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What do North Korea and Colonial Virginia Have in Common?

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Men and women forced to live in isolated work camps, laboring 12 hours a day, six days a week, living half-starved, eating only bowls of corn mush.

These are the conditions endured by North Korea's agricultural workers today, but they would seem very familiar to black and white indentured servants working on Virginia tobacco plantations in the early 1600s.

Comparing North Korea today with the Virginia Colony of 400 years ago may seem unfair, but it serves to expose the myths perpetrated in both countries to support the status quo. For North Korea, exposing widespread famine and disease gives the lie to the regime's claim that it is a modern workers' paradise. For the United States, acknowledging our nation's slaveholding past

refutes the origin myth of idealistic religious exiles seeking a society committed to free expression and equal opportunity.

This rose-colored version of our founding continues in the mainstream media. In the December 11 issue of *Time* magazine, Nancy Gibbs wrote that America was the first nation in history “to be forged more by thought and faith than threat and force.”

Let’s start with North Korea. The recent defection of a North Korean soldier who ran through machine-gun fire to collapse across the border in the south highlights the terrible conditions endured under the Kim family dictatorship. South Korean surgeons found the defector carried dozens of intestinal parasites and had hepatitis B and pneumonia.

In the last decade 20-30,000 North Korean civilians have managed to flee the country. The *Washington Post* recently interviewed a dozen now living outside the country. They reported that factory workers often went unpaid and food was often only available at high prices on the black market. A United Nations report found that 40 percent of the North Korean population are undernourished, including 1.3 million children below the age of five.

The North Korean regime subjects its 23 million people to a state-imposed caste system known as “songbun.” As described in a November 25 op-ed article in the *New York Times* by Brian H. Hook, a U.S. State Department policy advisor, “from birth every North Korean is marked by the government as a member of a loyal ‘core’ caste, a ‘wavering’ middle caste or a ‘hostile’ caste and this designation determines access to food, housing, education, jobs – everything.”

These conditions of famine, widespread disease and class discrimination based upon birth seem shocking to most Americans in 2017, but four hundred years ago in Virginia, our nation’s first settlers lived and died in similar conditions.

Founded in 1607 on a small peninsula of land jutting into the James River, the Virginia Colony struggled as a distant military outpost underserved by its corporate parent, the Virginia Company. Between 1607 and 1622, the Company sent nearly 10,000 men to the remote colony, but only 1,200 were still alive at the end of the period. This mortality rate of 80 percent was due to repeated famines and frequent epidemics of malaria, typhoid, dysentery and smallpox.

The military commanders who selected the site for Jamestown, the colony’s first settlement chose a location 50 miles inland from the Chesapeake Bay surrounded on three sides by swamps.

Unfortunately, the adjacent swamp bred malarial mosquitos and the river at that point was a tidal estuary; the water had a high salt content and was often stagnant. Human waste quickly contaminating drinking wells. Lacking modern medical knowledge, the first colonists suffered wave after wave of diseases that they had no waw of preventing or curing.

Early Virginia was a two-tiered society. Almost all of the land was owned by men who had capital, either the sons of aristocratic families or wealthy merchants.

The white workers were desperately poor, illiterate young men from the slums of London, Bristol and other English cities. The Virginia Company paid recruiters to lure the unemployed men into signing contracts. The recruiters depicted Virginia as a “garden of Eden” with fruit trees, bubbling brooks, a moderate, warm climate and vast stretches of fertile land just waiting for the plow.

Since most of the recruits were illiterate, they signed the documents placing them in indentured servitude with a simple “X.” Most contracts required the men to serve four to six years of unpaid labor in exchange for free transportation across the Atlantic and the promise of “freedom dues,” a cash payment upon completion of their assignment. However, in the first decades of the colony, fewer than 25 percent lived to earn their freedom dues.

The colony finally found a winning formula when John Rolfe bred a new hybrid species of tobacco, *Nicotiana rustica*, a sweet-smelling variety which grew readily in Virginia’s fertile soil. By 1688 Virginia sent more than 18 million pounds of tobacco to England. With hundreds of thousands of acres under cultivation, the need for a dependable labor source grew acute. In the last half of the 17th century, the supply of poor English workers plummeted. A series of plagues reduced the population, while the Great Fire of London in 1666 set off a building boom and employed many new workers.

The wealthy planters who controlled the colony found the solution to their labor shortage in the growing transatlantic trade in African slaves. The first ship bearing Africans arrived in 1619. For the next thirty years the number of black workers remained small. The ruling white elite treated them as indentured servants, because colonial law made no provision for lifetime enslavement. Some black men and women earned their freedom and owned plantations, others worked as freemen at skilled trades including carpentry, masonry and blacksmithing.

In 1688, England’s King Charles II effectively took control of the Atlantic slave trade through his Royal African Company. The number of slaves arriving in Virginia dramatically increased. By 1705, the colony held 70,000 whites and 20,000 blacks (almost all enslaved). Many slaves had tried to run away and a few plotted revolts (usually foiled). The colonial legislature responded with the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705, which stripped blacks of most rights, and reinforced lifetime, hereditary slavery.

Many other Southern colonies soon adopted similar laws and by 1776 the 13 colonies held 2.7 million people of whom 550,000 were enslaved blacks.

Historian Alan Taylor wrote that when America declared its independence, “slavery and freedom were intertwined and interdependent, the rights of Englishmen supported on the wrongs (done to) Africans.”

This story of national origin, a society built first upon coerced white labor and later African slavery, is one many Americans choose to ignore. Many school textbooks and popular culture references instead identify the idealistic Pilgrims and Puritans as the founders of America. The idea of deeply religious, egalitarian New England society as the foundation stone of a new nation committed to freedom is deeply rooted in our self-identity.

Publicly discussing the repressive caste system and a regime-created famine in North Korean can only weaken the unpopular Kim Regime. Debunking the myth that America was built on devout Puritans working happily on family farms and ignoring the injustice of the “labor switch” to African slavery will help, not hurt our nation. When all Americans understand how racism and coerced labor shaped our nation’s economy and government system, can we move forward toward a truly just society.