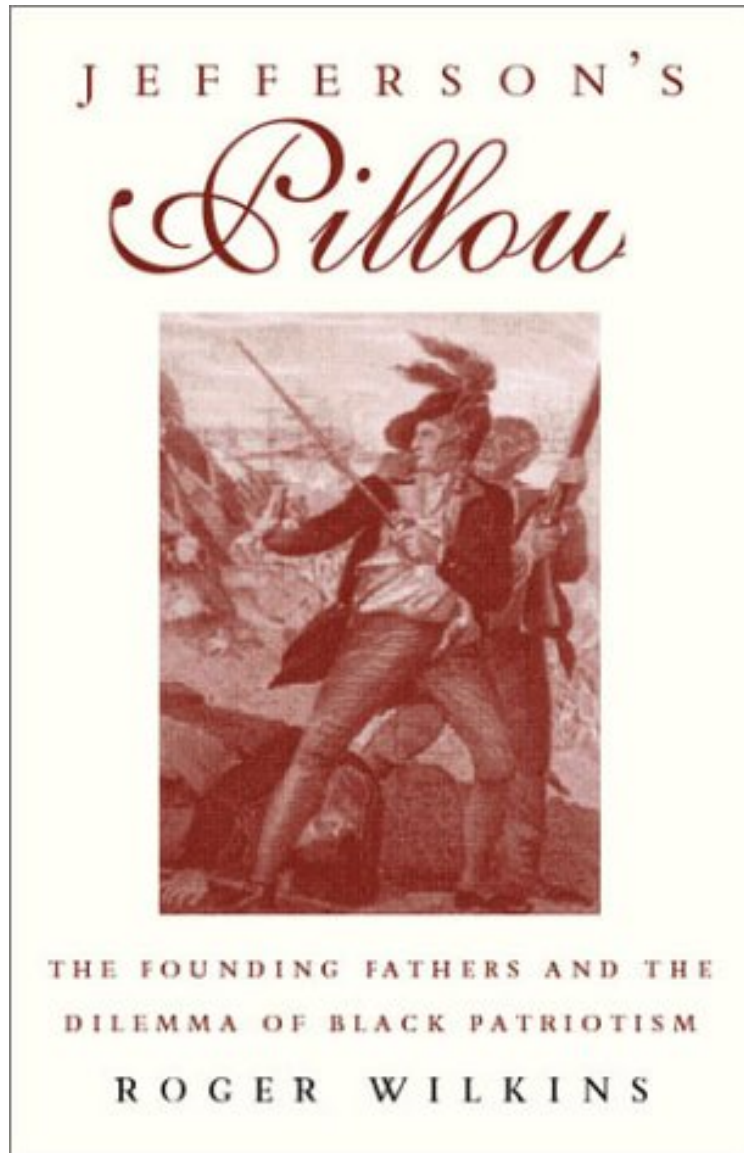


Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism

Roger Wilkins

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Roger Wilkins : Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A New Moral Calculus for our Heroes? By Herbert L Calhoun Once

again, Dr. Wilkins has demonstrated his immense talents for mature, patriotic, deep thinking and eloquent writing. As he did in his autobiographical memoir he has again confronted the "mother" of all American problems; the beast that remains coiled in the nation's bosom: the history and practice of racism, and its companion and handmaiden, racist hypocrisy. By unraveling the moral and existential ambiguity and complexity these issues set up in the personal lives of our four most revered forefathers (what he refers to as the Virginia quartet), he has peered through the dense jungle of patriotic myths and stared this beast squarely in the eyes. By bringing more clearly into focus what they were thinking and how they acted on issues of race and slavery, Wilkins has demythologized Washington, Madison, Mason, and Jefferson, and in the process has forever elevated them above the plane of mere racist adulation and rationalization. He has done more. He has in the process "re-humanized" them, and has given us, not less, but more, reasons to revere them. For this feat alone he must be lauded. It is no mean trick to be able to accomplish this. However, had he stopped there, I would have no qualms with this manuscript. But he tried to do more -- perhaps too much more. Professor Wilkins' ultimate goal seemed to have been to square the circle between the immense theoretical contributions made by these men in the political sphere on the one hand, and the utter destructive legacy bequeathed to us as a result of their personal weaknesses in the social sphere, on the other. Just as we still live under the political freedoms provided by the former, we also continue to live under the social destructiveness and scourges of the latter. Just as the Constitution is a direct legacy of these patriots, so is the racism that we have come to know in everyday practice a direct result of their hypocrisy. Despite failing at his goal, we must all be grateful to the author for the clarity with which he demonstrated through historical juxtaposition the contradictory (if not fatal) qualities in each of these founding patriots. He did it with grace, without even a hint of malice or bitterness and with great skill and honesty. My concern is with the calculus he has used to try to revolve these human contradictions, the calculus with which he tried to square the circle: by adding them together. How reasonable it must have seemed to the author that the good in these men should, in the end "be made" to cancel out the bad. But may I ask: of what good is it to raise the skeleton of slavery from the historical closet if it is only to be re-clothed in a different colored garment of the same old pedigree of exaggerated mythmaking? How easy it is to make such a mistake in a country where we desperately need more genuine heroes worthy of our adulation. But, if history has taught us anything, it is that moral complexity and existential ambiguity cannot be reduced to a simple additive calculus: The good, even in our most revered heroes, will never quite completely cancel out the bad. Unless, and until, theory is put into practice the good and the bad forever remain in different orbits. They remain in two different but parallel universes. Greatness is not to be found in the mere careful juxtaposition of good and evil, but in eliminating the latter, the evil. Although each of these theoretical giants saw the handwriting on the wall: That is, conceptually they each knew that slavery, racism and freedom could not long coexist, and could even possibly serve to destroy this country. Yet despite this, none among them had the moral courage to face this reality -- if only to possibly head it off. As a result, despite the lovely embroidery that Professor Wilkins has fashioned here, the Virginia quartet will forever remain theoretical giants and moral pigmies. Every American, and especially every Native and Black America must read this book. Five stars.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Thoughtful and Challenging By Customer Roger Wilkins is uniquely qualified to write this book. It is thoughtful and challenging, especially to those of us in the white community. I have grown in my thoughts and perspectives on race relations because of Mr. Wilkins' book.10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Owing Up By Mark S This extraordinary volume shares the virtues of the men that provide its focus. It has the steady, right-thinking leadership of Washington. It has the learning and driving intensity of Madison. It has the cantankerous insistence on truthfulness of Mason. And it surely has much of the crafty elegance of Jefferson. With charity toward all and malice toward none, Wilkins manages the nearly impossible - a fully adult reflection on race and the American project. The issue of slavery and the founding fathers here is not the occasion for simple-minded evaluation and homiletics. It is the setting off point for a deep, careful, and powerful examination of the practical nature of political progress in the face of genuine human failing. Unflinching and realistic, mature and balanced, this book shames the shallowness of most public discourse and private apathy today, even as it honors the founding fathers with the respect of honest recognition. In one of the many extraordinary and too little known original writings this book reveals, George Mason wrote of slavery: "By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, providence punishes national sins, by national calamities." Breaking slavery's chain of national calamity certainly requires today - as it did then - more than words. Yet through the words in this carefully crafted reflection, Wilkins opens the opportunity for us to own our own past as a nation - and that must certainly help compel and direct action.

An outspoken participant in the civil rights movement, Roger Wilkins served as Assistant Attorney General during the Johnson administration. In 1972 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize along with Bernstein and Herblock for his coverage of Watergate. Yet this black man, who has served the United States so well, feels at times an unwelcome guest here. In *Jefferson's Pillow*, Wilkins returns to America's beginnings and the founding fathers who preached and fought for freedom, even though they owned other human beings and legally denied them their humanity. He asserts that the mythic accounts of the American Revolution have ignored slavery and oversimplified history until the heroes, be they the founders or the slaves in their service, are denied any human complexity. Wilkins offers a thoughtful analysis of

this fundamental paradox through his exploration of the lives of George Washington, George Mason, James Madison, and of course Thomas Jefferson. He discusses how class, education, and personality allowed for the institution of slavery, unravels how we as Americans tell different sides of that story, and explores the confounding ability of that narrative to limit who we are and who we can become. An important intellectual history of America's founding, *Jefferson's Pillow* will change the way we view our nation and ourselves. "We are obliged to judge because we are obliged to do better; to probe the flaws of our predecessors is to engage not in vindictive finger-pointing but to resist hubris and complacency in our own time. Wilkins' book has made a mirror of the past in which we glimpse our own shortcomings —and perhaps even the means for transcending them." —Philip Connors, *In These Times* (full review online) "Wilkins makes a case for his opinions in sentences that enchant and inform. In its persuasive blend of logic and lyricism, Wilkins's language at its most potent is positively . . . Jeffersonian." —Jabari Asim, *Washington Post Book World* (full review online) With a sense of genuine curiosity Wilkins tried to avoid either condemning the founders too easily by modern standards or excusing too easily the contradictions of their slave ownership. Instead, by exploring the culture and atmosphere in which they grew up, he discovered how much slavery was an integral part of the Virginia society that enabled the founders to create the recipe for modern rights, equality and democracy. —Clarence Page, *Chicago Tribune* (full article online) "Wilkins, who describes himself as a 'deeply committed American,' is never less than a patriot here; someone indifferent about America could not write such a thoughtful book. He demythologizes the Founding Fathers, yet expands their greatness by placing it within the context of the times, as well as their flawed humanity." —*Boston Globe* "When the Founding Fathers were deciding whether to risk their lives and fortunes for their ideals, Benjamin Franklin remarked: 'We must all indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall hang separately.' In the years after their bold gamble for freedom, the hangman's noose played a far darker role in our republic, becoming the lynch mob's weapon of choice for denying African-Americans their inalienable rights. Liberty and freedom, repression and racism, these warring yet braided strands form the Gordian knot of the American experience: A land of visionary light entwined in the darkest recesses of human cruelty. Now comes Roger Wilkins like a modern-day Alexander to cut this knot." —J. Peder Zane, *Raleigh News and Observer* "This astonishing book by the 1980s antiapartheid leader Wilkins (a professor of history at George Mason University and Pulitzer-Prize winner) provides a brief, but tremendously incisive demythologizing of four Virginian founders—Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Mason (whose stature Wilkins justly elevates)—and their conflicted attitudes toward race, in the process of humanizing them and deepening our appreciation of the internal struggles involved in achieving their greatness, however flawed or incomplete. (There's nothing forced in this evaluation, as Wilkins acknowledges their enormous contribution to activists such as himself today.) Where others routinely excuse past figures or judge them by present standards, Wilkins exemplifies a subtler, sounder approach. Reaching back to England and Virginia in the 1600s, he briskly illuminates the historical, ideological, and socioeconomic contexts that made a burning concern for freedom not just compatible with slavery, but materially and psychologically dependent on it....His insight recalls James Baldwin, arguably the best we've ever had for appreciating the humanity of even the most flawed among us without yielding an inch of moral principle." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

From *Publishers Weekly* This astonishing book by the 1980s antiapartheid leader Wilkins (a professor of history at George Mason University and Pulitzer Prize-winner) provides a brief, but tremendously incisive demythologizing of four Virginian founders Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Mason (whose stature Wilkins justly elevates) and their conflicted attitudes toward race, in the process humanizing them and deepening our appreciation of the internal struggles involved in achieving their greatness, however flawed or incomplete. (There's nothing forced in this evaluation, as Wilkins acknowledges their enormous contribution to activists such as himself today.) Where others routinely excuse past figures or judge them by present standards, Wilkins exemplifies a subtler, sounder approach. Reaching back to England and Virginia in the 1600s, he briskly illuminates the historical, ideological and socioeconomic contexts that made a burning concern for freedom not just compatible with slavery, but materially and psychologically dependent on it. Surprising connections prove particularly revealing, as when Wilkins describes two English-educated second-generation Virginia aristocrats as suffering "something akin to the problems encountered by the bright barrio or ghetto youngster who is selected and groomed and sent to Harvard and then tries to return to his or her roots." He gets inside the "addictive" naturalness of privilege that slaveowners enjoyed via his own draft-deferred student experience during the Korean War, but without forgetting his ancestors' suffering as slaves. Indeed, reflections on his family history ground Wilkins and allow him to develop enormous sympathy for and insight into his subjects without losing balance or excusing the inexcusable. His insight recalls James Baldwin, arguably the best we've ever had for appreciating the humanity of even the most flawed among us without yielding an inch of moral principle. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From *Booklist* Wilkins brings the credentials of a history professor and longtime civil rights activist to this exploration of the reality of slavery and black patriotism in the founding of the nation famous for its notions of freedom. In the lives of George Mason, James Madison, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson, Wilkins finds the essential ingredients of the ideals and standards on which the U.S. was built. He avoids the easy and predictable critique of these men in the contradiction of their ideals and their tolerance for the

institution of slavery. Instead, he humanizes them, exploring the dominant influence of their class and status on their ideals and the influence of the material privileges they enjoyed as a result of slavery. Wilkins explores slavery within the context of the times but doesn't moderate the impetus for the current struggle that has resulted from the incapacity of these men to recognize their moral contradictions. This is an important look at the essential and ongoing contradictions at the heart of American ideals of liberty and patriotism. Vernon Ford Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved "...A mirror of the past in which we glimpse our own shortcomings--and perhaps even the means for transcending them." -- In These Times "In its persuasive blend of logic and lyricism, Wilkins's language at its most potent is positively . . . Jeffersonian." -- Washington Post Book World "With genuine curiosity...avoid[s] either condemning the founders too easily by modern standards or excusing...contradictions of their slave ownership." -- Clarence Page, in the Chicago Tribune Wilkins's ringing affirmation of his dual loyalties offers an extraordinarily thoughtful and illuminating meditation on American history. -- New York Times, SUN SEP 9, 2001 brutally honest about the American past, Wilkins is positive about the progress the nation and African Americans have made... -- Choice, January 2002