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Valley Historian Involvement in 1776 Commission Is Shameful

FRESNO—Sometimes the greatest condemnation of someone is simply to repeat what they say.

On Jan. 18, one of the final acts of the Trump administration was to release an excerpt from its 1776 Commission, a report “presenting a definitive chronicle of the American founding, a powerful description of the effect the principles of the Declaration of Independence have had on this Nation’s history, and a dispositive rebuttal of reckless ‘re-education’ attempts that seek to reframe American history around the idea that the United States is not an exceptional country but an evil one.”

The sort of dangerous and fact-blind nationalism that follows can be inferred from that opening.

The Central Valley’s own Victor Davis Hanson, professor emeritus at Fresno State, is one of only two historians who contributed to the 1776 Commission report along with several Republican businesspeople, politicians and lawyers.

Hanson is a specialist in ancient Greek military history, but since the beginning of the George W. Bush administration has gained a national reputation as a conservative commentator on contemporary politics with numerous policy suggestions. The drawbacks of modeling modern policies on the slave labor and tribute-based war economies of classical Greece are readily apparent.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that this report Hanson helped craft was formulated as a direct denial of a critique against America’s own history of slavery. The 1776 Commission was created by Donald Trump as a response to the 1619 Project published by the *New York Times*.

The year 1619 refers to the date the first African slaves were shipped to the lands that would later become the United States, and the project seeks to increase understanding of this country’s development by presenting a perspective of its foundation on the economy of slave labor, in both the North and the South, and the countless political and social mechanisms required to sustain that violently exploitative system, of which many still linger.

However, the 1776 Commission does more than just try to whitewash America’s enduring legacy of subjecting people of African descent by trying to (falsely) claim sole credit for the abolitionist movement without taking blame for the institution.

In describing the history of the United States’ founding, not a single word is given to the Native American nations that lived on this continent before, during and after European colonization. Instead, the report describes Europeans “carving communities out of a vast, untamed wilderness.”

To describe the growth of the United States without mentioning the ethnic cleansings and periodic genocides that allowed most of its territory to be conquered is so historically blind that it is like describing the pyramids of Giza without ever mentioning Egypt.

The commission then wanders on to attacking today's Democratic Party. The report compares modern progressivism and Mussolini's fascism because both utilize "so-called experts."

It claims there are "uncanny similarities between 21st century activists of identity politics and 19th century apologists for slavery" because both say the United States was founded by and for White men, ignoring the fact that one faction claims this is bad and the other claims this is good.

It asserts that identifying the plights of marginalized groups is "as unjust as the old hierarchies of the antebellum South." And at times the text is simply stupefying, with one sentence saying the United States does not have a "body of civil servants" but instead has a "bureaucracy."

It is appalling that any professional historian would support this document, let alone have a hand in its creation. Unfortunately, Victor Davis Hanson has done both.

Conservatism inherently idolizes the past while progressivism seeks to build on top of it. The Republicans behind this 1776 Commission want people to admire the United States, but instead of trying to hold up virtuous aspirations they choose to try and push our sins down into the shadows, as if that will ensure they never happened. But they did happen. Many are still happening.

Our past was as a brutal country yet filled with noble people trying to escape into a brighter future. The only way we can improve our present is to examine the horrors that have come before. Only then can we know the true shape of the horrors we still live with and so devise the means to slay them. We cannot sink our nation on a foundation of lies.

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