

From Joseph Ellis, *The Great Contradiction: The Tragic Side of the American Founding*.

Alongside their impressive achievements, the founding generation failed to reach a just accommodation with the Native American population, and failed to end slavery or, more realistically, put it on the road to extinction. Both failures led directly to horrific consequences: a policy of genocide in slow motion for Native Americans; and the bloodiest war in American history to end slavery.

Taken together, these triumphal and tragic elements constitute the ingredients for an epic historical narrative that defies all moralistic categories, a story rooted in the coexistence of grandeur and failure, brilliance and blindness, grace and sin...It cries out for a protégé of Henry Adams to expose the ironies of it all: the overlapping ways that achievements on one side of the political equation closed off options on the other side; how leaders trapped in contradictions invented denial mechanisms to avoid facing their hypocrisy; how some of the wisest men of our greatest generation became mentally paralyzed once race entered the conversation. In this narrative format, all saints are also sinners (Thomas Jefferson is a singular figure who leads the list in both categories), the high moral ground turns out to be a utopia—Greek for “nowhere” — and all the gods are laughing.

But that is not the way the story has been told. Instead, we have been asked to choose between two competing narratives of the founding. One features the founders as demigods who were permitted to glimpse the eternal truths, or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once put it, “to see God face to face.” The other is crowded with a cast of despicable villains who collectively comprise the deadest, whitest males in American history. These mindlessly celebratory and naively judgmental responses to the founders are in fact complementary cartoons, the front and back sides of the same childlike portrait that we periodically rotate, like adolescents fluctuating between the emotional imperatives of unconditional love and Oedipal hate.