



**THE FLAWED FOUNDING OF AMERICA:  
JAMESTOWN AND HERRENVOLK DEMOCRACY**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 02-22-07, p. A-9*

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The celebrations of Jamestown's 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary easily remind us of the problematic of a people being loyal to ideals and imagery that do not include or honor them; being in service to a system that simultaneously suppresses and seduces them with force, funds and false favors; and being apprehensive to assert their identity and interests as a people in a context and country that rightfully calls for and compels it. For Jamestown is considered by the ruling class and race of society the founding site of its emerging democracy. But it is also the founding site of the Native American and African Holocausts, the evolution of White supremacy and thus, the *herrenvolk* (master race) democracy we embrace as "unfair and unfinished" rather than engage it as unacceptable and in urgent need of radical restructuring.

This year's annual State of the Black Union (S.O.B.U.), hosted by Tavis Smiley and held at Hampton University was convened in the context of these celebrations of the Jamestown founding. But there was no solemn remembrance or serious discussion of the meaning of this site for us as a people and certainly no mention of the Native American. As I watched the S.O.B.U. broadcast and read an article on Jamestown by two of the panelists on the program, Atty. Stephanie Robinson of the think tank, The Jamestown Project, and Dr. Cornel West, Professor of Religion at Princeton University, I thought about the contradictory meaning of Jamestown and related issues. I thought about how the destiny of these three peoples: Native Americans, Africans and Europeans, intersected and offered an opportunity for mutually beneficial exchange, and how it led instead to full-fledged enslave-

ment and holocaust in the midst of hollow claims of democracy, freedom and justice for all.

I thought also how in the midst of the discourse and struggle for reparations for the Holocaust of enslavement and justice for Native Americans, the larger society would find various ways to avoid critical self-reflection and deny and delay the correctives necessary to achieve the just and good society some would have us believe we already have. And I thought how we as a people might consciously or unconsciously participate in this national acute denial and embrace the self-delusion of U.S. society as a land founded on freedom and conceived in justice without a hint of holocaust or genocide, or adequate engagement with the race, class and gender oppression that has defined it and the struggles to change it.

Robinson and West state in their article that at Jamestown "the promise of our founding ideals lived alongside slavery and racial domination." But the founding ideals didn't simply live alongside enslavement and racial domination; they included them as a normal and moral way to reason, rule and live. It is this fundamental contradiction of establishing and justifying enslavement and White racial domination in the midst of documents and discourse on "self-evident truths" about divinely endowed equality and inalienable human rights that lies at the heart of the "American dilemma" and self-delusion. It is also what defined U.S. society as a *herrenvolk* democracy like Greece, its model, with its ruling race/class and its enslaved and dominated others. And it is also the conceptual key to grasping how African Americans can understand and embrace both the American dream which King hopefully

imagined and the American nightmare which Malcolm insightfully exposed.

King, like Robinson and West, separates the high ideals from the gross ideals and practices which contradict America's self-congratulatory conception of itself. But Malcolm argues that what is seen as "high ideals" carry within them both hidden and expressed values and a vision which are a dream for White folks but a nightmare for Black people and other peoples of color.

Robinson and West ask the question, "what does it mean that a country so flawed in its founding nonetheless produces such an accomplished population of African Americans?" But it is not the country that has produced our achievements, but our people themselves, struggling hard, hopefully and heroically against the odds and obstacles placed in our path. And this demonstrates *our* agency, adaptive vitality and indomitable spirit.

They say that our success means "first, that when given the opportunity African Americans, like all Americans who work hard, who have talent, ambition and desire and who possess the complex values that make up the 'Protestant Ethic,' can make the most of the American Dream." But much of our success is not from opportunities "given", but from opportunities made and seized at critical moments.

And it is not the materialistic and individualistic Protestant ethic that undergirds or promises our success, but our own African ethic, rooted in the best values of our ancient, ongoing and varied spiritual and ethical traditions, and focused on mutual care and concern, common ground and shared work, responsibility and struggle for the good world we all want and deserve.

Finally, the whole idea of an American dream must be redefined in terms of its cultural basis and beneficiaries. Even King's dream is not the American dream at Jamestown or even Philadelphia. Indeed, we have imagined and brought into being with other oppressed and struggling peoples and progressive forces an America the founding fathers would neither recognize nor accept. So even though King called his an American dream, it was a proposal and project the majority did not share and will not countenance or concede without intense and uncompromising struggle.

Given this, many of those called middle class leadership have moved from confrontation to compromise, from active initiatives to passive solicitation of funds and favor and from the radical practice of a life in struggle to a relentless escape into a life of literature and public relations. But the masses respect and long for more insightful, assertive and Black-oriented leadership. This is the meaning of their sustained and repeated standing ovations for Dr. Julia Hare of the Black Think Tank who spoke with clarity, cogency and an uncompromising commitment to Black interests at the S.O.B.U. gathering.

Thus, if the gathering of leaders is to be more than a triumphant listing of successes of the middle class and a mournful litany of the lackings and liabilities of the masses, we must put forth a new shared vision and collective vocation of social justice and human good in society and the world. We must free ourselves from illusions, resume our role as a moral and social vanguard, rebuild the Movement, and struggle to expand the realm of human freedom and flourishing in this land of pleasant dreams, Katrina nightmares, and comfortable spaces in which to escape and imagine otherwise.