, the protagonist of Herman Melville's novel, *Moby-Dick*. As some of you know, Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* during the time he was a member of All Souls. To be sure, Captain Ahab was master of a much smaller domain than President Trump, but the captain's rage was fully the president's equal.

For those of you not familiar with the tale, a great white whale that Ahab dubbed Moby-Dick had, during a previous voyage, destroyed Ahab's ship and bitten off his leg. Ahab vowed revenge. As the story of Ahab's vendetta voyage unfolds, he comes to view Moby-Dick not only as the perpetrator of an evil act, but as the sum and substance of all evil absolutely. In one telling passage, Melville writes:

All evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby-Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.

During the closing chase near the end of the story, Ahab hurls his last harpoon at Moby-Dick, along with a final invective: "...to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee."

Words like these coming from the Oval Office seem distressingly familiar these days. In part as a result, the overall tide of rage in our nation seems to be rising. The identity of the whale varies, of course, depending on who's enraged, and at what. The sum of evil gets personified, in turn, by various groups: immigrants, or Iranians, or feminists, or Muslims, or poor people, or liberals, or whistleblowers. Some days singly and some days in swarms, the harpoons keep coming.

The recent move to impeach the President shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. The problem isn't that he's foulmouthed, or sexist, or racist, or xenophobic. He's demonstrably all of these things, but many of his predecessors have been as well. The problem is that he's out of control — certainly in moral terms, and perhaps also in legal terms. Time will tell.

James Fallows, who has written for *Atlantic* magazine for several decades, observed in August: "If Donald Trump were in virtually *any other position of*

responsibility, action would already be under way to remove him from that role. The board at a public company would have replaced him outright or arranged a discreet shift out of power... The chain-of-command in the Navy or at an airline or in the hospital would at least call a time-out, and check his fitness, before putting him back on the bridge, or in the cockpit, or in the operating room.”

On these terms, impeachment can best be understood as a timeout to check the President’s fitness for duty. Of course, much of the punditry concerning the move to impeach has characterized Trump as an outlier — observing how far he has transgressed the line of propriety and how few of his predecessors have been impeached. These observations assume that our Presidents have generally been men of strong moral character, committed to the good of the nation as a whole, and motivated by altruistic interests.

The founders of our nation made no such assumption. In 1974, David Rankin, then Minister of the Unitarian Society of San Francisco, addressed the impeachment controversy swirling around then-President Richard Nixon. The founders, Rankin said, viewed humankind as generally “ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious.” In light of this bleak view of human nature, the founders devised a legal system that would function despite the people and their rulers. “They wrote a Constitution, consisting of an elaborate network of checks and balances, which they hoped would off-set the unfortunate pre-disposition of human nature.” By this means, Rankin concluded, they hoped to limit the damage done by “the demagogue, the tyrant, and the nit-wit.”

The nature of human nature has been a problem since the beginning of time, but it has never been limited to the White House — or any house, for that matter. Knowing this, the founders set up guardrails that extended far beyond the Presidency. They did so by making the following commitment: “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that the founders signed on July 4, 1776, “that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”

In retrospect, it’s hard to believe that the founders would sign their name to such an idealistic statement, because none of them believed it was true. Despite the fact that humanity as a whole in those days was typically referred to as “mankind” or just “man,” the founders didn’t believe equality extended to women and they certainly didn’t think it extended to enslaved black people from Africa. In this sense, Nikole Hannah-Jones says, “The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie.”

A *New York Times* staff writer who co-founded the Ida B. Wells Center for Investigative Journalism, Hannah-Jones wrote a long essay two months ago — it’s also a podcast — as part of an effort by the *Times* to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans on the shores of what eventually would become the United States. The essay is titled, “America Wasn’t a Democracy, until Black Americans Made It One.” I commend it to you.

Hannah-Jones grew up in a two-story house with perennially-chipped paint and a fence in perpetual disrepair. But, she says, her dad always flew an American flag in their front yard, and the flag always flew pristine.

As a girl, she never understood why. She says, “The Mississippi of my dad’s youth was an apartheid state that subjugated its near-majority black population through breathtaking acts of violence. White residents in Mississippi lynched more black people than those in any other state in the country, and the white people in my dad’s home county lynched more black residents than those in any other county in Mississippi, often for such ‘crimes’ as entering a room occupied by white women, bumping into a white girl or trying to start a sharecroppers union.”

Hannah-Jones goes on to describe how her dad signed up for the Army at age 17, hoping to escape poverty, but also hoping that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American. This didn’t happen. He was passed over for promotion and eventually discharged under what Hannah-Jones describes as “murky circumstances.” Her dad ended up working in a series of service jobs for the rest of his life. He worked hard, she says, but he never got ahead.

Hannah-Jones says that she was taught in school and through cultural osmosis to view Black Americans as having contributed little to this nation. “So when I was young,” she concludes, “that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused Black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn’t understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me.”

What Hannah-Jones has learned since, she goes on to say, is that her father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. She says, “He knew that our people’s contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.”

During the years of the slave trade, twelve-and-a-half million Africans were kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic. Nearly 2 million did not survive the journey, known as the Middle Passage. Four hundred thousand of these enslaved Africans were sold in America, and they and their descendants became the economic engine that transformed this land.

Hannah-Jones explains, “They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation’s most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66% of the world supply... Profits from black people’s stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring, and financing of their bodies and products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking capital, insurance and trading sector, and New York City the financial capital of the world.”

She adds, “But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have

also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: it is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy... Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of Black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all.”

It's not clear, at least to me, whether if the founders had been honest and transparent about their designs for this new nation they would have called it an oligarchy or a slavocracy. But they clearly had no interest in it being a democracy in the sense that it has become, and even less in the sense that it still yearns to be. But in their efforts to cover the constitutional tracks of their commitment to preserve the institution of slavery, the better angels of their nature led them to lay claim to a truth that has thankfully turned out to be unalienable. All people are created equal – every one of us.

Hannah-Jones concludes her essay by saying that when she was a child, her teacher assigned the students in her class to write a short report on their ancestral land and then draw the nation's flag. She knew that slavery had erased any connection she had to Africa, so she picked a random African country and claimed it as her own.

She says, “I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people's ancestry started here on these lands and to boldly, proudly draw the stars and stripes of the American flag.” She adds, “We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all.”

Through centuries of sorrow, and suffering, and torture, Black Americans have and continue to insist that this nation live up to the commitments made at its founding. So have women, who were also intentionally disenfranchised, as well as LGBTQ people, immigrants, and others who have been pushed to the perimeter by those in power.

The work of living up to our nation's founding commitments now belongs to all of us. It especially belongs to those of us who have disproportionately benefited from our nation's racist past. In order to be true to our ideals as a nation, we hold accountable those who betray those ideals, from the president on down. In order to prove ourselves worthy of our identity as Americans, we uphold the equal dignity and rights of everyone. The work of perfecting our democracy is now ours to do.