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# America's Role in Ending the Slave Trade: A Second Look

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**H**onoring Great Britain's withdrawal from the international slave trade has been an ongoing public event this year. The recurring message has been that the withdrawal—a watershed event in the elimination of slavery in the West—was largely the result of the actions of a single British politician, William Wilberforce. Wilberforce, imbued by strong Christian convictions, began his antislave-trade crusade with a 1789 speech in Parliament; he continued his quest for 18 years before Great Britain bowed out of the trade. Wilberforce's story was the subject of the movie, *Amazing Grace*, earlier this year.

Curiously, a number of significant, concurrent American subplots have gone unnoted in this Wilberforce-centered tribute. For example, the U.S. government barred international slave imports in 1807, the same year Britain formally withdrew from the slave trade. Worthy of notice? One would think so. Moreover, President Thomas Jefferson signed the enabling legislation for this action on March 2, 1807 (to become effective January 1, 1808), while Britain's withdrawal received its Royal Assent on March 25, 1807. Worthy of notice? Again, one would think so.

To be sure, the U.S. Constitution banned federal interference in the slave trade until 1808 (see Article 1, Section 9, Clause 1). An import tariff up to \$10 per slave was allowed, but none was ever enacted. And the 20-year moratorium was engraved in constitutional stone, since Article V of the Constitution, which outlines amendment procedures, made the moratorium immune to amendment. Nevertheless, notable subplots lurk behind the moratorium!

The same clause mandating the moratorium also granted discretion to each state concerning how many slaves it admitted. This is noteworthy in itself because the Constitution generally bars states from imposing restrictions on interstate and international commerce. Nevertheless, as far as the Wilberforce-centered bicentennial is concerned, when Jefferson signed the 1807 legislation, only *one* state—South Carolina—allowed international slave imports. All other states had already outlawed such imports. Worthy of notice for discussion of the bicentennial? Why not?



William Wilberforce (1759–1833)

It turns out that South Carolina had barred slave imports between 1787 and 1802. So the “openness” the 1807 federal legislation impinged on was relatively new. In fact, if one goes back to the 1787–1789 writing, ratification, and adoption—which corresponds to the beginning of Wilberforce's antislave-trade crusade—slave imports were already illegal or soon to be illegal in most states. New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, for example, prohibited slave imports in 1788. Virginia ended them in 1778. The list of states goes on. Worthy of notice for discussion of the bicentennial? Again, why not?

The American movement against slavery even predated the U.S. Constitution: to wit, Article VI in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, adopted under the Articles of Confederation, said, “There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory [land west of the Appalachians].” Of course, the same article

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allowed for the return of any slave escaping into the territory, but why exclude the Ordinance in a taxonomy of events dealing with the western movement against slavery?

None of the above is meant to denigrate the courage and persistence of Wilberforce or the importance of the British to the slave trade. Rather, it adds a needed note of caution to the 1807 slave-trade bicentennial celebrations. A valuable resource when it comes to U.S. actions with respect to the slave trade is W. E. B. Du Bois's 1898 book, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870*. Du Bois, who is more likely to be known for being instrumental in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), published the book while on the faculty at *Wilberforce* University, a private, African-American university founded before the end of slavery in 1856 in *Wilberforce*, Ohio.

Why have these American subplots escaped attention? One possibility is that some Americans who opposed slave imports did so for reasons of self-interest. In particular, American slaveholders who were selling their slaves to expanding slaveholding sections of the country opposed slave imports because they undermined the prices they could command for their slaves.

For example, George Mason, one of the Founding Fathers from Virginia, was a vocal opponent of the slave trade. Indeed, Mason was one of the three delegates to the 1787 U.S. Constitutional Convention who refused to sign the Constitution, in part because it allowed the slave trade to continue for 20 years. Owning more slaves than any delegate to the convention, Mason also faulted the Constitution for not securing slaveholders' rights to their slaves. Needless to say, Mason's opposition to the slave trade doesn't pack the same inspirational punch as Wilberforce's. Wilberforce's motives were noble; Mason's ignoble. Nobility trumps ignobility.

A related explanation is that Americans' self-loathing about all things slavery is so intense that our cognoscenti can never admit that slaveholders' actions with respect to slavery could have beneficial social consequences. So when Wilberforce acted to reduce slave *exports* from Africa, that is good, something to be celebrated with a bicentennial. But when George Mason, or that other notorious Virginia slaveholder, Thomas Jefferson, acted to reduce slave *imports* from Africa, so what? Never mind the economists' insight that self-interested actions can have beneficial social consequences. Piety is what counts. Alas. 

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