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## Book Reviews

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# Does 'PBS' mean, 'Praise for the British System'?

by Denise Henderson

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### **Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery**

by Charles Johnson, Patricia Smith, and the WGBH Series Research Team  
New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998  
494 pages, hardbound, \$30

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When the PBS series "Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery" aired from Oct. 19-22, 1998, newspapers around the country, to varying degrees, condemned the series for its shallowness, its historical inaccuracies, and the way in which it myopically portrayed the history of the problem of slavery in America—and all rightly so.

Beyond these criticisms, there was the scandal around Patricia Smith, the *Boston Globe* journalist and co-writer of the series and its companion book. Smith was fired for having made up people in her articles, as well as for fabricating quotations for her stories in the *Globe*.

Ironically, the series was financed in large measure by Bankers Trust, which is now merging with Deutsche Bank in a desperate attempt to paper over its financial bankruptcy. Perhaps the disaster that this series became, contributed to Bankers Trust's insolvency.

While it is easy to pick *Africans in America* apart piece by piece, fact by fact, chapter by chapter, let's start with the most glaring fact of all. *Africans in America* has as its overall theme, that the United States is the villain when it comes to slavery, and Great Britain and its imperial possession, Canada (which gave safe haven to the men who plotted the assassinations of both Lincoln and Kennedy), were the great champions of freedom for African-Americans.

Any American who wishes to understand not so much the complexities, but the actual nature of the historical fight surrounding slavery in America—which was part and parcel

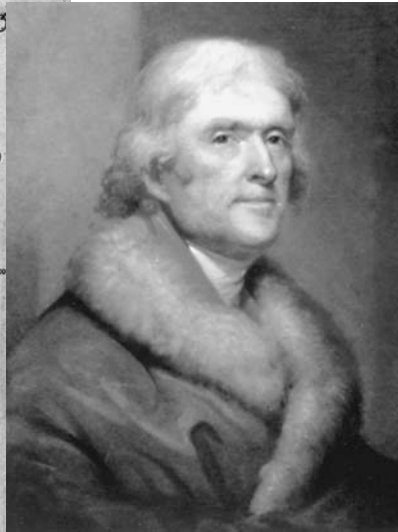
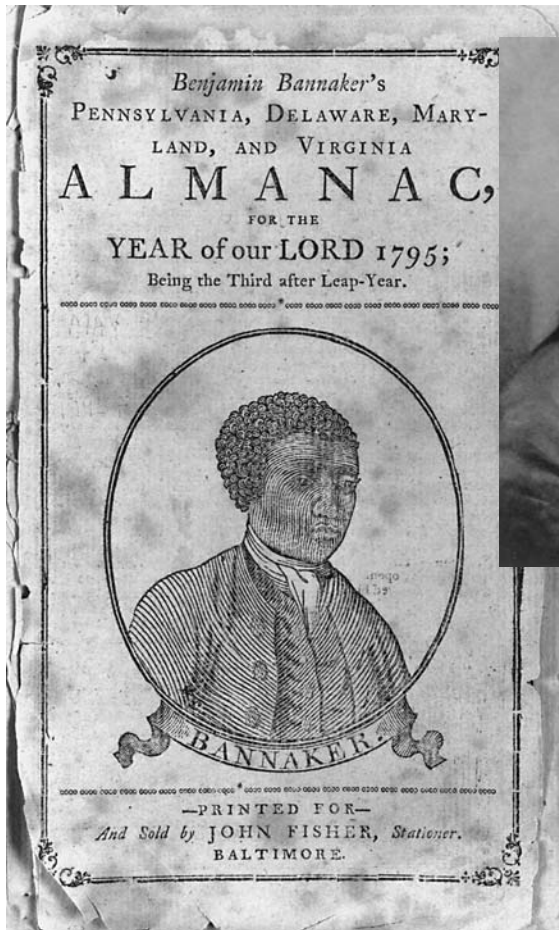
of the fight against the international oligarchy—should begin by reading Anton Chaitkin's seminal work *Treason in America*, as well as H. Graham Lowry's *How the Nation Was Won*. Chaitkin details the treasonous, pro-imperial, pro-feudal networks that operated in the United States, including those who tried to sell out the American Revolution, among them those who fomented and laid the basis for the Civil War, by ensuring that economic backwardness, embodied in the use of human servitude, was allowed to fester for decades. Lowry demonstrates that the United States, from the very founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was a struggle against oligarchism.

The third crucial source, is W. Allen Salisbury's *The Civil War and the American System*, in which Salisbury lays out what precisely the American System of political economy was, and how the fight for a physical economy based on industrial development, was the crucial fight in the United States before, during, and after the Civil War. Salisbury's introductory essay discusses that fight. His book includes writings by Henry Carey, E. Peshine Smith, and other American System economists of the 19th century, most of whose writings were unavailable prior to the publication of Salisbury's work.

All three historians make the point that the fight against imperialism, which was global, was picked up and carried on by the American System republicans, who knew that the British plantation system, not merely in the U.S. South, but around the world, had to be destroyed and replaced by a policy of economic development for all mankind. That was the focus of the republican fight against the Confederacy at home, and also against British, Dutch, and other imperialist powers.

### **Our African-American intellectual heritage**

With these three books under one's belt, the reader can then address the issue of slavery in America. Let us take a detour into the field of American history, and the fight earlier



*The cover of Benjamin Banneker's Almanac. PBS gives short shrift to intellectuals like astronomer Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and historian Carter G. Woodson, who fought to bring alive the promise of the U.S. Constitution for all Americans. Banneker exchanged letters with Thomas Jefferson (see inset) in which he argued against chattel slavery.*

project of the Library of Congress to tape-record interviews with former slaves. The wealth of this dramatic documentation, and the passion of its authors—always relying on primary source material—helped tell the truth about African-Americans in U.S. history.

Prior to the efforts of these historians, the lying romanticism of “Birth of a Nation” prevailed. As Mark Calney has detailed (*EIR*, April 2, 1993), that film promoted the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and sought to deepen racialism in America.

In contrast, the pro-republican historians began from the same standpoint as Frederick Douglass after he founded his newspaper, *The North Star*, in the 1850s. Douglass believed that the U.S. Constitution represented a promise to all Americans, whatever their race or creed. And that the fight over slavery in America—a slavery which was fostered by British imperialism, while the British Crown banned slavery in the Empire in order to hypocritically set themselves up as the champions of emancipation—was the fight to re-

deem that promise: the fight to finish the Unfinished American Revolution. It was for this reason that the Civil War and the brief period of Reconstruction became known as America’s Second Revolution.

The historians engaged in this fight, used as their primary weapon, primary-source documentation of the *intention* of the Founding Fathers, from the 1668 Germantown Friends’ “Protest against Slavery,” to the attempts to implement Abraham Lincoln’s Reconstruction policy after the Civil War, to ensure that the *inalienable rights* of all men, women, and children were implemented and respected.

*The Journal of Negro History* played a major role in disseminating this history, including the history of Benjamin Banneker of Maryland, America’s first black astronomer, who attempted to set Thomas Jefferson straight on the issue of race through an exchange of letters, who helped to lay out the streets of Washington, D.C., who created the first astronomical almanac in America. Nowhere in either the PBS book or the series itself, is this great scientist mentioned. Instead, PBS explores in intimate detail, the story of a Maryland African-American property owner, whose rights were gradually eroded. Banneker himself lost much more than that: His house, containing all of his astronomical calculations and

in this century, to truthfully portray African-American history over the 1621 to 1868 period. Beginning in the 1920s, with the founding of the *Journal of Negro History* by Carter G. Woodson, through to the creation of Black Nationalism in the late 1960s, a school of historians developed among both African-American intellectuals—scholars who had taken seriously their responsibility to study, to read primary sources, and to educate the American population—as well as white historians. This school began to counter the myth of the romantic “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy and phonies like Claude G. Bowers, the journalist-turned-Confederate apologist whose *The Tragic Era* alleged that African-American rule during Reconstruction was an unmitigated disaster for the lily-white, home-grown oligarchs of the South.

These historians range from Alrutheus A. Taylor, who produced an excellent physical-economic study of South Carolina during Reconstruction, to John Hope Franklin’s insistence on digging up primary sources, to Willie Lee Rose’s seminal (if flawed) study, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, of the issue of “40 acres and a mule.” Dorothy Sterling used primary sources to document the history of African-Americans intellectuals, teachers, singers, and builders, as well as the tragedy of the slave’s life. Invaluable, too, is the 1930s

his library, was burned down by individuals hostile to the idea that an African-American could be a scientist.

In choosing to highlight the property-owner, and not the scientist, the PBS team showed their preference for John Locke's British System of "life, liberty, and property," over Gottfried Leibniz's and the Founding Fathers' actual intent of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

### The American versus the British system

Another glaring example of this bias, is how, in contrast to Benjamin Quarles, the PBS team treats the American Revolution. The African-American republican has always written of the American Revolution as a great opportunity, a rebellion against an intolerable imperial power. Quarles, in his books, highlights the role of the African-American soldier in George Washington's Continental Army, as well as in the Civil War. *Africans in America*, however, puts the weight on the side of the British, and waxes eloquent about the "bravery" of those African-American slaves who escaped behind British lines, in exchange for a promised freedom; some later were freed, but others who boarded British boats as the Redcoats sailed out of America, wound up as slaves in Britain's Caribbean possessions.

The larger issue, of republicanism versus imperialism, is outside the purview of PBS's theme. How British agents-of-influence were used to sabotage efforts at resolving the problem of slavery in America, is not explored. For example, PBS highlights the rebellion of Nat Turner, rather than the more profound debate on whether slavery should be abolished, which was argued out in the Virginia State House in the aftermath of the Turner rebellion. In that debate, the lines were clearly drawn between the free farmers—mostly German-Americans in the Shenandoah Valley and the area that later became West Virginia—and the state's oligarchical planters. A young student of history could learn far more about what forces were actually at work from studying the Virginia debate, than from the Nat Turner or Denmark Vesey revolts, both of which had the effect of creating even more restrictions against African-American slaves.

PBS portrays the commitment of Frederick Douglass, and other African-American leaders, to the U.S. Constitution, as a matter of pragmatic politics. But the issue was much deeper than that. Abraham Lincoln, a lifelong opponent of slavery, as a true American patriot, led the change that began to occur from the time of the *Dred Scott* decision to the Harper's Ferry revolt, culminating in his 1860 election, which returned the U.S. Presidency to republicans for the first time in many decades. Douglass played a key role in that history, which PBS merely shrugs off.

Something should also be said about the horribly stilted, phony firsthand narratives which have been inserted in highlighted pages, throughout the book. These sections are written in the voice of a 20th-century speaker, masquerading as "how Americans thought" in previous centuries. To anyone

who knows anything about history, these sections are simply unbelievable: The literacy rate in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries was so high that Americans were called the "Latin farmers," for their command of both English and other languages.

Given the richness of firsthand sources which have been painstakingly made available by so many historians (John Hope Franklin was the first African-American allowed to carry on research in many Southern libraries), as well as the work done by those who wrote for the *Journal of Negro History*, there is no need to expose U.S. students to PBS's pro-imperialist, lying claptrap.

It is finally of interest to mention, that in 1962, as the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation approached, some of these historians, along with Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders, met with President John F. Kennedy, to ask him to issue a new Emancipation Proclamation, which in effect would have been an official sanctioning of the civil rights movement.

For over a decade now, the Schiller Institute has circulated its proclamation internationally for the Inalienable Rights of Man. Let us take this opportunity to reflect upon the ongoing fight against the brutal, imperialist policies which the City of London, Wall Street, and other centers of oligarchism are currently imposing throughout the world, and instead make this worldwide Emancipation Proclamation a reality for all mankind. Let us thus guarantee that such poorly written, pro-imperialist histories as the one by PBS, wind up where they belong—in the trash bin.

### Recommended reading

Roger Burns, editor, *Am I Not A Man and a Brother? The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America 1688-1788* (New York: Chelsea House, 1983).

Henry C. Carey, *The Slave Trade Domestic & Foreign* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967).

Anton Chaitkin, *Treason in America: From Aaron Burr to Averell Harriman* (New York: New Benjamin Franklin House, 1985).

Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962).

John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (New York: Garden City, 1963).

John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3d ed. (New York: Random House, 1967).

H. Graham Lowry, *How the Nation Was Won: America's Untold Story* (Washington, D.C.: Executive Intelligence Review, 1988).

Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1961).

—, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953).

—, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

Amelia Boynton Robinson, *Bridge Across Jordan* (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1991).

Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1964).

W. Allen Salisbury, *The Civil War and the American System* (Washington, D.C.: Executive Intelligence Review, 1992).

Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

Alruthus A. Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina During the Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C., 1924).