

## July 2020 Entry (on pragmatic history)

From Amapour & Company, June 26, 2020, [“How Could a Slaveholder Write ‘All Men Are Created Equal’?”](#)

[Jon Meacham, Vanderbilt University](#): “The way I’ve decided this, because I have written about incredibly flawed people – Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Jefferson – you know these were people who have significant, significant moral failings that were not just moral failings, that were massive political ones and they contributed to the most deleterious chapters of our national story. But my view is that you can’t then just banish those people from the public sphere or push them off to the side, because that lets the rest of us off the hook. These were political people, these were makers of manners and morals, but they were also mirrors of manners and morals.

And so, when you talk about Andrew Jackson, many, many Americans who are feeling awfully self-righteous about Andrew Jackson are living on land that his actions brought into the presiding regime sphere of influence. And what we have to do, I think, is not look up at them mindlessly and celebrate them, but we shouldn’t look down on them condescendingly either, but look them in the eye, see what we can learn, and apply those lessons – the moral utility of history in my view is if the best people in the public lives of the nation in the past could get stuff so horribly wrong, what are we getting so horribly wrong right now?”

[Annette Gordon-Reed, Harvard Law School](#): “That’s the thing that I talk to my students about quite a bit. What are the things today that people 100 years from now will look back and say, ‘can you imagine they did this’? Now, that doesn’t mean you excuse people; I think history is a moral enterprise. I mean that you can’t help at some level make judgments about the people about whom you are writing. It’s a question of balance, however, and remember that if you are talking about a human being, that we have our preoccupations, we’re preoccupied, and I think rightly so, with slavery as an institution, with race as a problem, but Jefferson – those are not his categories, whether they should have been or not, that’s not what he was preoccupied with. Jefferson, the single, the most important thing in his life was his participation as a revolutionary in the American Revolution and the creation of the United States of America. And once that happened, that became his focus and he thought that his life’s mission would be to creating and maintaining that country.

Now, this business about slavery, that would be something that would solve itself in time. Now, we know that’s not true. We know that didn’t happen. But if we’re biographers, as we all are here, if you’re looking at a person, you’re trying to figure out what mattered to them and why did it matter to them? I mean, it’s difficult to do anything in the world, that’s one of the things that we’ve all learned to do anything, but to do lots of different things, and I am speaking of Jefferson now, it’s pretty amazing, and I don’t got a question of forgiving him for not solving the slavery problem. I think

the slavery problem was solved the way it was going to be solved. And that is not something a person who put together a union could bear to think about.”

*Pragmatic ethics* and *pragmatic history* are discussed in GGDM in various places, most notably, [3 Order](#), p. 551 and [6 Combat](#), p. 1032. The Amapour & Company video is available on [YouTube](#). In the terms Prof. Gordon-Reed used, GGDM is my preoccupation, like Thomas Jefferson's own.

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*Cf. Noam Chomsky (from Jacobian Magazine transcript, June 23, 2020):* “We will emerge [from the pandemic, but] we’re not going to emerge from another crime that Trump has committed, the heating of the globe. The worst of it is coming – we’re not going to emerge from that. ... All around the world, countries are trying to do something about it. But there is one country which is led by a president who wants to escalate the crisis, to race toward the abyss, to maximize the use of fossil fuels, including the most dangerous of them, and to dismantle the regulatory apparatus that limits their impact. There is no crime like this in human history. Nothing. This is a unique individual. And it’s not as if he doesn’t know what he’s doing. Of course he does. It’s as if he doesn’t care. If he can pour more profits into his pockets and the pockets of his rich constituency tomorrow, who cares if the world disappears in a couple of generations?”

Will future historians be as pragmatic about President Trump and global warming as they are being currently about white slaveholders (i.e. Thomas Jefferson) writing 'all men are created equal'? I am questioning the limits of pragmatic history; for example, as we approach the 100th anniversary of a series of events that have been identified as the proximate cause of WW2, it is still very difficult to think of Hitler and his sycophants in a pragmatic way. And why does Western history focus on blaming Germany above all others?

By Charles W. Phillips