

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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## *Book Review*

Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), xv + 219 pages, \$22.95.

CHRISTOPHER FLANNERY  
*Azusa Pacific University*

Students of political philosophy in America these days often have their attention turned more to the mysteries of the nocturnal council than to the counsels of their country. Thomas West's book is, among other things, an invitation for those ambitious to think for themselves about serious matters to return from texts to life. "The Great Books," as he says, "are indispensable preliminaries to real thinking, but the thinking itself must be about the world we live in if it is to be our own. . ." (p. x).

This book is the result of a kind of second sailing in West's own studies. West studied American things in Claremont with Martin Diamond and Harry Jaffa, vindicators of the Founders whose influence he gratefully acknowledges. But in graduate school and for years following graduate school he concentrated on Greek and German political philosophy. Then about fifteen years ago, he began to focus his attention on America and on the American Founding in particular. This new turn led to his current inquiries which, he discovered, call for "reflection that goes beyond the work of those who have preceded me in vindicating the Founders" (p. xiv). West writes in scholarly pursuit of the truth about the Founders, but the truths with which he is concerned have implications for "choices facing us today." He aspires to write in the vein of Jefferson, Thucydides, and Churchill, who in studying history were "loyal to the truth but not afraid to distinguish between justice and injustice, honor and villainy, greatness and degradation" (p. xv).

Against what and whom is Thomas West "Vindicating the Founders"? Against modern and contemporary authorities who either distort or misunderstand the Founders' ideas and the policies and institutions arising from them. These authorities include preeminent historians and political scientists of this century, Supreme Court justices, clerics, civil rights activists, and leading intellectuals of the left and the right (in particular, those intellectuals who are heirs of what West, following John Dewey, calls the "New Liberalism"). J. Allen Smith, Charles Beard, James MacGregor Burns, Gordon Wood, Forrest McDonald, Paul Finkelman, Thurgood Marshall, Ralph Abernathy, Cardinal Roger Mahoney, are a few among many. What do these authorities misunder-

stand or distort? A great deal! But, first of all, they mistake the meaning and implications of the most famous words in the American political tradition: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.” West responds to three contemporary orthodoxies about these famous and important words: that the founders did not believe that all human beings are created equal; that they believed this, but did not understand the implications of this idea as well as we do; and that they believed this and understood it full well, but weakly or hypocritically ignored it in their actions.

Anyone who teaches these subjects to college freshmen knows how widespread and deep rooted is the opinion that the founders did not mean and could not have meant “all human beings” when they wrote “all men” in America’s central political document. As a rule, a student graduates from high school confident in the knowledge that the Founders could not have meant “black men” because they held black slaves; they could not have meant “women” because women did not enjoy equal civil rights with men; they could not have meant “poor men” because there were property qualifications for voting in many of the states. If our student has had an oldfashioned teacher and textbook, he might be disposed condescendingly to excuse the Founders’ inhumanity as determined by economic self-interest or reflecting an “eighteenth-century mindset,” which we have long ago transcended. If the student has had a more up-to-date education, he will know that the Founders were merely racist, sexist, and elitist. In either case, the thought of the Founders was suffering from some debility that deprives it of any intrinsic merit in its own right. If we are to study the Founders, it is so that we can learn how narrow, prejudiced, unjust, outdated, or merely confused they were. It follows necessarily that the country they founded would partake of these attributes.

West sets out to demonstrate that informed and intelligent people will find many reasons to share what used to be a nearly universal American opinion: that the American Founding was great and noble and has much to teach us today. To accomplish this task, he must first dispel a determined falsehood that has achieved almost the status of gospel truth. To cite just a few of the evangelists:

Samuel Eliot Morison, *Oxford History of the American People* (a standard work reprinted many times since 1965): “Did Jefferson think of blacks when he wrote ‘all men are created equal’? His subsequent career indicates that he did not; that in his view blacks were not ‘men’” (pp. 2–3).

Gordon Wood (regarded as the most influential historian of the Founding period in the last thirty years): “What was radical about the Declaration in 1776? We know it did not mean that blacks and women were created equal to white men (although it would in time be used to justify those equalities too). It was radical in 1776 because it meant that all white men were equal” (p. 3).

Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall (in 1987): The “prevailing opinion of the framers” was that blacks were “so far inferior, that they had no rights

which the white man was bound to respect . . . and that the Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit” (p. 1).

Jefferson biographer Conor Cruise O’Brien (in 1996): “It is accepted that the words ‘all men are created equal’ do not, in their literal meaning, apply to women, and were not intended by the Founding Fathers (collectively) to apply to slaves” (p. 1).

John Garraty, *The Story of America* (an eighth-grade textbook): “By the first of his self-evident truths in the Declaration of Independence, . . . Jefferson certainly meant that *only free men were created equal*” (West’s emphasis, p. 4).

Ralph Abernathy (civil rights activist in the 1960s and 1970s): “The only logical conclusion that modern blacks can draw . . . is that their forefathers were not regarded as ‘men’ by the white founders of this country” (p. 19).

James MacGregor Burns (in a college American government textbook): “the Declaration . . . refers to ‘men’ or ‘him,’ not to women” (p. 73).

The first and most essential evidence to cite against these entrenched sophisms is Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration, demonstrating beyond any doubt that when the author of the Declaration of Independence wrote “all men,” he meant all human beings, certainly including all black men. In this draft, which Jefferson submitted to Congress, he explicitly denounced negro slavery as a violation of the rights of “human nature”:

He [the king of Britain] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights to life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. (Jefferson’s emphasis, p. 3)

But Jefferson is hardly alone; there is voluminous evidence of the Founders’ meaning. As Lincoln wrote, before the 1850s the historical record “may be searched in vain for one single affirmation, from one single man, that the Negro was not included in the Declaration of Independence” (p. 35). Many of today’s intellectuals wittingly and unwittingly trace their understanding of this point to the supporters of slavery of the 1830s to 1850s. West cites many other Founders to confirm the fact: Certainly all leading Founders meant all human beings (including nonwhites, women, the poor, and the unfree) when they reasoned about “all men” being equal; more than this, they understood with remarkable depth and clarity the many moral and political implications of this idea. It has taken a few generations of ideologically driven scholarship to obscure this incontrovertible truth. Patient recitation of the unanswerable evidence may in another generation or so bring the truth back into view.

In light of the truth, the task of understanding the Founders as they understood themselves begins to take interesting shape. What can it mean, believing

in and understanding equal natural rights as they did, that they held and continued to hold negro slaves? that many of them opposed black citizenship and political equality? that they supported and encouraged the unequal acquisition of property, even defending the unequal distribution arising from unjust conquest? that they permitted and justified property qualifications for voting? that they denied many political, economic, and professional opportunities to women? that they supported immigration restrictions based on race or national origin? West examines each of these questions, showing in each case how the Founders reasoned from their principles of equality and liberty, through the often complicated particulars, to moral judgments and political decisions. In each case, West compares the Founders' reasoning with the reasoning of modern and contemporary authorities. He takes particular pains to discover how the Founders thought on questions of race, gender, welfare, property rights, and immigration which so agitate the public mind today. Comparing the Founders' views with the views of the New Liberalism—and occasionally with current conservatism—on these issues, West invites us to consider how much moral progress we have made in the past two centuries.

West finds coherence in the New Liberalism which characterizes contemporary scholarly opinion. It is a coherence founded on a rejection of the old liberalism of the Founders. The Founders' liberalism viewed human rights and liberty as rooted in an unchanging human nature, whereas the New Liberalism, traceable through Hegel to Rousseau, views man as having no fixed nature, being essentially malleable (pp. 59–60). From the point of view of the New Liberalism, man is, so to speak, nothing without the state, and there is no natural limit to what the state might make of man, with enough resources and enough planning. West recognizes and takes advantage of the many contributions of modern scholarship to our understanding of the past, but he raises a genuine question for serious students. From whom do we have more to learn: Historians like Paul Finkelman, who urges us to regard Jefferson as having “committed ‘treason against the hopes of the world’ because he failed to do more to abolish slavery” (p. 175)? Or the likes of Abraham Lincoln, who urges: “All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression” (p. 175)? West is sure of his answer to this question, and he gives reasons for his assurance. They are reasons that inform what one of his teachers has called “the scholarship of the politics of freedom.”

West shows a decent respect to the opinions of the Founders; but this is by no means a slavish pietism; the founders themselves would despise that and consider it no foundation for self-government. In a manly spirit of reasonable

self-restraint and self-assertion, West would agree with Madison, who wrote in Federalist 14: “Is it not the glory of the people of America that, whilst they have paid a decent regard to the opinions of former times and other nations, they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule their own experience? To this manly spirit posterity will be indebted for the possession, and the world for the example, of the numerous innovations displayed on the American theater in favor of private rights and public happiness.”