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OPINION

No Defending Slavery by Founding Fathers

A tour guide's faulty justification

BY SARAH BROWNING

This summer, on the very day that white supremacists rioted in Charlottesville, Va., I was down the road visiting Montpelier — the home of James Madison, our fourth president.

On the house tour, we stopped in Madison's upstairs library, where he spent hundreds of hours reading about earlier attempts at self-governance.

There, he imagined the previously unimaginable: freedom of religion, freedom of expression, the right to a jury of one's peers. Madison would go on to write those amendments into the Constitution, earning him the name "Father of the Bill of Rights."



As we stepped outside to Montpelier's beautiful grounds, we learned something else: To keep his small family of four white people in the height of 18th century luxury, James Madison enslaved 100 black people.

Indeed, Montpelier now has an Enslaved Community Exhibit and tour. I was eager to see how these two Madisons were being interpreted: the man who conceived unimaginable freedoms for himself and his kind, while simultaneously denying freedom to countless others.

The Enslaved Community Exhibit is powerful: historians, archeologists, and descendants have worked hard to document the lives of the hundreds of African Americans enslaved at Montpelier over the years.

Artifacts of their lives are on

display, and hundreds of their names are painted on the exhibit walls. Videos recreate the story of enslaved people who tried to escape and were recaptured and imprisoned.

Then I took the tour.

The white guide began to explain why James Madison didn't free any of the people he enslaved when he died. "James Madison was a practical man," the guide said. "He knew that they would not be welcomed into the deeply prejudiced society of the time."

I tried to give the man a way out. "Perhaps this is what Madison told himself so he could sleep at night. But if he'd asked any of the people he enslaved, I'm sure they would've preferred freedom."

"No, no," the guide continued, "slave states required that freed men and women leave the state within a year. Even the North wasn't welcoming. ... They

would've had to go all the way to Canada."

Canada? Would that really have been worse than slavery?

When I wrote to the Montpelier administration afterward expressing my outrage that their staff would justify slavery on any grounds, the reply included this information: "A visitor to Montpelier in 1835 noted that [Madison] 'talked more on the subject of slavery than on any other, acknowledging, without limitation or hesitation, all the evils with which it has ever been charged.'"

My correspondent then explained that Madison's solution was support for the American Colonization Society, which proposed — and implemented — the outrageous scheme of sending African Americans to West Africa, to what's now Liberia.

In other words, though Madison could imagine a brand new form of government, he couldn't

imagine living a more modest lifestyle, side by side with people whose skin was a different color from his own.

Let's pause a moment and consider the possibility: What if James Madison — and the other most powerful men of his time — had declared publicly, as apparently they did at home, the evils of slavery? What if the original Bill of Rights had ended slavery outright?

It seems shocking, I know. But in 1789, so did freedom of religion.

What if we were the new revolutionaries, and dedicated ourselves to building a society that truly enacted the promise James Madison imagined — for all our people?

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An Independent Thinker's Guide to the Tax Debate

There's a heist coming; arm up with the facts

BY CHUCK COLLINS

For 40 years, tax cutters in Congress have told us, "We have a tax cut for you." And each time, they count on us to suspend all judgment.



In exchange, we've gotten staggering inequality, collapsing public infrastructure, a fraying safety net, and exploding deficits. Meanwhile, a small segment of the richest one tenth of 1 percent have become fabulously wealthy at the expense of everyone else.

Ready for more?

Now, Trump and congressional Republicans have rolled out a tax plan that the independent Tax Policy Center estimates will give 80 percent of the benefits to the richest 1 percent of taxpayers.

The good news is the majority aren't falling for it this time around. Recent polls indicate that over 62 percent of the public oppose additional tax cuts for the wealthy and 65 percent are against additional tax cuts to large corporations.

Here's the independent thinker's guide to the tax debate for

people who aspire to be guided by facts, not magical thinking. When you hear congressional leaders utter these claims, take a closer look.

"Corporate tax cuts create jobs."

You'll hear that the U.S. has the "highest corporate taxes in the world." While the legal rate is 35 percent, the effective rate — the percentage of income actually paid — is closer to 15 percent, thanks to loopholes and other deductions.

The Wall Street corporations pulling out their big lobbying guns have a lot of experience with lowering their tax bills this way, but they don't use the extra cash to create jobs.

The evidence, as my Institute for Policy Studies colleague Sarah Anderson found, is that they more often buy back their stock, give their CEOs a massive bonus, pay their shareholders a dividend, and lay off workers.

"Bringing back offshore profits will create jobs."

Enormously profitable corporations like Apple, Pfizer, and General Electric have an estimated \$2.64 trillion in taxable income stashed offshore. Republicans like to say that if we give them a tax amnesty, they'll bring this money home and create jobs.

Any parent understands the folly of rewarding bad behavior. Yet

that's what we're being asked to do.

When Congress passed a "repatriation tax holiday" in 2004, these same companies gave raises to their CEOs, raised dividends, bought back their stock, and — you guessed it — laid off workers. The biggest 15 corporations that got the amnesty brought back \$150 billion while cutting their U.S. workforces by 21,000 between 2004 and 2007.

For decades now, those big corporations have made middle class taxpayers and small businesses pick up the slack for funding care for veterans, public infrastructure, cyber security, and hurricane mop-ups. Let's not give them another tax break for their trouble.

"Tax cuts pay for themselves."

Members of Congress who consider themselves hard-nosed deficit hawks when it comes to helping hurricane victims or increasing college aid for middle class families are quick to suspend basic principles of math when it comes to tax cuts for the rich.

The long discredited theory of "trickledown economics" — the idea that tax cuts for the 1 percent will create sufficient economic growth to pay for themselves — is rising up like zombies at Halloween. As the economist Ha Joon Chang observed, "Once you realize that trickle-down economics does not work, you will see the excessive tax cuts for the rich as what they are — a simple upward redistribution of income."

"Abolishing the estate tax will help ordinary people."

This is the biggest whopper of them all. The estate tax is only paid by families with wealth starting at \$11 million and individuals with \$5.5 million and up. There is no credible economic argument that this will have any positive impact on the economy, but it would be a huge boon for billionaire families like the Trumps.

This tax cut plan is an unprecedented money grab. Whether the heist happens, is entirely up to the rest of us.

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