

# Does the United States need a Third Founding? The Quest for a “More Perfect Union”

The purpose of this “thought experiment” is to take a serious reader and thinker beyond the sound bites into a common theme in our common lives as Americans that has arisen and been brought to greater light over the past 16 months. A “three-legged stool” of extraordinary circumstances serves as our launching point – the impact of the COVID 19 Pandemic in the US, the death of George Floyd in May 2020, and the numerous attempts to subvert a transfer of power and political leadership of the US Federal Government beginning in late 2020 and continuing through the present. Regardless of one’s “political truths”, or “philosophical truths”, I follow Hannah Arendt’s classification of these events as “Factual Truths” (Reference is made here and throughout to the Hannah Arendt essay “Truth and Politics”, from *The New Yorker*” which was the Topical Essay for September 2021 – well worth the read)

To provide some structure to this endeavor I would like to use the included copy of an essay that appeared in *The Atlantic*. The author is Eddie Glaude, Jr. of Princeton University and is timed with the release of his book [Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own](#). Revisiting the “Philosophical Truths” – perhaps prophetic words of James Baldwin, Glaude pulls together a common call for our nation to “Begin Again”.

Within the scope of this work are links to at least three other important readings to place on top of our three-legged stool. There is one offering each from Adam Serwer, Ibram X Kendi, and TaNehisi Coates that help Professor Glaude build his “Philosophical (aka Logical)” point of view. Lewes Public Library has tools to assist those of us who might not have paid subscriptions to *The Atlantic*.

I have also found great inspiration and guidance from the following two publications:

- 1) *The Words That Made Us* America's Constitutional Conversation, 1760-1840– by Akhil Reed Amar <https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/akhil-reed-amar/the-words-that-made-us/9780465096367/>
- 2) *The Sum of Us* – Heather McGhee - <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/564989/the-sum-of-us-by-heather-mcghee/>

Amar’s book looks at the incredible questions and decisions that faced loyal subjects of the King of England as they attempted to operate the North American colonies and the tracing of key words in the founding documents of the US to cases as far back as 1760 Massachusetts. The discussion carries through to the end of Martin Van Buren’s presidency. There are good summaries in *NYTimes*, *Washington Post* and *WSJ* and elsewhere.

*The Sum of Us* is currently being read throughout Delaware as Delaware Community Foundation’s Building Opportunity initiative - <https://www.delcf.org/community/building-opportunity/> There is an SDARJ moderated book discussion at 6pm on Tuesday September 28. Register through Lewes Public Library. The gist of this book follows our theme – with some prescriptive recommendations.

Our primary question first appears in the first paragraph of Glaude’s essay – “The United States has confronted two crucial moments of moral reckoning where we faced the daunting challenge of “beginning again”. The first came during the “Reconstruction” times immediately following the US Civil War and the second came out of the Black Freedom struggle in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. Glaude (and others) are calling upon our nation to “confront our national trauma honestly to “craft a new story”.

Glaude is at the head of the class shouting “Don’t discard the elements of the old story” “Don’t dwell only on our sins”. He is also having us call upon such Factual Truths related to the slavery, the use of

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land held by Native Peoples and the “complicated pursuit of profits” He is also asking us to be more open minded about long-held “political truth’s” and believes and their attachment to our identity.

James Baldwin called for a “New Jerusalem”. Glaude says “Both call for a world and a society that reflect the value that all human life—no matter the color of your skin, your zip code, your gender, or who you love—is sacred”

What might this “Third Founding” look like – can it be taken on? How should it be taken on? Who should take it on? What happens if we fail?

I hope that our written responses and conversations on October 13 will include, though not be limited to the following.

- I. Why (or Why Not) Would the US Need a “Third Founding”?
  - a. Geo-Political reasons
  - b. Economic Reasons
  - c. Environmental Reasons
  - d. Technological Reasons
  - e. Social/Political
  - f. Moral
- II. What is the COST of NOT Attempting a third Founding?
  - a. Geo-Political reasons
  - b. Economic Reasons
  - c. Environmental Reasons
  - d. Technological Reasons
  - e. Social/Political
  - f. Moral
- III. What KEY VALUES and PRINCIPLES would guide such a BOLD Endeavor?
  - a. What do we do about the Factual, Political, and Philosophical Truths that **Self Governance Is Messy**?
  - b. Should we/could we change our “ZERO/SUM Thinking” (on a meaningful scale)?
  - c. Should we Conduct Truth, Racial Healing, Transformation conversations at the local community level
- IV. What Key Values and Principles Should Be Preserved – included but not limited to
  - a. Balance of Power
    - i. State and Federal
    - ii. Executive, Legislative, Judicial
  - b. Market Economy that limits corruption and corrects inevitable “imperfections)
  - c. Certain “inalienable” rights
    - i. Privacy
    - ii. Due Process
    - iii. ???

I look forward to gathering many different thoughts and perspectives.

# We Need to Begin Again

In the midst of a moral reckoning, America needs a third founding.

By [Eddie S. Glaude Jr.](#)

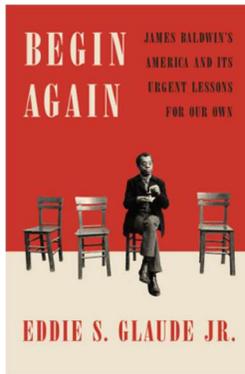
The Atlantic – July 18, 2020

The United States has confronted two crucial moments of moral reckoning where we faced the daunting challenge of beginning again; both times we failed. The first was during the Civil War and Reconstruction, which constituted a second founding for the country. The second was the Black-freedom struggle of the mid-20th century. What we need now is a third American founding. We need an America where “becoming white” is no longer the price of the ticket. Instead, we should set out to imagine the country in the full light of its diversity and with an honest recognition of our sins.

After the Civil War, the fabric of America was woven anew after fraying almost beyond its ability to hold. Reconstruction led to the formation of the modern U.S. nation-state. With expanded federal power, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and the Civil War amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth — Congress, led in many respects by the House Ways and Means Committee chairman and radical abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens, put forward an idea of citizenship untethered to the issue of race. Almost immediately, forces sought to undermine the promise of the second founding, but the point here is that Stevens and others sought to radically transform the country’s understanding of itself as they grappled with questions of equality, the right to vote, and the role of government in protecting the rights of all citizens.

[Adam Serwer: Civility is overrated](#)<sup>1</sup>

On one level, what Stevens and others did was exactly what James Baldwin called on us to do a century later. “Not everything is lost,” Baldwin wrote after the collapse of the civil-rights movement. “Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again.” Stevens and his colleagues went back to where we started. They understood that the three-fifths clause and the fugitive-slave clause had tilted the balance of power to the slaveholding states; that the Constitution did not live up to the Declaration of Independence’s promise of equality; that the actions of the states and the courts consolidated a view of Black people that mandated their inferior place in American society. With the Civil War amendments, they aimed to begin again. But the country turned its back. The Black-freedom struggle in the mid-20th century, what scholars call the Second Reconstruction, sought, among other things, to complete what was left of this “unfinished revolution,” as the historian Eric Foner describes it.



This post is excerpted from Glaude's recent book.<sup>2</sup>

Now we find ourselves facing a moral reckoning of the same magnitude. By now, we should have learned the lesson that changing laws or putting our faith in politicians to do the right thing is not enough. We have to rid ourselves, once and for all, of this belief that white people matter more than others, or we're doomed to repeat the cycles of our ugly history over and over again. George Santayana, the Spanish-born American philosopher, was right to point out that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But what he didn't say is that those who willfully refuse to remember become moral monsters.

We have to confront our national trauma honestly if we are to shake loose from the political frame of Reaganism and Trumpism, with its racial dog whistles and foghorns, its greed and selfishness, and its idealized version of America as "the shining city on the hill," where the country's sins are transformed into examples of its inherent goodness. This will demand of us a new American story, different symbols, and robust policies to repair what we have done. I don't yet know what this will look like in its details—and my understanding of our history suggests that we will probably fail trying—but I do know that each element is important to any effort toward beginning again. As Samuel Beckett wrote in his 1983 novella, "Worstward Ho," "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

A new story doesn't mean that we discard all the elements of the old story, nor does it mean that we dwell only on our sins. Instead, we narrate our national beginnings in light of our contradictions *and* our aspirations. Innocence is left aside. Who we aspire to be, without the safety of the lie, should always organize the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. I say this because our stories carry moral weight. Who and what we choose to exclude exposes the limits of our ideas of justice. Our stories can make some people the center of the plot and make others latecomers and objects of charity and goodwill or of scorn and derision. America's should be a story that begins with those who sought to make real the promise of this democracy. Put aside the fairy tale of America as "the shining city on the hill" or "the redeemer nation," and cast the idea of perfecting the union not as a guarantee of our goodness, but as a declaration of the ongoing work to address injustice in our midst.

In 2019, Nikole Hannah-Jones and *The New York Times Magazine* launched "The 1619 Project." They set out to tell a different story of the country by focusing on Jamestown instead of Plymouth Rock. As they did so, the messiness of our national beginnings came into clearer view. Slavery became a central part of the story, as did our relationship with the land and with Native peoples, and the complicated pursuit of profits is seen as interwoven into the very texture of what would become America. Here, neat perfectionist tales are thrown to the wind, and out of that complex history we tell a consensus story that binds us one to the other, because we no longer have at the center of our national imagination the value gap—the belief that white lives matter more than others, an idea that has distorted and deformed our democracy from the start. With a different story, our national greatness will not reflect some grand lie that hides our

evils and protects us from shame, but will be a consequence of our acknowledgment of what we have done and the ongoing work to do better.

Ibram X. Kendi: The hopefulness and hopelessness of 1619

This story requires a different symbolic landscape. In moments of profound national transition, the symbols of the old order have to be removed. In our case, the statues of the Confederacy have to be torn down and some placed in museums. They do not represent who we are and who we aspire to be. Our built environment should reflect the brilliant diversity of the people who make up this country. But the shift in our symbolic landscape must go beyond statues. The value gap is experienced and lived as we move about in this country. It is evident in the spatial organization of towns, villages, and cities. The monuments of ghettos, housing projects, and highways that cut off and isolate communities all reflect an age shaped by the lie. We have to build a different America.

All of this—the stories and the symbols—presuppose the importance of policies. For generations, we have lived according to the lie, and it has had tangible, material consequences for the lives of so many Americans. We have to begin a serious conversation about what form and shape repair will take. That can start with something really basic: passing H.R. 40, which establishes a commission “to study and consider a national apology and proposal for reparations for the institution of slavery, its subsequent de jure and de facto racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans, to make recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies, and for other purposes.” Such a commission could function as our truth and reconciliation commission. We could finally get out in the open all of that gunk that rests in our national cellar. Hearings in open sessions, town-hall meetings across the country, an organized effort to tell a different story about who we are (something along the lines of a Constitution Day that can become a moment of collective reflection about the past), and scholarly study of the policy impacts of repair would position the country to take that bold step toward beginning anew. Then we must take courageous steps to change how we live and govern: What is clear to me is that we have to end, no matter the costs, the policies that breathe life into the lie.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: The case for reparations

This third American founding must happen in the context of a political transformation. It must involve a complete rejection of the way we have conducted politics up to now. Otherwise we will succumb to the temptation of safety and find ourselves trapped once again. It is worrisome that there is deep sentiment in some quarters of this country for nothing more than a return to American life before Donald Trump. I find this feeling dangerous, because often it is not merely a response to the damage that Trump has wrought on the country—and on the American psyche—but also, more subtly, a reaction to all the long-standing and difficult questions Trump’s presidency has brought into view. The way he treats Black people prompts open discussion of the way Black people are treated in America generally; it makes the painful

confrontation with the value gap unavoidable. The horror he visits on immigrants at the border necessitates a broader conversation about the role of immigrants in American life. Trump makes it impossible to turn away. And for as many people who find his conduct abhorrent, there may be just as many who simply do not want to experience daily reminders of suffering and injustice. That explains the seductive appeal of Democrats whose sole promise is to steer toward calmer waters.

Trumpism presents us with a choice. We can double down on the lie and reelect him, we can find comfort in reaching back to an idea of normalcy and settle for safety, or we can decide to untether our politics from the insidious assumptions of race that have guided our choices for generations. If we now choose Trump, or if we choose Biden just because he is safe, we should prepare ourselves for even darker days ahead. But if we decide to be others, as difficult as that may be, we will push Biden to embrace a bold, transformative vision and we finally make possible the birth of a New America.

Baldwin did not call for a third American founding. Instead, he worked tirelessly for what he called the New Jerusalem. To my mind, there is little difference between the two. Both call for a world and a society that reflect the value that all human life—no matter the color of your skin, your zip code, your gender, or who you love—is sacred. In his aftertimes, Baldwin understood that something new was desperately trying to be born, but that the old ghosts had the baby by the throat. He wrote in the epilogue to *No Name in the Street*: “An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key.” That was in 1972. The labor has been long and hard, and the new world has yet to be born. We are now in our aftertimes, but responsibility has not been lost. Whatever happens next is up to us.

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