

# “The Birth of a Nation”: Revisiting the Nat Turner African Slave Rebellion of 1831

Film Released During an Escalation in Racial Strife in the United States

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*Nate Parker has produced a masterpiece which will evoke the legacy of one of the greatest African slave rebellions in the history of the United States.*

*The Birth of a Nation is a dramatic film which attempts the arduous task of conveying the story of the African known as Nat Turner, who was enslaved and led a rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. This film is co-written, co-produced and directed by Nate Parker. It stars Parker as Turner, with Armie Hammer, Aja Naomi King, Jackie Earle Haley, Penelope Ann Miller and Gabrielle Union in supporting roles.*

In order to launch the project Parker obtained financing to invest in the movie eventually obtaining \$10 million in order to start the production filming in May 2015 in Georgia. The film represents a much needed effort aimed at reinterpreting the legacy of resistance among African people in North America as seen through the eyes of the oppressed and their descendants.

This film is being released 185 years after the Nat Turner Rebellion in August 1831 which took place in Southampton County, Virginia but had national ramifications. This former British colony was the entry point of enslaved Africans into the region of North America in 1620.

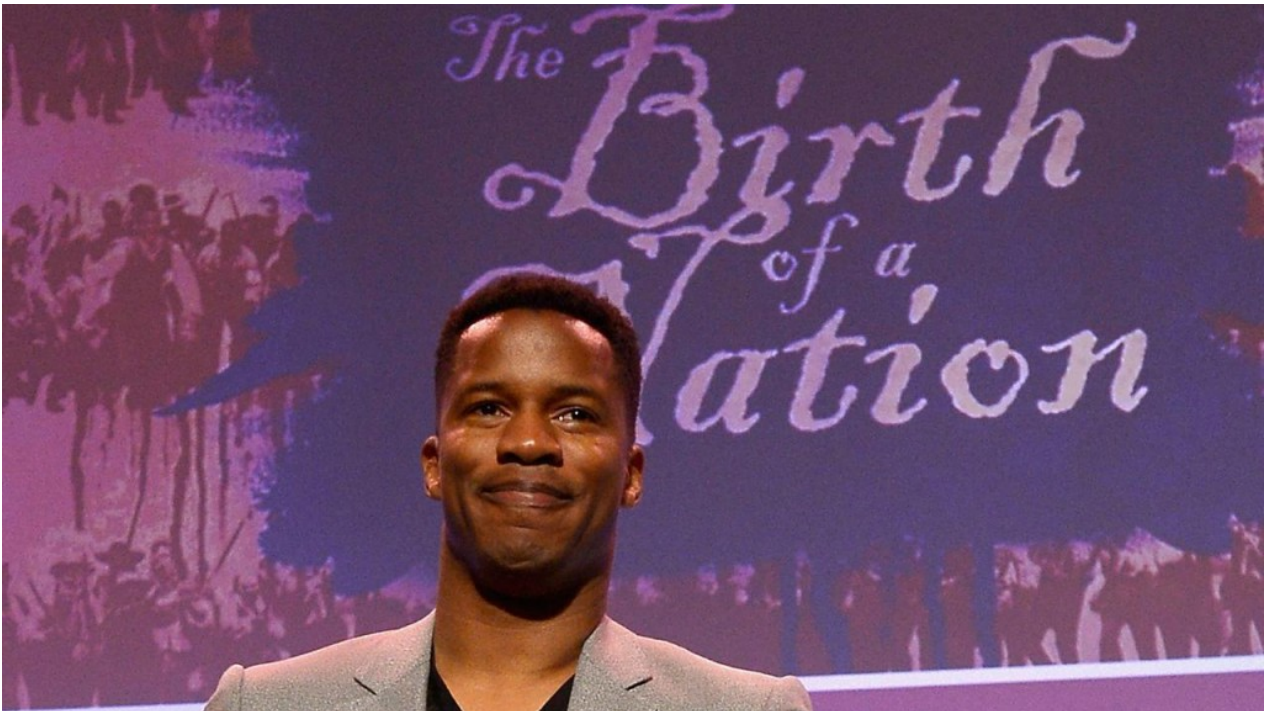


Some five decades after the much-flaunted 1776 Declaration of Independence of the white settlers, the importation and trade in Africans was growing at a fever pitch. Nonetheless, the economic system of slavery was already beginning to decline as is reflected in the film.

The failure of the slave system to secure a future for the Southern planters created the conditions for the intensification of the exploitation and brutality against Africans. Slave catchers of the period in Virginia and throughout the South are the forerunners of modern-day law-enforcement in their purpose and behavior.

After two centuries of super-exploitation and the development of a system of national oppression based upon institutionalized racism, Nat Turner and his comrades sent a profound warning to the slave masters that their plantations were not secure from unrest in its deadliest form. This episode in U.S. history reminds residents and observers of U.S. society that the plague of racism is very much alive and well in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Parker's work deliberating utilizes the same title as the notoriously racist silent film released in 1915 under the direction of D.W. Griffith. The cinematic innovation of the film a century ago through close ups and panning, made its propaganda incendiary. Historians say that the release of Griffith's film just two years prior to the American intervention in World War I under the-then President Woodrow Wilson prompted a revival of the Ku Klux Klan.



Wilson hosted a screening of the film at the White House in part due to his friendship with novelist Thomas Dixon, whose 1905 book, *The Clansman*, provided the storyline of the 1915 release of *The Birth of the Nation*. Wilson is noted for his efforts in reinstating strict segregation in Washington, D.C. Many believe he was an ideological racist and in recent times there have been demonstrations demanding the removal of his name from buildings and institutions at Princeton University, one of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the U.S.

In an article published by the *New York Times* on November 18, 2015, it says

“The students’ demands include the removal of Woodrow Wilson’s name from anything named after him at the university; cultural competency training for the faculty and the staff; the inclusion in Princeton’s core curriculum

requirements of a course on the history of a marginalized people; and the creation of a cultural space on campus dedicated to black students. During tense discussions between Mr. Eisgruber (university president) and more than 100 students spilling out of his office, Mr. Eisgruber refused to sign on to the demands. Though he personally agreed that Woodrow Wilson was a racist, he refused to remove his name. He said that Wilson, a former president of the university, had done some things that were honorable and some that were blameworthy. Mr. Eisgruber also said he would not require competency training for all faculty members, even though he and his cabinet had attended such training."

## The Political Economy of Slavery and the Racist Intellectual Culture of Historical Revisionism

In the contemporary *The Birth of a Nation* from 2016 it reveals the financial unviability of African slavery as an economic system. The protagonist Nat Turner, a preacher, is exploited by the planters in efforts to solve the problems of incorrigibility among the enslaved Africans.

Nat Turner is sent around the area to preach a doctrine of docility and obedience to the master class. Nonetheless, his exposure to the system in its most egregious aspects including horrendous working conditions, the selling of family members by the planters, the mass rape of African women and the deliberate division sewn among the enslaved themselves in order to maintain the dominance of the white slave owners and their functionaries, fueled his anger leading to a historic rebellion resulting in the deaths of many whites and the destruction of their property.

The field of American historical studies has been enriched by scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, CLR James, Eric Williams, Herbert Aptheker and others who rejected the notions of the "happy slaves" fostered by the apologist for institutional racism and national oppression such as Ulrich B. Phillips, Walter Lynwood Fleming and William Archibald Dunning. The racist approach to historical studies dominated the major universities in the U.S. during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In taking such an approach to the history of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction, the Southern and indeed the entire ruling class of the post-antebellum period, were provided with a pseudo-scholarly rationale for the maintenance of national oppression and economic exploitation of the former enslaved Africans. This same justification continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Africans seek to realize their inherent right to self-determination and national liberation.

The so-called Dunning school of Southern history blamed the Africans themselves for the failure of Reconstruction in the aftermath of the Civil War fought from 1861-65. Fleming, the son of a Alabama slave owner who taught for years at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, was so imbued with racism that he refused to even capitalize the word "Negro", as Africans were known in the period leading up to the 1960s, when the term was overturned by the Black Power and Pan-Africanist movements.

Fleming wrote in one of his major works that "The [N]egro is the central figure in the reconstruction of the South. Without the [N]egro there would have been no Civil War. Granting a war fought for any other cause, the task of reconstruction would, without him, have been comparatively simple."

This film by Nate Parker makes an important contribution to rewriting the actual history of the African people in the U.S. and consequently world studies. Without an accurate understanding of the development of America as the leading imperialist nation in the world it is impossible to design a program for transforming the present conditions of colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism.

Africans will of course be integral to the reshaping of international affairs amid the decline once again of the dominant economic class within the U.S. As slavery had outlived its usefulness and profitability in the mid-decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so has imperialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whether its ultimate decline can be realized in the absence of another world war is largely dependent upon the role of the nationally oppressed in alliance with the working class in the U.S. and around the world.

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