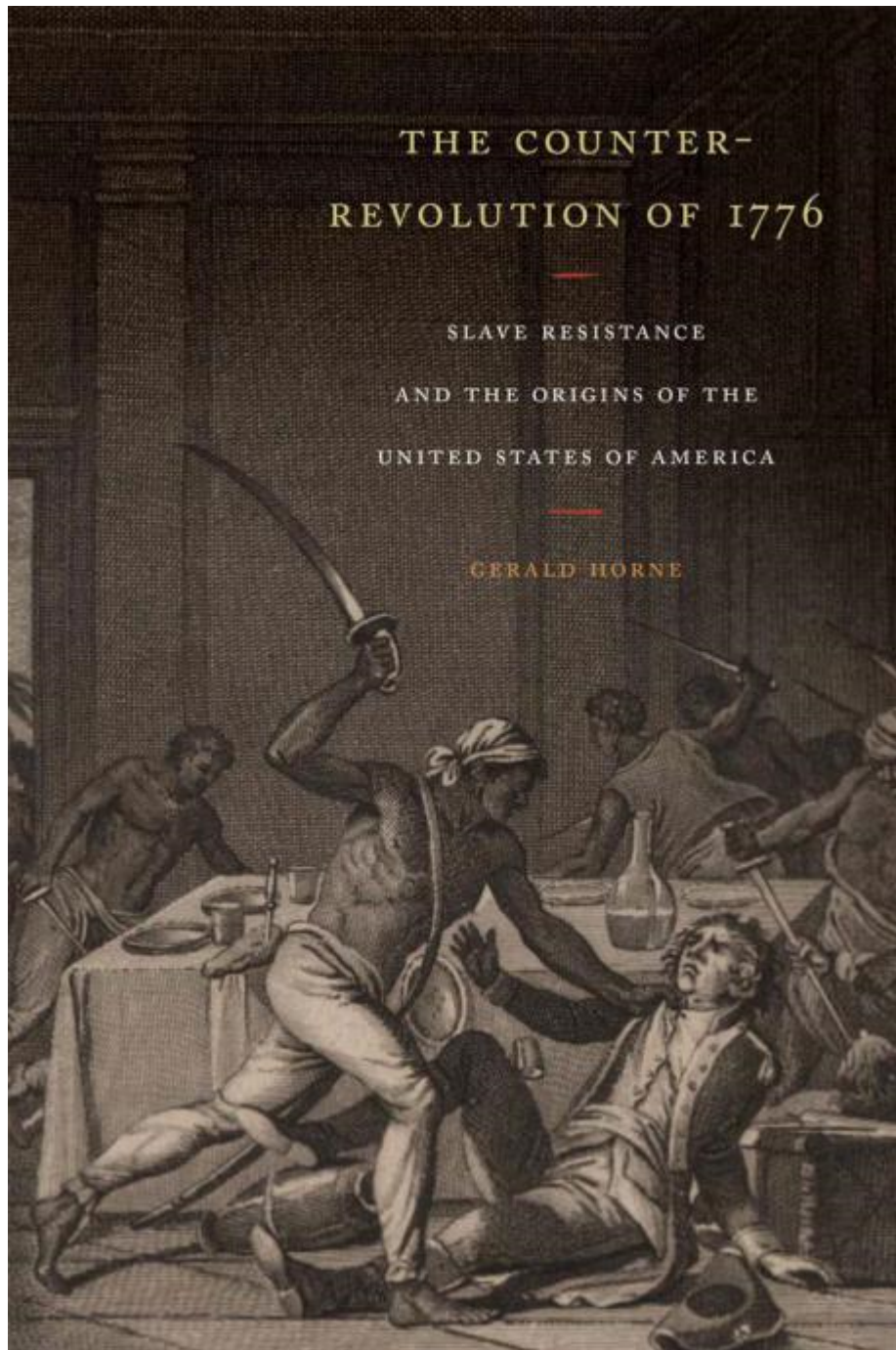


Introduction to The Counter-Revolution of 1776



The introduction to Gerald Horne's *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America*.

It was just past ten in the morning on 22 June 1772 in a London courtroom. And the presiding magistrate, Lord Mansfield, had just made a ruling that suggested that slavery, the blight that had ensnared so many, would no longer obtain, at least not in England. A few nights later, a boisterous group of Africans, numbering in the hundreds, gathered for a festive celebration; strikingly, none defined as “white” were allowed— though they toasted Lord Mansfield, the

first Scot to become a powerful lawyer, legislator, politician, and judge, with unbounded enthusiasm.¹

Others were not so elated, particularly in Virginia, where the former “property” in question in this case had been residing. “Is it in the Power of Parliament to make such a Law? Can any human law abrogate the divine? The Law[s] of Nature are the Laws of God,” wrote one querulously questioning writer.² Indicating that this was not a sectional response, a correspondent in Manhattan near the same time assured that this ostensibly anti-slavery ruling “will occasion a greater ferment in America (particularly in the islands) than the Stamp Act itself,” a reference to another London edict that was then stirring controversy in the colonies.³ The radical South Carolinian William Drayton—whose colony barely contained an unruly African majority—was apoplectic about this London decision, asserting that it would “complete the ruin of many American provinces.”⁴

This apocalyptic prediction was shaped inexorably by the inflammatory statements emanating from the London courtroom. The lawyer for the enslaved man at issue sketched a devastating indictment of slavery, an institution that undergirded immense fortunes in the colonies. He observed that slavery was dangerous to the state, perhaps a veiled reference to the forced retreat of colonists in Jamaica a few decades earlier in the face of fierce resistance by African warriors designated as “Maroons”: their militancy seemed to augur at one point the collapse of the colonial regime.⁵

Caribbean revolts were so frequent that—according to one analyst—this unrest “underscored colonists’ pathological fear of Africans as their natural enemy”⁶—a situation that was inherently unsustainable but, simultaneously, indicated why this London case had fomented such raw emotion.

This lawyer’s reproach of slavery was not only part of enlightened conversation in London, for as far afield as Madrid and Paris, serious reconsideration of this institution had arisen. In the late 1750s in Hispaniola, dozens of Europeans and thousands of livestock had succumbed to poisons administered by African herbalists. Unsurprisingly, French “physiocrats” had begun to raise searching questions about the future viability of slavery.⁷

Slavery inevitably bred angry disaffection that could be quite destabilizing—particularly when combined with intervention by other European powers. Consequently, this attorney railed against the “unlawfulness of introducing a new slavery into England from our American colonies or any other country.” Yes, he conceded, “by an unhappy occurrence of circumstances, the slavery of Negroes is thought to have become necessity in America”⁸—but why should this pestilence be extended?

Hanging ominously in the air was the implication that if slavery were to be deemed null and void in London, then why not in Charleston? Even before these foreboding words were uttered in London, the Virginia Gazette—whose audience had few qualms about enslavement of Africans—had noticed that since this case had commenced, “the spirit of Liberty had diffused itself so far amongst the species of people”—namely Negroes—“that they have established a club near Charing Cross where they meet every Monday night for the more effectual recovery of their freedom.”⁹

The New Yorker was prescient, as we know, while the man from Carolina summarized neatly what was to befall the British holdings south of the Canadian border. The eminent 20th-century historian Benjamin Quarles has argued that this London case “hastened” slavery’s “downfall in New England.”¹⁰ Moreover, what came to be known as “Somerset’s case” emerged in the wake of a number of decisions emanating from London that unnerved the powerful slaveholders of North America—and was followed by others—all of which aided in lighting a fuse of revolt that detonated on 4 July 1776.

This is a book about the role of slavery and the slave trade in the events leading up to 4 July 1776 in igniting the rebellion that led to the founding of the United States of America¹¹—notably as the seditiousness of rebellious Africans intersected with the machinations of European powers, Spain and France most particularly. It is a story that does not see the founding of the U.S.A. as inevitable—or even a positive development: for Africans (or indigenes) most particularly.¹² I argue that a number of contingent trends led to 1776. As we know, the now leading metropolis that is New York was once controlled by the Dutch; the area around Philadelphia once was colonized by the Swedes; New Orleans had French, then Spanish, then French rule once more; Jamaica went from Spain to Britain in the mid-17th century. The colonizing of the Americas was a chaotic process for which teleology is particularly inappropriate: it was not foreordained that the Stars and Stripes would flutter at all, least of all over so much of North America. The colonizing of the Americas was a wild and woolly process. Guy Fawkes and Oliver Cromwell were surging to prominence as London’s creation of colonies in the Americas was accelerating: these two men represented plotting and attempting to overturn an already unstable status quo that was hard to hide from Africans. Moreover, the colonial project unfolded alongside a kind of Cold War between Catholics and Protestants¹³ (studded with the periodic equivalent of a kind of “Sino-Soviet” split that from time to time disunited Madrid and Paris). The chaos of colonialism combined with this defining religious rift ironically created leverage for Africans as they could tip the balance against one European power by aligning with another—or with the indigenous. Then there was the developing notion of “whiteness,” smoothing tensions between and among people hailing from the “old” continent, which was propelled by the need for European unity to confront raging Africans and indigenes: this, *inter alia*, served to unite settlers in North America with what otherwise might have been their French and Spanish antagonists, laying the basis for a kind of democratic advance, as represented in the freedom of religion in the emergent U.S. Constitution. Surely, the uniting of Europeans from varying ethnicities under the umbrella of “whiteness” broadened immeasurably the anti-London project, with a handsome payoff delivered to many of the anti-colonial participants in the form of land that once was controlled by the indigenous, often stocked with enslaved Africans—not to mention a modicum of civil rights denied to those who were not defined as “white.” Ironically, the founders of the republic have been hailed and lionized by left, right, and center for—in effect—creating the first apartheid state.

Assuredly, as with any epochal event, the ouster of London from a number of its North American colonies was driven by many forces— not just slavery and the slavery trade—a point I well recognize.¹⁴ As ever, there were numerous economic reasons for a unilateral declaration of independence. When British forces in 1741 were in the midst of attacking Cuba and Cartagena, an officer of the Crown mused—in case of victory— about settling North American colonists in the “East End of Cuba” since if they “could be settled there, it would be much better than their returning home to a Country over-peopled already, which runs them on setting up manufactures, to the prejudice of their Mother Country.”¹⁵ Nine years earlier, another Londoner fretted that while once “almost all the sugar made” in the West Indies “was brought to England in British built ships[,] now it is as notorious that one ship in three, which bring that commodity are New England built and navigated by New England sailors. From whence it follows that New England has supplanted Britain in its Navigation to those colonies one part in three.” These North American colonies were surpassing Britain in making hats, so useful in frequently inclement weather; thus, it was concluded portentously, “independency” of these colonies “must [be] the consequence: a fatal consequence to this Kingdom!” This “independency” was “highly probable.”¹⁶ By 1761, yet another Briton was arguing that these North America colonies were “far from being beneficial to Great Britain, that it would have been much better if no such Continent or no

such colonies had ever existed” since “from their very establishment [they] have been a growing evil to Great Britain, which [has] thereby *laid the Foundation of an EMPIRE that may hereafter make her a COLONY*” (emphasis original).¹⁷

These economic conflicts were all very real and deeply felt by settlers and Londoners alike. Yet, even when one posits this economic conflict as overriding all others in sparking revolt, the larger point was that it was slavery that was driving these fortunes, particularly in the North American colonies. For example, in Rhode Island—epicenter of the slave trade during a good deal of the 18th century¹⁸—these merchants of odiousness moved rapidly to plow their vast fortunes into sectors that competed aggressively with the “Mother Country,” notably manufacturing, insurance, and banking, indicating that slavery remained at the root of the conflict.¹⁹ “Negroes were considered essential to New England’s prosperity,” argues historian Lorenzo Greene, speaking of the colonial era.²⁰ In South Carolina, always on edge because of the presence of a restive African majority often in league with Spanish Florida, care was taken to build roads and establish ferries in order to more effectively gain access to lands rocked by slave revolt—but this infrastructure spending also spurred economic development generally.²¹

In sum, the argument between these colonies and London was—in a sense—a chapter in a larger story whose first lines were written in 1688 during the “Glorious Revolution” when the Crown was forced to take a step back as a rising merchant class stepped forward,²² not least in corroding the monarch’s hegemony in the slave trade. Arguably, it was then that the groundwork was laid for the takeoff of capitalism—a trend in which slavery and the slave trade played an indispensable role.²³ The growing influence of merchants in the aftermath of 1688 turbocharged the African Slave Trade, which allowed for spectacular profits growing from investments in the Americas and the forging of a wealthy class there which chafed under London’s rule. It was in 1696 that the House of Commons received a petition objecting to the monopoly on this hateful trade in humans then held by the Royal African Company (RAC). The petition was signed by individuals referring to themselves as “merchants and traders of Virginia and Maryland,” who argued that their “plantations” were “capable” of much greater profit and production and if they were “sufficiently supplied with Negroes, they would produce twice the quantity they do now”—indeed, “the shortage of slaves was hindering the development of the tobacco colonies.” After wrangling, their prayers were answered, leading to spectacular increases in the number of Africans in chains crossing the Atlantic.²⁴

This business benefited handsomely some entrepreneurs in New England—notably in Massachusetts and Rhode Island—where the trade flourished. This region contained the “greatest slave-trading communities in America,” according to Lorenzo J. Greene: “the profits from the slave trade were almost incredible. Seldom has there been a more lucrative commerce than the traffic in Negroes,” since “gross profits [were] sometimes as high as sixteen hundred percent,” as “the slave trade easily became the most lucrative commerce of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”²⁵ The “Puritan colonies,” says Greene, “were the greatest slave-trading communities in America. From Boston, Salem and Charlestowne in Massachusetts; from Newport, Providence and Bristol in Rhode Island; and from New London and Hartford” emerged these vessels of opprobrium—and profit. And “of the American ships involved in [shipboard] insurrections, those from New England suffered the most,” with Massachusetts leading the pack.²⁶ Simultaneously, this phenomenon bonded colonies—north and south—on the altar of slavery and nervousness about African intentions.

To be sure, for the longest period it was the sugar colonies of the Caribbean that were the cash cow for London. In 1700, the average English person consumed five pounds of sugar per year. In 1850, the figure was thirty-five pounds. By value, sugar had become Britain’s

number- two import, after cotton. Poor people in England spent about 5% of their wages on sugar. Sugar planters, as a result, became fabulously wealthy and influential in London itself, as William Beckford—whose fortune was centered in Jamaica—became Lord Mayor of this sprawling metropolis, only to be mocked as “Negro whipping Beckford.”²⁷

Yet, because the gain was so potentially stupefying, this dirty business bred conflict among the European powers almost effortlessly, igniting piracy and privateering—all of which, as we shall see, allowed Africans to tip the balance against one of these powers, which in most cases meant disfavoring London and its colonies. In a like fashion, the gargantuan wealth generated by trade in human commodities fed conflict between London and the colonies over taxes and who should pay— importers or exporters—not to mention clashes between insurers and merchants over losses at sea or the much-dreaded shipboard insurrections. At a certain point, some colonists may have wondered if deluging the mainland with Africans was part of a ploy by the metropolis to place in their backyard a force that could discipline—if not eliminate— them. Africans were victimized by this trade, but the clash of interests opened the door for their engaging in political arbitrage.

This influx of Africans also bailed out the colonial enterprise in another sense, for as the historian Colin G. Calloway has observed, “up until the end of the seventeenth century the British had feared for the survival of their infant American colonies.”²⁸ By 1698, the RAC was obliged to yield and rescued the colonial enterprise when so-called separate traders and private traders filled the breach with slave-trade profits—and filled their pockets with filthy lucre, many of them enabled to climb the class ladder to esteemed merchant status. Thus, in the fifteen years prior to 1698, slavers transported close to fifty-five hundred enslaved Africans to the North American mainland, and in the fifteen years after, the figure increased dramatically to more than fifteen thousand. The heralded reforms flowing in the aftermath of 1688 were as important to slave-trade escalation as the reforms of 1832 were to slave emancipation.²⁹ Finally, in 1750, London declared the trade to Africa to be even more free and open, which sent a cascade of Africans across the Atlantic to the mainland, with wide consequences hardly envisioned at the time.³⁰

This enormous influx of Africans laid the foundation for the concomitant growth of capitalism. The advent of this system has been seen widely and schematically as a leap forward from the strictures of feudalism and, therefore, a great leap forward for humanity as a whole.³¹ Nonetheless, this trade did not signal progress for Africans, as their continent was besieged by “separate traders” with the demented energy of crazed bees. It was an early example of the immense profit and productivity (and devastation) that accompanied “free trade”—but this time in Africans. In fact, to the extent that 1776 led to the ossification of slavery and an increase in the illegal slave trade captained by U.S. nationals—particularly after 1808, when it was thought to have gone into desuetude—1776 marks a counterrevolution. ³² The de facto repudiation of “Somerset’s Case” on the mainland was an affirmation of the necessity of slavery, and this—at least for the Africans—meant a counter-revolution. This affirmation in turn made the explosion in 1861—a deepening of the “counter-revolution of slavery” and the continuously heightened denunciation of the import of “Somerset’s Case”—virtually inevitable. Such was the onrushing momentum, the electrifying intensity, of this powerful counter-revolution that—arguably— it continues today, albeit in a different form.³³

Inexorably, the process of brutal and hurried enslavement generated an opposing and fierce resistance. Reports of various plots and conspiracies by the enslaved were rising sharply in the years preceding 1776.³⁴ What was at play was a crisis of rapid change: when the pace, force, and pressure of events increase sharply in a frenzied manner, making pervasive ruptures veritably unavoidable. The enormous influx of Africans— and the settlers’

intoxication with the wealth they produced—meant that more “whites” had to be attracted to the continent to countervail the ferocity of the fettered labor force, and ultimately, an expanded set of rights for these European migrants, along with land seized from the indigenous, was critical in enticing them.

The unforgiving racial ratios in the Caribbean basically determined that slave rebellions would be more concentrated and riotous there; yet this placed London in a vise, for—as noted—there were growing reservations about focusing investment in North America given that region’s growing competitiveness, while militant Africans were driving settlers away from the Caribbean, precisely to North America. Yet this brought London no surcease since the arrivals of these enterprising individuals in North America brought as well those who had experienced the fright of riotous Africans. It was in early 1736 that a conspiracy was exposed in Antigua for the enslaved to liquidate the European settlers—according to the authorities, “all the white inhabitants of this island were to be murdered and a new form of government to be established by the slaves among themselves,” as they were determined to “possess the island . . . entirely.”³⁵ This was preceded by yet another “horrid” plot that was exposed in early 1729, in which the enslaved were determined to “cutt off every white inhabitant” of Antigua.³⁶

Eliza Lucas, the daughter of the lieutenant governor of Antigua, promptly migrated to South Carolina, where she became the spouse of Charles Pinckney, a leader of this colony, and their sons became leaders of the revolt against London. Unsurprisingly, she found “Carolina greatly preferable to the West Indies”—though by March 1741 she was anxiety ridden once more as Charleston, she thought, was to be “destroyed by fire and sword to be executed by the Negroes before the first day of next month.”³⁷ Then, as some of these colonists fled northward, they brought with them enslaved Africans well aware that their oppressors were vulnerable, which was not the kind of insight conducive to stability in the mainland colonies. Among these was the influential Isaac Royall, who by 1737, it was said, had arrived in Massachusetts with “a Parcel of Negroes designed for his own Use” and a willingness to “pay the Duty of Impost” in a province where—as elsewhere—nervousness about the growing presence of enslaved Africans was growing.³⁸ Then there was Josiah Martin, the final colonial governor in North Carolina, who outraged fellow settlers in the immediate prelude to 1776 by allegedly threatening to free and unleash Africans against rebels: he too had roots in Antigua and, thus, had reason to possess a healthy regard for the fighting spirit of Africans and their own desire for domination—a point that may have occurred to residents of what became the Tarheel State.³⁹

As settlers fled from the Caribbean to the mainland of North America, they brought with them nerve-jangling experiences with Africans that hardened their support of slavery—just as abolitionism was arising in London. But the point was that rebellious Africans were causing Europeans to flee the Caribbean for the mainland, as the productive forces in the latter were already burgeoning: the following pages will reveal that slave resistance in the Caribbean too merits consideration when contemplating the origins of the U.S.

Thus, in 1750, fifty thousand more Africans lived in the islands than on the mainland, but as 1776 approached, thirty thousand more Africans lived on the mainland than on the islands. Likewise, in 1680, almost nine out of ten Africans under London’s jurisdiction in the Americas lived in the Caribbean, and half resided on the small island of Barbados, while the Negro population on the mainland was relatively small.⁴⁰ This rapid transition to the mainland by 1750 reflected many forces—particularly investors betting on the mainland more than the islands, as Africans had inflamed these small territories. But this transition occurred as restiveness was growing on the mainland about the nature of colonial rule.

The mainland and the metropolis were approaching confrontation for another reason: abolitionism was rising in London not least because Britain was becoming increasingly dependent on African soldiers and sailors: it was not easy to enslave those of this important category of workers, particularly when they carried weapons. One observer detected “twelve ‘black moore’ sailors serving in one of the King’s ships at Bristol in 1645, nor was it unknown that black body-servants to rise into battle alongside their Roundhead or Cavalier masters”; some of these men “whose presence was recorded on Civil War battlefields may well have been born in these islands.”⁴¹ The Civil War in which these Africans participated and the fractiousness of English, then British, politics virtually preordained that various island factions would seek the support of Africans— notably as their numbers escalated in the 18th century.

Moreover, a number of Irishmen, quite dissatisfied with London, often sought succor with the Crown’s most obstinate foes, providing further impetus for reliance on Africans. Strikingly, in early 1748 in South Carolina, a plot of the enslaved was uncovered to liquidate European settlement, which was said to be assisted by an Irishman, Lawrence Kelley.⁴² In the run-up to 1776, there were numerous Irish soldiers of fortune who had thrown in their lot with His Catholic Majesty in Spain, including Alejandro O’Reilly, Spain’s chief representative in New Orleans, and General Richard Wall, who served in the post of “Spanish Secretary of State.” The powerful O’Reilly was deemed to be the most respected figure in the military of Spain.⁴³

Many Scots were similarly unhappy—a discontent that has yet to disappear. ⁴⁴ The Act of Union, formally consolidating Scotland’s role in the United Kingdom, came only in 1707. There were two massive uprisings— 1715 and 1745—that had a particular resonance in the Highlands, where resistance was the strongest, which happened to be a point of departure for numerous migrants to North America. Some of these migrations were involuntary, as prisoners of war were shipped en masse to the colonies, many of whom arrived in no mood to compromise with London and eager for revenge.⁴⁵ Satisfying the needs of these migrants often meant massive land grants to them in the colonies,⁴⁶ necessitating either enslaved Africans to work the land or armed Africans offshore to protect them from attack, goals at cross-purposes leading to strains in the colonial project.

Thus, in early 1776, Arthur Lee of Virginia was gleeful, as he reported from London. The “Irish troops go with infinite resistance” to North America, he averred, and “strong guards are obliged to be kept upon the transports to keep them from deserting wholesale. The Germans too, I am well informed, are almost mutinous.” London, he said, “found it impossible to recruit in England, Ireland or Scotland, though the leading people of the last are [to] a man almost violently against America.”⁴⁷ The presumed unreliability of the Irish and Scots facilitated London’s increased reliance on African soldiers and sailors.

Yet the sight of armed Africans was quite unsettling to the settlers. It was in 1768 that Bostonians were treated to the sight of Afro-Caribbean drummers of the 29th Regiment actually punishing their fellow “white” soldiers. In the heart of Boston Commons, these Negroes whipped about ten alleged miscreants for various misdeeds. One can only imagine how such a sight would have been received in Carolina, though such displays gave resonance to the growing perception that London would move to free the enslaved, arm them, and then squash colonies already perceived as a growing rival. It was also in Boston in 1768 that John Hancock and other eminent petitioners accused the redcoats of encouraging slaves to “cut their masters’ throats and to beat, insult and otherwise ill treat said masters”; it was felt that with the arrival of more redcoats, the Africans surmised they would soon “be free [and] the Liberty Boys slaves.”⁴⁸

It was not only the British who felt compelled to place weapons in the arms of Africans. It was in 1766 that Louisiana's governor, Etienne Boucher Perier de Salvert, asserted that since "soldiers fled at the first flash of the Indian gun," it "would be much better to trust Negroes on the battle-field and use them as soldiers . . . because they, at least, were brave men."⁴⁹ Actually, the governor was an inadequate sociologist, for what drove the indomitable courage of Africans was the perception that, if captured, they could easily wind up in slavery, while their European counterparts—alternatively—had numerous options available, including becoming property owners stocked precisely with the enslaved.

London felt compelled to rely upon Negro soldiers and sailors, as the colonists came to rely upon Negro slaves: this was becoming an unbridgeable chasm. The Crown—the sovereign in both London and the colonies—had created a highly combustible political volcano. This instability was also propelled by another contradiction that the Crown helped to create: the model in the "Mother Country" was based upon a certain privilege for the English, as against the Irish and Scots. In contrast, the colonies—desperate for men and women defined as "white" to counter the fearsome presence of Africans in the prelude to 1776—could empower the Irish and Scots and provide them with more opportunity. All this was occurring as economic conflicts brewed in the trans-Atlantic relationship. Ultimately, the mainland model based on "racial" privilege overwhelmed the London model based on "ethnic" privilege. London's "ethnic" approach implicitly—at times explicitly—sacrificed the interests of Irish and Scots and Welsh (and even the English of certain class backgrounds) and made up for the shortfall by seeking to attract Africans to the banner, a policy propelled not least by competition with Madrid. But such a policy could only alienate mainland settlers, driving them toward a unilateral declaration of independence on 4 July 1776.

One espies part of this trend unfolding in the Chesapeake during this tumultuous era. Beginning in the 1680s and stretching until at least 1720, there was a decided shift from the use of servants to the use of slaves; as the population of the latter increased at twice the rate of the Europeanderived population, instability increased. But for present purposes, note that the term "white"—the vector of a potently rising identity politics still operative centuries later—only began to supplant "Christian" and "free" as favored designations in the 1690s, as the monopoly of the Royal African Company eroded and "separate" and "private" traders began descending in droves on Africa, providing the human capital for economic expansion.⁵⁰ In short, the privilege of "whiteness" was based heavily upon the increased presence of Africans, but since mainlanders were coming to suspect that London would deploy the Negroes against them—or, at least, had a more expansive view of their deployment than settlers—this meant that independence in 1776 was tied up with complicated, even fearful, sentiments about humans designated as slaves. This expansion in the colonies fueled by enslavement of Africans then undergirded the conflict with London that erupted in 1776.

Unfortunately for London and its energetic North American colonies, there were other forces that had a vote on their future. In retrospect, it seems appropriate that the Spanish term for "Blacks"—that is, "Negros"—invaded the English language almost as effortlessly as the bronze troops of His Catholic Majesty invaded the territory ostensibly controlled by London. For as early as 1555, Madrid was deploying in the Americas attacking forces heavily composed of Africans, and by 1574 in Havana the darkest of us all had their own militias under African command. ⁵¹ Thus, as Africans began flooding into North America, forced to endure the most heinous of circumstances, this prepared a delicate recipe for the exquisite taste of Spain, which wished to reverse London's gains. It was in mid-1742, as London and Spain were at war once more, that Madrid's man in Havana barked out blunt orders: "after taking possession of Port Royal [South Carolina], it will be proper to send out Negroes of all

languages (some of which [should] accompany the militia of this place for this very purpose) to convoke the slaves of the English in the plantations round about, and offer . . . in the name of our King, liberty, if they will deliver themselves up of their own accord and to say that the lands will be assigned them in the territories of Florida, which they may cultivate and use themselves as owners, under the direction and laws of the Kingdom of Spain.”⁵² In the long run, enslaved Africans in the British colonies—and then the early U.S. itself—may have absorbed Iberian notions about the relation between slavery and freedom, notably the seditious notion that freedom was a permissible goal for a slave.⁵³

The threat from Spanish Florida led directly to the creation of London’s colony in Georgia. A motive force for the founding in 1733 was to forge a “white” buffer—where African slavery was to be barred— between South Carolina, which labored anxiously with a Negro majority, and Spanish Florida, from whence armed Africans continually probed. Establishing Georgia evidently did not hamper unduly Madrid’s plans, particularly when a few years after the founding, South Carolina endured the Stono revolt, the bloodiest in the history of colonial North America, in which—it appears—Spain played a starring role. Thus, it was also in mid-1742 that the founding father of Georgia, James Oglethorpe, confessed disconsolately that the devilish “Spaniards” had “fomented” a “mutinous temper at Savannah,” and, as a result, the “destruction of that place was but part of their scheme for raising a general disturbance through all North America. Their correspondence [with] the Negroes too fatally manifested itself in the fire at New York & Cha Town [Charleston] & the insurrection of the Negroes in Carolina.”⁵⁴

These were not Oglethorpe’s views alone. The idea was growing that the South Carolina, then Georgia, border separating British from Spanish soil was the soft underbelly, the Achilles’ heel of London’s mainland colonial project that could push the Union Jack back to the Canadian border. It was in mid-1741 that an official investigation poking through the debris of the September 1739 Stono uprising by the enslaved, which led to buckets of blood being shed by Carolina colonists (more than two dozen were slaughtered), observed that these Africans “would not have made this insurrection had they not depended” on Florida “as a place of reception afterwards”—this was “very certain and that the Spaniards had a hand in prompting them to this particular action, there was but little room to doubt” (emphasis original); for the previous July, a Spanish official in Florida arrived in Charleston with about 30 aides, “one of which was a Negro that spoke English very well.” This arrival was “under the pretence of delivering a letter” to Oglethorpe, though it must have been known that he did not reside there. It was feared that this Negro was tasked to incite Carolina Africans.⁵⁵

Oglethorpe thought he knew why Madrid relied so heavily on armed Africans, and inexorably, given the intensity of religiosity, the reason was to be found in Catholicism. Madrid and Paris, he stressed, contained “one hundred thousand *Cloyster’d Females*, not permitted to *propagate* their Species and the Number of Males in a State of *Celibacy* is still abundantly greater”—besides, “a considerable part of their great Armies” tended to “resolve against Marriage,” meaning a birth dearth that could only be resolved by a more dedicated inclusion of Africans that Protestant London abjured.⁵⁶ If Oglethorpe had paid closer attention to Iberian politics, he might have noticed that—like Scotland—Catalonia, which included Barcelona, was not wholly reconciled to being administered by Madrid. It was on 11 September 2012 that an estimated 1.5 million Catalonians called for more autonomy for this region, which contained a population of about 7.5 million: it was on that date in 1714 at the end of the War of Spanish Succession that the Bourbon monarchy suppressed regional institutions.⁵⁷ Madrid’s reliance upon Africans in the Americas may have seemed less risky than reliance upon men with roots in Catalonia.

Ultimately the clash between London and Madrid at the South Carolina– Georgia–Florida border in the 1740s proved decisive for the future of what was to become the U.S., on the same level as the better-known conclusion of the Seven Years’ War in 1763; yet this former struggle (even more than what befell Quebec) had the enslavement of Africans at its throbbing heart.⁵⁸ Moreover, after the 1740s, Georgia’s role as a “white” equivalent of the Berlin Wall rapidly crumbled, bringing more Africans to the mainland and, thus, increasing the anxieties of mainland settlers.

There was a kind of “arms race” that ensnared London and Madrid involving competition for the often angry affections of Negroes. London, with a developing empire and a relatively small population, could hardly ignore Africans. London’s negotiations in the 1730s with Jamaican Maroons suggested that the Crown recognized early on the value of an entente with Africans. In this contest, London was at a blunt disadvantage, not least since its blustering mainland colonies had opted for a development model based on the mass enslavement of Africans and the reluctance to build an “escape hatch” for free Africans. The very name St. Augustine, Florida, sent a frisson of apprehension coursing down the spines of the British, particularly after it became a citadel where armed Africans were known to reside. By the late 1720s, British subjects returning to Carolina battered and bruised from captivity in Florida told spine-shaking tales of Africans (and the indigenous) selling British scalps for thirty Spanish pieces-of-eight.⁵⁹ Unfortunately for the settlers, it was not only Carolina that was terrified by the dual prospects of internal revolt and external invasion, particularly from Spanish Florida, for this dual nightmare was a frequent topic of discussion in Virginia at the highest level.⁶⁰

Moreover, London was administering an over-stretched empire, which too necessitated the employment of more Africans. By 1757, after a battle with Bengal’s Muslim viceroy, the East India Company found itself in possession of a territory three times larger than England. Less than a decade later, the company had successfully undermined the ruler of Awadh, the largest of the Mughal Empire’s provinces.⁶¹ Yes, the “distraction” of India benefited the North American rebels—but it also underscored the importance of Africans as a military force in the Americas.

London probably undermined its cause with the mainland colonists during the all-important siege of Havana in 1762. There was conscription in North America for this campaign, which admittedly was designed in no small part to ease Spanish pressure on the Carolinas and Georgia—though these settlers thought their time could have been better spent subduing the indigenous and the land they controlled. But then London’s commanders were instructed that the “corps of Negroes to be raised in Jamaica” for this battle “should have an equal share in all booty gained from the enemy in common with his regular troops”: this only served to add heft to the gnawing feeling on the mainland that settlers were being treated like Africans—which, in their argot, meant being treated like slaves.⁶²

Britain finally ousted the Spanish from rule in St. Augustine in 1763— though the future Sunshine State continued to be the dog that didn’t bark, since it was the “fourteenth” colony that did not revolt in 1776, perhaps because Africans continued to play a martial role there and like most Africans were not enthusiastic about a settlers’ revolt that augured an ossification of slavery; strikingly, Africans also fled en masse as London took the reins of power.⁶³ Interestingly, in 1776, Governor Patrick Tonyn, in what was then British East Florida, created four black militia companies to join in defense of the province—mostly with success—designed to foil attacks from Georgia, which these companies then proceeded to attack.⁶⁴

In summary, the post-1688 tumult brought London mixed blessings. Surely, the enhanced slave trade it augured lined the pockets of numerous merchants in Bristol and Liverpool—but in Rhode Island too, which instigated dreams of independence. This tumult delivered more Africans to the hemisphere who were not immune to the seductive appeals of Madrid. This tumult also brought more Negro insurrectionists who helped to spur an abolitionist movement that served to create a gulf between London and its increasingly obstreperous colonies.

These Africans played a pivotal role in spurring once proud British subjects to revolt against the Crown, thanks to the final colonial governor in Virginia, Lord Dunmore: he was viewed as a villain by the rebels, particularly after his notorious November 1775 decree to free and arm enslaved Africans in order to squash the anti-colonial revolt. Dispatched to bolster his deteriorating rule were 160 men from the 14th Regiment at St. Augustine.⁶⁵

But often forgotten when Dunmore is invoked is the run-up to November 1775, when rebellious Africans had sought to eliminate settlements, leading some colonists to feel that the world could be upended and they could assume a status below that of vassals. Thus, the threat of Negro revolt was magnified in the desperation driven by the Yamasee War, featuring the indigenous rampaging against settlers, which led to the arming of Africans in South Carolina in 1715. In other words, in addition to competing European powers—for example, Spain—allying with Africans, settlers also had to worry about slaves bolstering revolts of the indigenous. Engaged typically in dickering and arbitrage, simultaneously Africans were also negotiating with and cooperating with raiding parties by the indigenous. In some instances, they even entered into formal alliances with the indigenous and commenced their own unilateral wars against the colony. “There must be great caution,” several planters warned, “lest our slaves when arm’d might become our masters.” This was the profoundly significant fear that hovered like a dark cloud over the colonial project, a fear London unwittingly ignited into raging fever as 1776 approached with its tentative steps toward abolition while arming and deploying African soldiers in the colonies.⁶⁶

Besieged by Africans, the indigenous, and European powers alike, mainland settlers found their options narrowing. Creating a buffer class of “free” Africans was a potential alternative to what appeared to be impending disaster. Indelicately, Governor William Gooch of Virginia had to explain in 1736 why such policies were inappropriate for his province. Why pass a law, he was asked, “depriving free Negroes & Mulattos of the privilege of voting at any Election of Burgesses . . . or at any other elections”? Well, he huffed, recently there was a “conspiracy discovered among the Negroes to Cutt off the English, wherein the free Negroes and Mulattos were much suspected to have been concerned (which will forever be the case).” Indeed, he continued, “such was the insolence of the Free Negroes at that time, that the next assembly thought it necessary . . . to fix a perpetual Brand upon Free Negroes & Mulattos by excluding them from that great privilege of a Freeman, well knowing they always did and, every will, adhere to and favour the Slaves.”⁶⁷

Mainland settlers railed against overtures to Africans while they made overtures to London’s staunchest foes. In early 1751, London was informed that mainland settlers were involved in a “clandestine trade” “with the French, Dutch and Danes” that was such a “success” that now these devious merchants were seeking to “introduce foreign sugar into Great Britain” itself, along with “great quantities of foreign rum into Ireland . . . as well as into Halifax.” In turn, mainlanders were bringing to North America “all kinds of French and Dutch merchandise directly interfering with those of Great Britain.” This was causing “irreparable injury to the commerce and manufactures of the Mother Country and to the great increase and strength and riches of [Britain’s] most dangerous rivals,” leading inexorably to “impending ruin . . . falling upon Great Britain.”⁶⁸ In 1756, London railed against “an illegal trade” that had “been carried out between [British] plantations and the French settlements.”⁶⁹

Indeed, mainland trade with Hispaniola was so sizeable, particularly with regard to trade implicating slavery and the slave trade, that it may have contributed to the demographic racial imbalance leading directly to the vaunted Haitian Revolution, 1791–1804, meaning these mainland settlers were active agents in two of the major developments of the past few centuries. In 1762, British officer Jeffrey Amherst complained that “some of the merchants on this Continent, particularly those of Pennsylvania and New York, were entering into Schemes for supplying the Havannah [Cuba] with provisions.” In August 1776, the British seafarer James Stokes, who had just arrived on the French-controlled Hispaniola, noticed armed North American vessels loading arms and ammunition, presumably for the anti-colonial revolt.⁷⁰

Thus, even before 1756—or 1763—these settlers, apparently unable to resist the stupendous profits emerging from an ascending slave-driven capitalism, were busily cutting various deals with their erstwhile opponents, particularly the French, even though London repeatedly warned that this was jeopardizing British interests. The settlers had good reason to believe that if they cut a deal with Madrid and Paris against British interests, they would emerge as the eventual winners. In other words, from 1756 to 1763, London fought an expensive and largely successful war against Paris and Madrid to oust the latter two from a good deal of North America to the benefit of the colonists, then sought to raise taxes to pay for this gigantic venture—only to have the settlers go behind the back of London and conspire with Spain and France against Britain. Yet even this gloss on the founding should not be allowed to downplay the role of Africans, for it was their conspiring with the Spaniards in Florida—in particular—which was a driving force behind the Seven Years’ War that contributed to London’s loss.

London had created an inherently unstable colonial project, based on mass enslavement of Africans—who could then be appealed to by Spanish neighbors and wreak havoc—and an inability to hedge against the fiasco that such a policy promised by building a buffer class of free Negroes and mulattoes. This conspicuous weakness drew London into a seemingly endless cycle of conflicts with Spain—and its frequent ally France—culminating in the so-called Seven Years’ War, 1756–1763. This proved to be a catastrophic victory for London, as in eroding these external threats to the colonies, it allowed the settlers to concentrate more of their ire on London itself, leading to the 1776 unilateral declaration of independence. That is to say, before 1763, mainland settlers were huddling in fear of Negro insurrection combined with foreign invasion, particularly from Spanish Florida or, possibly, French Canada; afterward, it appeared to a number of colonists—particularly as abolitionist sentiment grew in London—that Negro insurrection would be coupled with a throttling of the colonies by redcoats, many of them bearing an ebony hue. Minimally, a mainland settler deal with Madrid in particular could forestall the eventuality of another Stono, no small matter as reports of slave conspiracies rose in the years immediately preceding 1776. The threats to London’s interests were multiplying as some mainland settlers were busily conspiring with the Crown’s enemies.

London did not seem to realize that when the RAC monopoly eroded, set in motion were virtually unstoppable economic forces that would place stressing strain on mainland provinces, ultimately setting them adrift toward independence. The traditional narrative of the republic’s founding has emphasized insufficiently the amorality and trans-border ethos that came to define capitalism—which often was at odds with traditional notions of patriotism and even sovereignty. This trend was reflected in the earliest stages of the mainland revolt. Quite naturally, this dearth of patriotism also came to characterize Africans—the human capital which propelled this system—who had little interest in identifying their interest with that of their so-called masters.

Moreover, the settlers thought that London's special relationship with Africans had gone too far, to the point where they thought they had reason to fear that the Crown's sable arm would come down with a crash upon their heads. "Every slave might be reckoned a domestic enemy," according to Benjamin Franklin speaking almost two decades before 1776.⁷¹ Just before 4 July 1776, a fellow Philadelphian denounced London for "not only urging savages to invade the country, but instigating Negroes to murder their masters."⁷² The embodiment of colonial secession, George Washington, may have spent more time overseeing "his" enslaved Africans than he did supervising soldiers or government officials,⁷³ suggesting the importance of this troublesome property; by 1764, he owed one of his London creditors a still hefty eighteen hundred pounds sterling⁷⁴ and certainly had an incentive to both preserve his slave property and escape from the Crown which seemed to be calling it into question. John Adams, who earned handsome fees as legal counsel for slaveholders in cases against the enslaved, had little reason to disagree.⁷⁵ Ditto for John Hancock, whose large signature on the nascent republic's founding document was somehow appropriate since he was one of Boston's largest slave owners.⁷⁶ James Madison speculated in late 1774, "if America & Britain should come to an hostile rupture, I am afraid an Insurrection among Negroes may & will be promoted. In one of our Counties lately a few of those unhappy wretches met together & chose a leader who was to conduct them when the English Troops should arrive—which they foolishly thought would be very soon & that by revolting to them they should be rewarded with their freedom."⁷⁷

Prominent slaveholder—and anti-London rebel—Henry Laurens of South Carolina was told that just before the April 1775 confrontation at Lexington between the republicans and the Crown, the latter planned to instigate the enslaved to revolt to blunt the settlers' initiative. By 1774, he was reportedly convinced that if London had its way, "none but Slaves & his Officers and their Task Masters shall reside in America." He may have heard of the British subject of African descent David Margrett, who was in South Carolina in 1775 preaching about abolition.⁷⁸

As the tempting of fate by Margrett in Carolina suggested, there were strong hints from Britain that sensitive settlers may have found—in every sense—unsettling. As June 1772 approached, beating slaves was much less common in London than in the colonies. Increasingly, Londoners were beginning to see slavery and slaveholders as an American phenomenon that sophisticated metropolitans disdained as uncivilized—partly because that was the view propounded by the growing number of Africans (perhaps fifteen thousand) in British streets in the 1770s; that the colonists were prating about liberty while enforcing a draconian enslavement tended to induce an adamantly defensive response among Londoners, who began to castigate the settlers as tyrants themselves.⁷⁹

Wittingly or not, reform proposals by London only served to incite the settlers even more, particularly those who were bent on imposing a model of development based on mass enslavement of Africans. In 1775, a leading British official proposed that London was willing to return to the status quo ante of 1763 with regard to taxes and the like if the settlers would concur with the notion that slavery was a "vice" that was "contrary to the law of God" and, thus, "every slave in North America should be entitled to his trial by jury in all criminal cases . . . as a foundation to extirpate slavery from the face of earth"; with a flourish, it was added, "let the only contention hence forward between Great Britain and America be, which shall exceed the other in zeal for establishing the fundamental rights of liberty to all mankind." Settlers may have thought that this official was either daft or engaged in a dangerous provocation, but in any case, this was not the kind of proposal designed to attract the sincere attention of rebels, many of whom had invested fortunes in slavery and the slave trade.⁸⁰ London appeared to present a clear and present danger to the lives and fortunes of settlers.

The decision to rebel, though festooned in the finery of freedom, wound up depriving a countless number of Africans of the liberty that the 1776 revolt has been thought to have provided.

* * *

As the 21st century proceeds, one point is evident: the heroic creation myth of the founding of the U.S. is desperately in need of revisiting. In November 1965, in remarks that escaped attention for the most part, Ian Smith—the leader of the newly founded racist republic that was Rhodesia (which became Zimbabwe in 1980)—argued that his Unilateral Declaration of Independence was a replay of 1776: he and his comrades were seeking to escape the logic of decolonization, just as 1776 sought to escape the logic of slavery's abolition.⁸¹ Smith had a coarse disregard for the aspirations of Africans, as did his counterparts in 1776. Contemporary observers should note that Smith had as much success in “integrating” Africans successfully into his ill-fated republic as did his North American counterparts in the aftermath of 1776. Smith was defeated and, justifiably, has passed into the ignominy of history. The rebels of 1776 were victorious and have been hailed widely ever since, suggesting that there is something to be said for winning in the shaping of history's judgment of a rebellion.

A few years before Smith's telling remarks, Blas Roca, a leader of what became the Communist Party in Cuba, then in a desperate confrontation with Washington, asked a question not often posed in Washington: why, he asked, was the plight of Negroes in the U.S. probably worse than that of any other group of Africans in the hemisphere?⁸²

Roca's plaint reflected the point that unlike in Cuba, where the anti-colonial and anti-slavery struggles merged, in the person of Antonio Maceo,⁸³ or in Mexico, where an early leader was of African descent, Vicente Guerrero, ⁸⁴ in what became the U.S., there was a divergence between the struggle against London and the struggle for abolition—in fact, arguably these goals were at loggerheads. With Africans on the mainland standing largely at the side of London—and even more so after independence—it was inevitable that the path ahead for U.S. Negroes would be exceedingly rocky. Indeed, one of the more striking aspects of the anti-London struggle on the mainland was how often it merged with a “Black Scare” in the form of the imprecations tossed at Lord Dunmore and Governor Martin of North Carolina.

Well after 1776, it remained striking that white supremacists were quite clear and precise as to the identity of their *bête noire*. For example, it has become veritable folklore that in order to escape successfully the pincers of Jim Crow, Africans with deep roots in the U.S. often began speaking in French or Spanish so as to escape the damning accusation that they were descendants of mainland slaves,⁸⁵ a group not notorious in its celebration of 1776 and quite willing to align with the republic's foes in London thereafter.⁸⁶

Though historians have pointed in various directions in seeking to explicate what has befallen Africans on the mainland,⁸⁷ it is difficult to ignore the point that one central reason for this awful persecution has been the simple fact that this besieged group had their own ideas about the configuration of North America and that their conceptions often involved collaboration with the antagonists of Euro-American elites (be they indigenes, Madrid, or ultimately London). The Negro dalliance with London was then followed by various relationships with Mexico City,⁸⁸ Tokyo,⁸⁹ New Delhi,⁹⁰ and Moscow,⁹¹ in a repetitive pattern of seeking leverage abroad to overcome rapacity at home. However, it was not until the 1950s that Washington came to realize that, perhaps, easing racist oppression at home might serve to foil such dangerous diplomatic alliances—until then, such relations served partially to provide further grist for the oppressive mill. Nevertheless, today the continuing invidious

discrimination that undermines the descendants of enslaved Africans on the mainland⁹² stems in no small part from their historically consistent and staunch opposition to the capacious plans of slaveholding rebel—then republican—elites, which too often targeted these very same Africans.

This chapter began with a remarkable instance of opposition to a sacred principle of mainland settlers—slavery—which in June 1772 helped to ignite a new departure in our complex history. Part of the background suggesting how these Africans came to be in a London courtroom and how their audacity helped to ignite a republican revolt will unwind in the following pages.

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