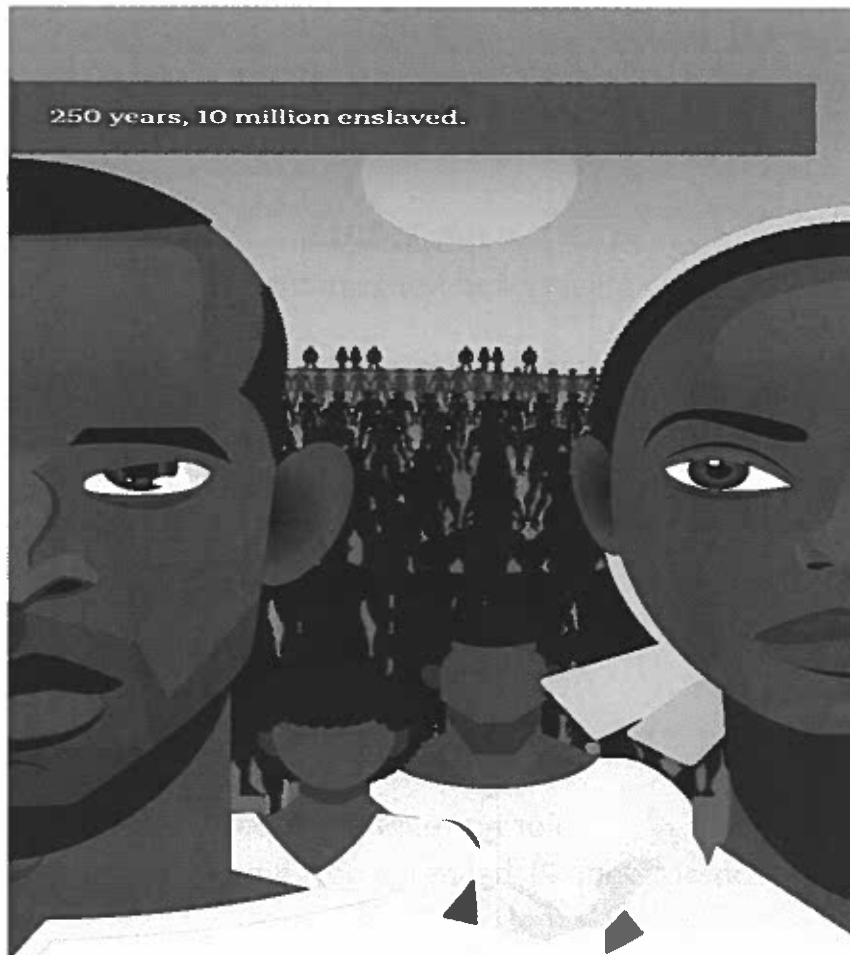


# 1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



**Topic: 1619 versus 1776 Projects**

**May 13, 2021**

**6:30 – 8:00 pm**

**Zoom ID: 823 648 5349**

**Password: 691353**

## **Upcoming 1619 programs**

All programs hosted on Zoom from 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.

Topics subject to change.

**June 10, 2021**

Slavery and Reparations part 1

**July 8, 2021**

Slavery and Reparations part 2

**August 12, 2021**

Slavery, Police, Prisons part 1

Please check our 1619 Discussion homepage at:

<https://heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project/>

And our Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3125417084169554>

For more information

Contact: John Piche' at [jpiche@heightslibrary.org](mailto:jpiche@heightslibrary.org)

# We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project

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[nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html)

December 20, 2019

*The letter below was published in the Dec. 29 issue of The New York Times Magazine.*

RE: The 1619 Project

**We write as** historians to express our strong reservations about important aspects of The 1619 Project. The project is intended to offer a new version of American history in which slavery and white supremacy become the dominant organizing themes. The Times has announced ambitious plans to make the project available to schools in the form of curriculums and related instructional material.

We applaud all efforts to address the enduring centrality of slavery and racism to our history. Some of us have devoted our entire professional lives to those efforts, and all of us have worked hard to advance them. Raising profound, unsettling questions about slavery and the nation's past and present, as The 1619 Project does, is a praiseworthy and urgent public service. Nevertheless, we are dismayed at some of the factual errors in the project and the closed process behind it.

These errors, which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or "framing." They are matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism. They suggest a displacement of historical understanding by ideology. Dismissal of objections on racial grounds — that they are the objections of only "white historians" — has affirmed that displacement.

On the American Revolution, pivotal to any account of our history, the project asserts that the founders declared the colonies' independence of Britain "in order to ensure slavery would continue." This is not true. If supportable, the allegation would be astounding — yet every statement offered by the project to validate it is false. Some of the other material in the project is distorted, including the claim that "for the most part," black Americans have fought their freedom struggles "alone."

Still other material is misleading. The project criticizes Abraham Lincoln's views on racial equality but ignores his conviction that the Declaration of Independence proclaimed universal equality, for blacks as well as whites, a view he upheld repeatedly against powerful white supremacists who opposed him. The project also ignores Lincoln's agreement with Frederick Douglass that the Constitution was, in Douglass's words, "a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT." Instead, the project asserts that the United States was founded on racial slavery, an argument rejected by a majority of abolitionists and proclaimed by champions of slavery like John C. Calhoun.

The 1619 Project has not been presented as the views of individual writers — views that in some cases, as on the supposed direct connections between slavery and modern corporate practices, have so far failed to establish any empirical veracity or reliability and have been seriously challenged by other historians. Instead, the project is offered as an authoritative account that bears

the imprimatur and credibility of The New York Times. Those connected with the project have assured the public that its materials were shaped by a panel of historians and have been scrupulously fact-checked. Yet the process remains opaque. The names of only some of the historians involved have been released, and the extent of their involvement as “consultants” and fact checkers remains vague. The selective transparency deepens our concern.

We ask that The Times, according to its own high standards of accuracy and truth, issue prominent corrections of all the errors and distortions presented in The 1619 Project. We also ask for the removal of these mistakes from any materials destined for use in schools, as well as in all further publications, including books bearing the name of The New York Times. We ask finally that The Times reveal fully the process through which the historical materials were and continue to be assembled, checked and authenticated.

Sincerely,

*Victoria Bynum, distinguished emerita professor of history, Texas State University;*  
*James M. McPherson, George Henry Davis 1886 emeritus professor of American history, Princeton University;*  
*James Oakes, distinguished professor, the Graduate Center, the City University of New York;*  
*Sean Wilentz, George Henry Davis 1886 professor of American history, Princeton University;*  
*Gordon S. Wood, Alva O. Wade University emeritus professor and emeritus professor of history, Brown University.*

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***Editor's response:***

**Since The 1619 Project** was published in August, we have received a great deal of feedback from readers, many of them educators, academics and historians. A majority have reacted positively to the project, but there have also been criticisms. Some I would describe as constructive, noting episodes we might have overlooked; others have treated the work more harshly. We are happy to accept all of this input, as it helps us continue to think deeply about the subject of slavery and its legacy.

The letter from Professors Bynum, McPherson, Oakes, Wilentz and Wood differs from the previous critiques we have received in that it contains the first major request for correction. We are familiar with the objections of the letter writers, as four of them have been interviewed in recent months by the World Socialist Web Site. We're glad for a chance to respond directly to some of their objections.

Though we respect the work of the signatories, appreciate that they are motivated by scholarly concern and applaud the efforts they have made in their own writings to illuminate the nation's past, we disagree with their claim that our project contains significant factual errors and is driven by ideology rather than historical understanding. While we welcome criticism, we don't believe that the request for corrections to The 1619 Project is warranted.

The project was intended to address the marginalization of African-American history in the telling of our national story and examine the legacy of slavery in contemporary American life. We are not ourselves historians, it is true. We are journalists, trained to look at current events and situations and ask the question: Why is this the way it is? In the case of the persistent racism and inequality that plague this country, the answer to that question led us inexorably into the past — and not just for this project. The project's creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones, a staff writer at the magazine, has consistently used history to inform her journalism, primarily in her work on educational segregation (work for which she has been recognized with numerous honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship).

Though we may not be historians, we take seriously the responsibility of accurately presenting history to readers of *The New York Times*. The letter writers express concern about a “closed process” and an opaque “panel of historians,” so I'd like to make clear the steps we took. We did not assemble a formal panel for this project. Instead, during the early stages of development, we consulted with numerous scholars of African-American history and related fields, in a group meeting at *The Times* as well as in a series of individual conversations. (Five of those who initially consulted with us — Mehrsa Baradaran of the University of California, Irvine; Matthew Desmond and Kevin M. Kruse, both of Princeton University; and Tiya Miles and Khalil G. Muhammad, both of Harvard University — went on to publish articles in the issue.) After those consultations, writers conducted their own research, reading widely, examining primary documents and artifacts and interviewing historians. Finally, during the fact-checking process, our researchers carefully reviewed all the articles in the issue with subject-area experts. This is no different from what we do on any article.

As the five letter writers well know, there are often debates, even among subject-area experts, about how to see the past. Historical understanding is not fixed; it is constantly being adjusted by new scholarship and new voices. Within the world of academic history, differing views exist, if not over what precisely happened, then about why it happened, who made it happen, how to interpret the motivations of historical actors and what it all means.

The passages cited in the letter, regarding the causes of the American Revolution and the attitudes toward black equality of Abraham Lincoln, are good examples of this. Both are found in the lead essay by Hannah-Jones. We can hardly claim to have studied the Revolutionary period as long as some of the signatories, nor do we presume to tell them anything they don't already know, but I think it would be useful for readers to hear why we believe that Hannah-Jones's claim that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery” is grounded in the historical record.

The work of various historians, among them David Waldstreicher and Alfred W. and Ruth G. Blumrosen, supports the contention that uneasiness among slaveholders in the colonies about growing antislavery sentiment in Britain and increasing imperial regulation helped motivate the Revolution. One main episode that these and other historians refer to is the landmark 1772 decision of the British high court in *Somerset v. Stewart*. The case concerned a British customs agent named Charles Stewart who bought an enslaved man named Somerset and took him to

England, where he briefly escaped. Stewart captured Somerset and planned to sell him and ship him to Jamaica, only for the chief justice, Lord Mansfield, to declare this unlawful, because chattel slavery was not supported by English common law.

It is true, as Professor Wilentz has noted elsewhere, that the Somerset decision did not legally threaten slavery in the colonies, but the ruling caused a sensation nonetheless. Numerous colonial newspapers covered it and warned of the tyranny it represented. Multiple historians have pointed out that in part because of the Somerset case, slavery joined other issues in helping to gradually drive apart the patriots and their colonial governments. The British often tried to undermine the patriots by mocking their hypocrisy in fighting for liberty while keeping Africans in bondage, and colonial officials repeatedly encouraged enslaved people to seek freedom by fleeing to British lines. For their part, large numbers of the enslaved came to see the struggle as one between freedom and continued subjugation. As Waldstreicher writes, "The black-British alliance decisively pushed planters in these [Southern] states toward independence."

The culmination of this was the Dunmore Proclamation, issued in late 1775 by the colonial governor of Virginia, which offered freedom to any enslaved person who fled his plantation and joined the British Army. A member of South Carolina's delegation to the Continental Congress wrote that this act did more to sever the ties between Britain and its colonies "than any other expedient which could possibly have been thought of." The historian Jill Lepore writes in her recent book, "These Truths: A History of the United States," "Not the taxes and the tea, not the shots at Lexington and Concord, not the siege of Boston; rather, it was this act, Dunmore's offer of freedom to slaves, that tipped the scales in favor of American independence." And yet how many contemporary Americans have ever even heard of it? Enslaved people at the time certainly knew about it. During the Revolution, thousands sought freedom by taking refuge with British forces.

As for the question of Lincoln's attitudes on black equality, the letter writers imply that Hannah-Jones was unfairly harsh toward our 16th president. Admittedly, in an essay that covered several centuries and ranged from the personal to the historical, she did not set out to explore in full his continually shifting ideas about abolition and the rights of black Americans. But she provides an important historical lesson by simply reminding the public, which tends to view Lincoln as a saint, that for much of his career, he believed that a necessary prerequisite for freedom would be a plan to encourage the four million formerly enslaved people to leave the country. To be sure, at the end of his life, Lincoln's racial outlook had evolved considerably in the direction of real equality. Yet the story of abolition becomes more complicated, and more instructive, when readers understand that even the Great Emancipator was ambivalent about full black citizenship.

The letter writers also protest that Hannah-Jones, and the project's authors more broadly, ignore Lincoln's admiration, which he shared with Frederick Douglass, for the commitment to liberty espoused in the Constitution. This seems to me a more general point of dispute. The writers believe that the Revolution and the Constitution provided the framework for the eventual abolition of slavery and for the equality of black Americans, and that our project insufficiently credits both the founders and 19th-century Republican leaders like Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner and others for their contributions toward achieving these goals.

It may be true that under a less egalitarian system of government, slavery would have continued for longer, but the United States was still one of the last nations in the Americas to abolish the institution — only Cuba and Brazil did so after us. And while our democratic system has certainly led to many progressive advances for the rights of minority groups over the past two centuries, these advances, as Hannah-Jones argues in her essay, have almost always come as a result of political and social struggles in which African-Americans have generally taken the lead, not as a working-out of the immanent logic of the Constitution.

And yet for all that, it is difficult to argue that equality has ever been truly achieved for black Americans — not in 1776, not in 1865, not in 1964, not in 2008 and not today. The very premise of *The 1619 Project*, in fact, is that many of the inequalities that continue to afflict the nation are a direct result of the unhealed wound created by 250 years of slavery and an additional century of second-class citizenship and white-supremacist terrorism inflicted on black people (together, those two periods account for 88 percent of our history since 1619). These inequalities were the starting point of our project — the facts that, to take just a few examples, black men are nearly six times as likely to wind up in prison as white men, or that black women are three times as likely to die in childbirth as white women, or that the median family wealth for white people is \$171,000, compared with just \$17,600 for black people. The rampant discrimination that black people continue to face across nearly every aspect of American life suggests that neither the framework of the Constitution nor the strenuous efforts of political leaders in the past and the present, both white and black, has yet been able to achieve the democratic ideals of the founding for all Americans.

This is an important discussion to have, and we are eager to see it continue. To that end, we are planning to host public conversations next year among academics with differing perspectives on American history. Good-faith critiques of our project only help us refine and improve it — an important goal for us now that we are in the process of expanding it into a book. For example, we have heard from several scholars who profess to admire the project a great deal but wish it had included some mention of African slavery in Spanish Florida during the century before 1619. Though we stand by the logic of marking the beginning of American slavery with the year it was introduced in the English colonies, this feedback has helped us think about the importance of considering the prehistory of the period our project addresses.

Valuable critiques may come from many sources. The letter misperceives our attitudes when it charges that we dismiss objections on racial grounds. This appears to be a reference not to anything published in *The 1619 Project* itself, but rather to a November Twitter post from Hannah-Jones in which she questioned whether “white historians” have always produced objective accounts of American history. As is so often the case on Twitter, context is important. In this instance, Hannah-Jones was responding to a post, since deleted, from another user claiming that many “white historians” objected to the project but were hesitant to speak up. In her reply, she was trying to make the point that for the most part, the history of this country has been told by white historians (some of whom, as in the case of the Dunning School, which grossly miseducated Americans about the history of Reconstruction for much of the 20th century, produced accounts that were deeply flawed), and that to truly understand the fullness and complexity of our nation’s story, we need a greater variety of voices doing the telling.

That, above all, is what we hoped our project would do: expand the reader's sense of the American past. (This is how some educators are using it to supplement their teaching of United States history.) That is what the letter writers have done, in different ways, over the course of their distinguished careers and in their many books. Though we may disagree on some important matters, we are grateful for their input and their interest in discussing these fundamental questions about the country's history.

Sincerely,  
*Jake Silverstein*  
*Editor in chief*

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The 1619 Project was launched in August 2019, on the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the English colonies that would become the United States. It consisted of two components: a special issue of the magazine, containing 10 essays exploring the links between contemporary American life and the legacy of slavery, as well as a series of original poetry and fiction about key moments in the last 400 years; and a special broadsheet section, produced in collaboration with the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. This work was converted into supplementary educational materials in partnership with the Pulitzer Center. The materials are available free on the Pulitzer Center's website, [pulitzercenter.org](http://pulitzercenter.org).



# How the 1619 Project took over 2020

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[washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/1619-project-took-over-2020-inside-story/2020/10/13/af537092-00df-11eb-897d-3a6201d6643f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/1619-project-took-over-2020-inside-story/2020/10/13/af537092-00df-11eb-897d-3a6201d6643f_story.html)

By Sarah Ellison

October 13, 2020

One morning in mid-September, Nikole Hannah-Jones woke to a text message from a friend noting an unusual event on President Trump's schedule: the first "White House Conference on American History."

It might have sounded banal, but Hannah-Jones, a staff writer for the New York Times Magazine, sensed a subtext immediately: This was about her and the project she says is the most important work of her career.

Sure enough, that afternoon, Trump thundered from a lectern at the National Archives Museum that "the left has warped, distorted and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies. There is no better example than the New York Times's totally discredited 1619 Project."

You've probably heard of it by now. The 1619 Project has emerged as a watchword for our era — a hashtag, a talking point, a journalism case study, a scholarly mission. It is the subject of dueling academic screeds, Fox News segments, publishers' bidding wars and an upcoming series of Oprah-produced films. It is a Trump rally riff that reliably triggers an electric round of jeers.

And now, at the nation's most significant moment of racial reckoning since the 1960s, it's become one of the hottest culture-war battlefields, where the combatants include turf-guarding academics, political ideologues angling for an election-year advantage — and the fearlessly spiky journalism superstar who willed the entire thing into existence.

All of this can make it easy to forget what the 1619 Project was — basically, a collection of smart, provocative magazine articles about the ways slavery shaped our nation. And by the time Hannah-Jones found her work under near-daily attack from brand-name intellectuals, the president of the United States and, as of last week, even the Times's own opinion section, it was already more than a year old.

**In December 2018**, Hannah-Jones was rushing to finish a book project before the end of a temporary leave from the Times — but another deadline kept nagging at her.

She had been thinking about August 1619 ever since discovering the date in high school, on page 29 of Lerone Bennett's "Before the Mayflower." That was when the White Lion merchant ship brought more than 20 enslaved Africans to the shores of Virginia — a rarely noted milestone that probably marked the beginning of chattel slavery in the mainland English colonies.

Now the 400th anniversary loomed. “And I was wondering, what I should do with that?” Hannah-Jones said in a recent interview.

Back at work, she told her colleagues she wanted to mark the occasion with a special issue dedicated to slavery’s impact on modern society. “It didn’t take very much convincing,” said Jake Silverstein, the magazine’s editor in chief. Hannah-Jones convened a multidisciplinary group of scholars — Pulitzer winners and Ivy League stars among them — to steer her thinking and brainstorm topics.

Seven months later, the 1619 Project had expanded to include a broadsheet section of the newspaper, a podcast series and a collaboration with the Pulitzer Center to develop a free school curriculum. Hundreds of thousands of extra copies were shipped to libraries and museums. The issue’s 10 essays about the legacy of slavery, most penned by Black writers, ranged energetically from sugar consumption in America and modern-day traffic patterns in Atlanta to the U.S. failure to guarantee health care to its citizens; they were interspersed with poems and short stories by artistic luminaries such as Jesmyn Ward, Barry Jenkins and Lynn Nottage.

The night before publication, a standing-room audience crowded into a 378-seat auditorium at the Times. “What if I told you,” Hannah-Jones began, “that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as the year 1776?”

Silverstein was no less bold in his editor’s note. The barbaric system that would endure in the United States for 250 years after the White Lion’s arrival “is sometimes referred to as the country’s original sin, but it is more than that,” he wrote. “It is the country’s very origin.”

The 1619 Project was an immediate sensation. Hannah-Jones, who would win a Pulitzer Prize for her introductory essay, needed an assistant to handle all the speaking requests. Silverstein recalls the rapturous crowds that would deliver a “laying on of hands” as she walked into their midst. Educators were thrilled by how their students connected with it, writing their own essays and creating art inspired by it.

“It resonated with many of our students that we are part of America, and instead of being ashamed of our history in this country, we can see our great contributions to it as African Americans,” said Janice Jackson, chief executive of Chicago Public Schools. “I was incredibly proud as a Black woman when I read that essay.”

**Sean Wilentz remembers** the Sunday morning in August when he walked down his driveway to pick up his Times. The Princeton historian was intrigued to see an issue of the magazine devoted to slavery; his most recent book, “No Property in Man,” explored the antislavery instincts of the nation’s founders. But then he started reading Hannah-Jones’s essay.

“I threw the thing across the room, I was so astounded,” he recalled recently, “because I ran across a paragraph on the American Revolution, and it was just factually wrong.”

Long before “1619” was vibrating on the lips of President Trump and leading GOP lawmakers, objections were brewing among serious liberal academics. Hannah-Jones’s 10,000-word essay opened with her father’s roots in a Mississippi sharecropping family before blossoming into a panoramic take on the nation’s history. In the passage that so enraged Wilentz, she asserted that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery” at a time when “Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution.”

This, Wilentz argues, is patently false: Other than a few lonely voices, England remained committed to the slave trade in 1776. The abolitionist movement didn’t take hold in London for more than a decade — and then it was inspired by anti-slavery opinions emerging from America.

Wilentz was impressed by some of the 1619 Project’s essays, but in November, he critiqued Hannah-Jones’s piece in a public speech. And he contacted other prominent academics, whose complaints about the project were chronicled by the World Socialist Web Site. Eventually, four agreed to join Wilentz in writing a letter to the Times, criticizing the project’s “displacement of historical understanding by ideology.”

It didn’t go over so well.

“We perceived it right away to be an attack on the project,” said Silverstein. He questioned why they didn’t just contact him or Hannah-Jones directly to offer thoughts on how to “strengthen this historical analysis” as he said other readers had.

Wilentz, in turn, was stunned by Silverstein’s response letter, which was published alongside the scholars’ in December and was longer than their own — a major tell, in his view, that the Times knew it had gotten something very wrong even while it appeared to dismiss the complaint and avoided addressing many of its points. “Holy smokes,” he thought. “This is war!”

Wilentz, who is White, had not succeeded in getting any Black historians to sign on to his letter. But some shared his concerns. Leslie Harris, a history professor at Northwestern who has written extensively about colonial slavery, was contacted in 2019 by a Times fact-checker asking if preserving slavery was a cause of the Revolutionary War. “Immediately, I was like, no, no, that doesn’t sound right,” Harris recalled. She thought the issue was settled — until she was a guest on a radio show with Hannah-Jones and heard the journalist assert that the colonists launched the revolution to preserve slavery. Taken aback, she was unready to argue

but retreated to her car nearly in tears: A fan of the 1619 Project's mission, she knew the claim could be consequential. "Given how high-profile this was, if this was really wrong, it was —" she paused, punctuating each word. "Really. Going. To. Be. Wrong."

Wilentz pressed his case, publishing a 5,000-word essay in the Atlantic in January detailing the errors he saw in Hannah-Jones's take on the revolution as well as her description of Abraham Lincoln as hesitant about emancipation. Harris took a different tack: Her March essay for Politico noted those points but also took a shot at the Wilentz letter-signers, arguing that their brand of scholarship had for too long overlooked the role of race and slavery in American history — a lapse for which the 1619 Project was compensating.

None of this discussion eluded the Pulitzer judges. Historian Steven Hahn, who served as the board's co-chair, told The Post he supported the main thrust of Hannah-Jones's essay — that Black people have been at the forefront of fighting for true political democracy — but had reservations about how she put together her argument, particularly the passage about the Revolutionary War. He laid out his concerns to his fellow board members. The majority still voted to give her the prize.

"Any serious historian would have questions about some of the claims and how they were made," Hahn said. He was "appalled," though, by the Wilentz letter: "It was pedantic — a big-shot historian saying 'Who the hell are you?'"

Both Wilentz and Harris feared that this very public discussion had opened the door to a backlash. Wilentz said he warned Silverstein about this when they met for lunch in January to discuss their differences — that Republicans would run against the 1619 Project in the fall election.

Silverstein laughed it off. But within weeks, an attorney for the president was referencing the 1619 Project to attack House Democrats' rationale for impeachment.

**When she joined** the New York Times in 2015 after working for Pro Publica and newspapers in Raleigh and Portland, Ore., Nikole Hannah-Jones was skeptical that she would fit in. Her hair is dyed firetruck red, her nails are long and acrylic, and she frequently wears a necklace that spells "Black girl magic" in script.

"This has been a conscious choice my entire career," she explained. "I was not going to try to adapt my sense of style to mainstream expectations."

In fact, the Times has embraced her, and she is considered by colleagues and rivals to have influence beyond her title. In 2017, she received a coveted MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant for her work chronicling the persistence of racial segregation. "I've teased her that the New York Times has many people who think they are geniuses," said Dean Baquet, the paper's executive editor, but "she's the only person who has been officially declared one."

She was raised in Iowa by a Black father and White mother, a dynamic that inspired her to cover race as a journalist. When her maternal grandparents learned their daughter was dating a Black man, “they initially disowned her, and did not re-own her until my older sister was born,” she said. “They loved us very deeply. But they were also prejudiced against other Black people who were not related to them.” Her choice, she realized, was to identify as mixed-race or Black. “Your mom is White, and I’m Black, but you’re Black,” her father told her. “Our country is going to treat you as Black and that’s who you are.” She embraced the identity, she says: “Why would I want to lay claim to people who wouldn’t lay claim to me?”

At the Times, she emerged as a prolific tweeter who has amassed nearly half a million followers, in part by sparring gleefully with critics. When the New York Post blasted protesters for toppling statues of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington as well as Confederate generals, it used the headline “Call them the 1619 riots” — and Hannah-Jones tweeted, “It would be an honor. Thank you.” Her response spurred a half-dozen articles by conservative critics expressing outrage. This past summer, she retweeted a wild conspiracy theory suggesting that a spate of urban fireworks was part of a plot to destabilize the Black Lives Matter movement. She later deleted her tweet and called it irresponsible.

Baquet noted that her magazine role allows her to express “more opinions and have more edge” than most reporters. Yet he has counseled her to draw some lines and pick her battles on social media.

“Dean has never told me I cannot be on Twitter, but he has suggested that maybe I need to chill,” Hannah-Jones said. “I know that sometimes what I have tweeted has hurt the work I am trying to do.”

**After six months** of defending the 1619 Project, Hannah-Jones and Silverstein received an email that convinced them that they had a problem.

Other scholars had weighed in since Wilentz — notably a group of Civil War historians who echoed his concerns about the description of Lincoln’s views and disputed another essay’s linkage of slavery with capitalism. Silverstein responded with a point-by-point dismissal. But the letter on Feb. 19 was from Danielle Allen, a prominent African American classicist and political theorist at Harvard, who also quarreled with the slavery-loving-colonists-spurred-to-war trope.

“If it instead said, ‘some colonists’ or ‘one of the primary reasons motivating influential factions among the colonists’ it would be correct,” she wrote. “But as it stands the sentence is false.” Allen — a former chair of the Pulitzer Prize board and a contributor to The Washington Post opinion page — warned that while she was now sharing her criticism privately, she might feel compelled to go public.

On March 11, the Times ran a “clarification” — a journalism term of art considered less grave than a correction — and added two words to the story specifying that slavery was a motivator for “some of” the colonists.

Hannah-Jones still sees no problem with her original text. She says she never intended to suggest that “every single colonist” was driven to preserve slavery. But “it became clear that if we didn’t clarify it in some way, it was going to dog us for eternity.”

But a clarification would hardly settle the controversy.

A conservative group called the National Association of Scholars had announced a “1620 Project” to highlight the contributions of the pilgrims who arrived in Plymouth Bay that year. And as the racial-justice protests of the summer renewed interest in the Times project — and the Pulitzer Center (no relation to the prizes) announced that 3,500 classrooms across the country were using its curriculum — it landed on the radar of Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.).

A rising-star conservative, Cotton had tangled with the Times earlier in the summer when his op-ed calling on the military to quell what he called “rioters” and “criminal elements” attached to the summer’s street protests triggered a mass uprising of Times staffers. (“As a Black woman, as a journalist, as an American, I am deeply ashamed that we ran this,” Hannah-Jones tweeted.) The opinions editor resigned amid the furor, and Cotton’s jabs at the paper helped his campaign raise \$1.3 million.

In July, Cotton proposed a bill to bar federal funds from schools that used the 1619 curriculum — “a radical work of historical revisionism aiming to indoctrinate our kids to hate America,” he called it. “The entire premise” of the Times project, he told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, “is that America is at root a systematically racist country to the core and irredeemable.”

In that interview, though, Cotton seemed to condone the Founding Fathers’ view of slavery as “the necessary evil upon which the union was built,” setting off a day-long news cycle in which he insisted his words were taken out of context and was pilloried by Twitter critics, including, yes, Hannah-Jones.

**And then, a couple weeks ago,** Hannah-Jones deleted almost her entire Twitter feed.

The 1619 Project was no longer just a team of journalists’ attempt to grapple with uncomfortable history. By the time Trump had attacked it, it had become a historic controversy in its own right, subject to scholarly dispute and debate and small-bore analysis.

It didn’t help matters much when it began to appear that the Times was backing away from some of the project’s bolder claims.

It started when Hannah-Jones took to Twitter to scold conservatives for misrepresenting the 1619 Project — which, she insisted “does not argue that 1619 is our true founding.”

But . . . hadn't she claimed exactly that?

A writer for the Atlantic launched a massive Twitter thread noting all the times when Hannah-Jones had said, in essence, that 1619 was the nation's true founding. That's what prompted her social media self-purge, she told The Post, so her tweets could not be “weaponized.” Meanwhile, the libertarian journal Quillette noticed that the Times had removed a phrase from the 1619 Project website describing the date as “our true founding.” But no clarification was issued, leading critics to suggest the Times was trying to wipe clean its history without owning up to its mistakes.

Silverstein explained that the altered words were from display text penned by a digital editor that they were “continually having to write and revise” for different platforms “to hone how we are rhetorically describing the project.”

He also acknowledged amending some of the prose in his own editor's note: It had not initially appeared online, he said, and when they added it to the site in December, “we made a few small changes to improve it” — not to backpedal, but to thin out rhetoric that seemed in hindsight like “too much flourish.” The paper's standards department agreed that no acknowledgment of the changes was necessary.

Hannah-Jones, meanwhile, protested that critics were taking her own flourishes too literally — why could she not speak metaphorically of 1619, in the same way that Barack Obama had eulogized John Lewis, the late congressman, as a “founding father”?

“Those who've wanted to act as if tweets/discussions about the project hold more weight than the actual words of the project cannot be taken in good faith,” she tweeted. “Those who point to edits of digital blurbs but ignore the unchanged text of the actual project cannot be taken in good faith.”

Last week, the National Association of Scholars doubled down by calling on the Pulitzer board to revoke Hannah-Jones's prize, taking particular aim at “surreptitious efforts” to alter it post-publication. Then on Friday evening came the most stunning slam of all:

“For all its virtues, buzz, spinoffs and a Pulitzer Prize . . .” wrote the columnist Bret Stephens, “the 1619 Project has failed.”

What made this attack different? Stephens is a Pulitzer-winning columnist for the New York Times opinion section, where he published the piece.

He defended the project against critics who claimed it rejected American values. But he suggested its small errors had accumulated via the authors' "monocausality" — an insistence on seeing everything through the lens of slavery. And he questioned Hannah-Jones's elevation of 1619 even as a metaphor.

"1776 isn't just our nation's 'official' founding," Stephens wrote. "It is our symbolic one, too. The metaphor of 1776 is more powerful than that of 1619 because what makes America most itself isn't four centuries of racist subjugation. It's 244 years of effort by Americans — sometimes halting, but often heroic — to live up to our greatest ideal."

Times leadership took pains to praise the 1619 Project this weekend. They maintained that Stephens's criticism represented not an institutional scolding of the project but commitment to thoughtful debate. "The Times's openness to hear and tolerate criticism is the clearest sign in its confidence in the work," acting opinions editor Kathleen Kingsbury said.

Hannah-Jones, though, was livid, and let Kingsbury and Stephens know it in emails ahead of publication. On the day the NAS called for the revocation of her Pulitzer, she tweeted that efforts to discredit her work "put me in a long tradition of [Black women] who failed to know their places." She changed her Twitter bio to "slandorous and nasty-minded mulattress" — a tribute to the trailblazing journalist Ida B. Wells, whom the Times slurred with those same words in 1894.

On Tuesday morning, Baquet put out a public statement welcoming the opinion team's right to challenge the newsroom's work but pushed back on Stephens's criticism of the project's journalistic standards. "The project fell fully within our standards as a news organization," he wrote. "In fact, 1619 — and especially the work of Nikole — fill me with pride."

Hannah-Jones has fiercely defended the 1619 Project. But today, she acknowledges that for all the experts she consulted, she should have sat down with additional scholars with particular focus on colonial history, the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, to better reflect the contention in the field.

"I should have been more careful with how I wrote that" passage about the revolution, she says, "because I don't think that any other fact would have given people the fodder that this has, and I am tortured by it. I'm absolutely tortured by it."

*2 p.m.: This story has been updated.*



# 1776 Honors America's Diversity in a Way 1619 Does Not

[theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/inclusive-case-1776-not-1619/604435/](https://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/inclusive-case-1776-not-1619/604435/)

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Conor Friedersdorf  
Staff writer at *The Atlantic*

America's original revolutionaries, along with Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King Jr., all placed the universalist ideals of the Declaration of Independence at the center of this country's founding. But that paradigm is under vigorous challenge from *The New York Times Magazine*. Last summer, the magazine began publishing the 1619 Project, marking the 400th anniversary of enslaved Africans' arrival in Virginia. In essays, stories, poems, podcast episodes, and more, the *Times* has grappled with how slavery shaped all that followed.

More controversially, the project explicitly aims to reframe American history, rejecting the centrality of 1776 and instead "understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are." In 2020, the *Times* will expand the 1619 Project into a book and promote classroom materials adapted from it.

That revisionist ambition quickly brought out critics—in outlets as normally antagonistic as *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page and the *World Socialist Web Site*—who challenged the *Times's* reframing and the factual claims offered as its basis. Last month, five historians alleged significant factual errors in a letter published in the magazine, alongside a response from Jake Silverstein, its editor in chief, who declined to issue corrections. That prompted another round of critical coverage from the *World Socialist Web Site* and historian Gordon Wood, a leading scholar of the period, who was irked most by the *Times Magazine's* doubling down on the claim that a primary reason American colonists favored independence was to protect slavery. "I don't know of any colonist who said that they wanted independence in order to preserve their slaves," he wrote. "No colonist expressed alarm that the mother country was out to abolish slavery in 1776."

That movement conservatives, tenured historians, and the editors of the *World Socialist Web Site* align so substantially in their critiques has broader significance. The debate over the relative salience of class, race, and hierarchy in the United States has divided the left while yielding odd convergences, and not only between classical liberals on the left and right. Both Trotskyist and movement conservatives can be fiercely protective of the revolution of 1776 and worry that centering race in history and politics divides America in corrosive ways (though they differ wildly on what should or will likely happen if racial fissures recede).

My own judgment diverges somewhat from the main rival factions in this debate. Like many critics, I hope the *Times Magazine's* work succeeds in causing more Americans to recognize the remarkable faith that African Americans showed in our country's promise even in eras when America least deserved it. Yet the core reframing that the 1619 Project advocates would unwittingly set back, rather than advance, the causes of equity and racial inclusion. Placing America's founding moment in 1776 honors the diversity of its people in a way that 1619 does not.

The 1619 Project began with an introductory piece from its creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones, and segued into a series of articles surveying the enormous influence of slavery over American music, housing patterns, voting rules, and crime policies, and over American capitalism more generally.

Many initial responses, such as Damon Linker's in *The Week*, praised the ambition of the *Times* project even as they lodged strenuous objections to it. Linker argued that the paper treated history "in a highly sensationalistic, reductionistic, and tendentious way, with the cumulative result resembling agitprop more than responsible journalism or scholarship." Other early critics worth engaging include Rich Lowry, Michael Brendan Dougherty, and Phillip W. Magness at *National Review*; Andrew Sullivan at *New York*; Glenn Loury and John McWhorter at *Bloggingheads.tv*; Lucas Morel at *The American Mind*; Wilfred M. McClay at *Commentary*; Timothy Sandefur at *Reason*; and Magness again at the American Institute for Economic Research. But little constructive debate about the substance of these critiques ensued, in part because center-left publications such as *Vox*, *Slate*, and *The Nation* tended to mock or pathologize those conservative responses to the 1619 Project that they found vapid (Newt Gingrich came up a lot), instead of grappling with the most thoughtful objections.

The most sustained, ambitious critiques came later—and from an unexpected source: the *World Socialist Web Site*, published by the Trotskyists at the International Committee of the Fourth International. Social-media users circulated the site's interviews with academic historians who believe that the 1619 Project got something important wrong about slavery. Among them were Texas State University's Victoria Bynum, Adolph Reed Jr. of the University of Pennsylvania, Brown's Gordon Wood, the City University of New York's James Oakes, and Princeton's James McPherson. They raised some of the same counterpoints as the widely ignored center-right critics.

Why did a socialist website invest so much time and attention to the 1619 Project? In the view of the site's editors, *The New York Times* is engaged in a reactionary, politically motivated "falsification of history" that wrongly centers racial rather than class conflict. "The establishment of a racialist narrative is extremely dangerous," the Marxist theoretician David North, chairman of the site's international editorial board, told me in a phone interview. "I cannot think of any action, intellectually or politically, more harmful to the struggle to unite the working class than an argument which asserts the primacy of race as the motivating

factor in history.” His efforts to rebut the project flow from his related belief that “the uncompromising defense of the progressive heritage of the two American revolutions”—the Revolutionary and Civil Wars—“is necessary for resisting intellectual retrogression and political reaction, educating the working class, and building a powerful American and international socialist movement.”

Conservatives and socialists alike tread on more perilous ground when they go beyond critique and impute hidden motives to the 1619 Project. In *City Journal*, Allen C. Guelzo confidently proclaims, “The 1619 Project is not history: it is polemic, born in the imaginations of those whose primary target is capitalism itself and who hope to tarnish capitalism by associating it with slavery.” Just as confidently, the *World Socialist Web Site* asserts that the *Times* project comes from an “affluent petty-bourgeois social stratum, determined to make as much money as possible, regardless of where it is coming from,” and that the 1619 Project’s identitarian politics is “a mechanism for dividing the working class, subordinating it to the right-wing, pro-war politics of the Democratic Party, and a mechanism for carrying out bitter struggles within the top ten percent for access to positions in academia, corporate boardrooms and the state.”

Both of these camps can’t be right, but both could be wrong. (While a few critiques of Hannah-Jones at the *World Socialist Web Site* have struck me as needlessly personal and uncharitable, she is on similarly shaky ground when she characterizes its several writers as “claiming to be socialists”—as if she doubted the Marxist ideological commitments of people who have been publishing Trotskyist polemics for years.)

Multiple sides in this debate see their factions as fighting against a dominant historical narrative. “It is finally time to tell our story truthfully,” the display text introducing the 1619 Project declares, implying that Americans have until now been telling an untruthful or woefully incomplete story.

“There is an implication running through much of the 1619 Project that slavery is a subject that somehow is rarely if ever spoken of in American history,” McClay writes at *Commentary*. He adds, “The shelves of American libraries groan with books on the subject by many of the greatest American historians, from Oscar Handlin and John Hope Franklin to Winthrop Jordan, Edmund Morgan, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, David Brion Davis, Stanley Engerman, Gavin Wright, and so on.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* argues plausibly that the educational establishment and the press already do much more to adequately teach about slavery and its modern legacy than the worker’s movement. “A reader of the 1619 Project would not know that the struggle against slave labor gave way to a violent struggle against wage slavery, in which countless workers were killed,” yet another of its published critiques declared. North and his co-authors Niles Niemuth and Tom Mackaman contend that by omitting major events in the American class struggle—from the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 to the founding of the

Socialist Party to the massive industrial battles of the 1930s—the 1619 Project offers “no real history of the African-American population and the events which shaped a population of freed slaves into a critical section of the working class.” How many Americans could describe the origins of something as central to their lives as the eight-hour workday?

These rival claims about which historical facts and narratives are given short shrift mirror a larger divide in which conservatives, socialists, 1619 Project authors, and their allies all represent themselves as marginalized voices.

*World Socialist Web Site* writers believe they are punching up against conspiring corporate media outlets, well-to-do journalists, international corporations like Shell Oil—which sponsored a Houston event related to the 1619 Project—and a Democratic Party that emphasizes the politics of personal identity rather than class. “The politics of racial, gender and other forms of identity is the politics of the upper-middle class, of all races and genders,” Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Joseph Kishore argued in a lecture on the 1619 Project.

Yet my colleague Ibram X. Kendi, the author of *How to Be an Antiracist*, casts the 1619 Project project itself as a vehicle for the historically disempowered to punch upward. In his telling, the Trotskyists at the *World Socialist Web Site* are giving voice to the establishment—which is to say, the professors from prestigious universities that they interviewed precisely because of their stature. “The criticism of the #1619 Project by these historians is part of a larger criticism in response to the tidal wave of revisionist racial history over the last five decades,” Kendi wrote on Twitter. “This revisionist history,” he added, “has largely been written by women, by historians of color, by younger historians, by antiracist white historians. We have rejected the master narrative that has in fact been the master’s narrative.” (Antebellum slave masters and tenured liberals at modern universities do not follow a common master narrative about slavery and its effects on American life.) For years, he continued, these revisionists have been met with “master narrative historians” trying “to limit our access to graduate history programs and tenure-track history jobs.”

I adhere to the classical liberal belief that one needn’t know who possesses which degree of academic, social, or political influence to evaluate whether an asserted fact, a piece of analysis, or a narrative is true or false. But truth-seekers are being thwarted in the 1619 debate, which has hinged on not only what happened in the past, but also who is commenting on it—and how loudly.

In my colleague Adam Serwer’s recent article about five scholars who criticized the 1619 Project in a letter, he noted “a recurrent theme” among historians he spoke with who saw the letter but declined to sign it. “While they may have agreed with some of the factual objections in the letter or had other reservations of their own,” he wrote, “several told me they thought the letter was an unnecessary escalation.” Similarly, North told me the *World Socialist Web*

*Site's* editors contacted several historians who have factual critiques but fear the backlash from voicing them publicly. Insofar as such historians are refraining from public comment at all, they do a disservice to public discourse.

In contrast, the Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter, who declined to sign the letter, had already explained her substantive disagreements with the 1619 Project in a *Guardian* article. Painter argued that the first Africans who arrived in Virginia were indentured servants, not enslaved ones, and that enslavement was a gradual process. More recently, she told Serwer that the 1619 Project was not history “as I would write it,” but added, “I felt that if I signed on to that [letter], I would be signing on to the white guy’s attack of something that has given a lot of black journalists and writers a chance to speak up in a really big way.” I’d fault Painter only for implying that the race of a historian is among the factors that should influence whether colleagues sign on to his or her critiques.

Regarding the five signatories who criticized the 1619 Project, the Duke University historian Thavolia Glymph told Serwer, “Maybe some of their factual criticisms are correct. But they’ve set a tone that makes it hard to deal with that.” A letter’s tone is not beyond criticism (though in my view the tone of the letter by the scholars is not particularly noteworthy, let alone disqualifying). But whether certain historians are right or wrong on the facts should matter more than whether the tone of their letter is perfect.

In my outsider’s estimation, historians sympathetic to the goals of the 1619 Project but skeptical of its factual claims do a disservice to its contributors by tiptoeing around them. For a mode of engagement more useful to readers *and* less patronizing of 1619 Project contributors, see “Fact Checking the 1619 Project and Its Critics,” in which Magness summarizes the *Times Magazine’s* major assertions and responds to them one by one. He persuasively argues that the *Times* errs in some disputes but prevails on the merits in others. Whether you agree or disagree with his fact-checking, his judgments are forthright, substantive, and falsifiable.

How does the story of the United States change if we mark the beginning of its history in 1619 instead of 1776? That question, posed in material that the 1619 Project is putting before schoolchildren, moves us beyond matters of fact. But I think a revision of the nation’s founding date would be a substantive mistake that would impede social justice, diminishing a moment that elicits this country’s best while pushing tens of millions of Americans further toward the margins of our national story.

In her essay, Hannah-Jones illuminates the brutality of slavery and the vital ways in which African Americans helped bring about a more perfect union, underscoring the impressiveness of their contributions by skillfully juxtaposing the subjugation most faced with the patriotism most exhibited. “Despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all,” she wrote, “black Americans believed fervently in the American creed.” I

concur with her that the plantations of antebellum America are better called “forced labor camps,” that black abolitionists warrant status as Founding Fathers, and that “no people has a greater claim” than African Americans to the Stars and Stripes.

I would add that neither the white settlers at Jamestown, nor the enslaved Africans sold there, nor the author of the Declaration, nor the African Americans denied the rights enumerated therein, nor any of the people celebrated on national holidays has any *greater* claim to this country’s flag than the most recently naturalized American of any race, color, or creed. Neither white nor black Americans belong at the center of U.S. history, because no racial group belongs there more or less than any other.

American members of the Mayflower Society; descendants of enslaved Africans; Navajos; grandchildren of refugees from Communist dictatorships; Hispanics with ancestors subsumed into the U.S. with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; and newly naturalized, foreign-born Muslims all share this: utterly equal claims to this creedal, individualist nation, where citizenship is grounded in universalist ideals. The United States can flourish, with its many races, ethnicities, religions, and national-origin groups, *because* all sorts of people can unite around the principles that every human is created equal and endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. America flounders most when blood-and-soil factions reject those principles.

For those reasons, I’ve always wanted children to be taught—as I was—that the United States was founded on July 4, 1776, with the declaration of those revolutionary ideals, rather than when the first North Americans crossed a land bridge from Asia into modern Alaska, when the Mayflower arrived, when George Washington’s army secured victory over the British, or when the Constitution was ratified. The words put forth in 1776 would inspire people all over the world to insist that governments are meant to secure rights, and that “when any government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it.” Those words resonated with Toussaint Louverture every bit as much as with Thomas Jefferson. How unique and useful to peg our founding to the expression of ideals that all can share, that are relevant across identities and generations, *and* that coincided with the moment when the earliest residents of our country formally broke with the prior regime, establishing a nation that endures today. To assert such ideals as our exalted beginning is to intensify the pressure to live up to them.

Any other choice is divisive and arbitrary. To underscore why, consider a 2017 *Smithsonian Magazine* article by Michael Guasco critiquing “the overstated significance of 1619” and fretting that the elevation of that date “erases the memory of many more African peoples than it memorializes.” In 1526, he wrote, a rebellion by enslaved Africans crippled and ultimately thwarted plans for a Spanish settlement on the coast of what is now South Carolina. Long before Jamestown, Guasco pointed out, African actors wielded the power to destroy European colonial ventures. He went on to argue that “telling the story of 1619 as an ‘English’ story also ignores the entirely transnational nature of the early modern Atlantic

world.” And most poisonous of all, he adds, elevating 1619 “casually normalizes white Christian Europeans as historical constants and makes African actors little more than dependent variables in the effort to understand what it means to be American.” It has the unintended consequence of “cementing in our minds” that recently arrived Europeans were already home. “They were not,” he observes. “Europeans were the outsiders. Selective memory has conditioned us to employ terms like *settlers* and *colonists* when we would be better served by thinking of the English as *invaders* or *occupiers*. In 1619, Virginia was still Tsenacommacah, Europeans were the non-native species, and the English were the illegal aliens. Uncertainty was still very much the order of the day.”

Is that narrative of 1619 any more true or false, any more or less enlightened or intersectional, than the *Times* narrative? Against charges of arbitrariness or problematic implications, the *Times* offers no adequate or even straightforward defense of the premise that the arrival of slaves in Jamestown was our true founding, leaning on vague, slippery formulations like “No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed.” Isn’t it equally true that no aspect of subsequent history “has been untouched” by the birth of Christ, the Magna Carta, the genocide of Native Americans, early colonists fleeing religious persecution, the appearance of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, the influence of Spain on the large swaths of North America first colonized by that nation, and a dozen other factors that echo across the centuries?

To substitute 1619 as America’s true founding not only centers one original sin, chattel slavery, over an earlier sin that was also abhorrent and consequential: the genocide and subjugation of indigenous North Americans. That substitution centers a story of white oppressors and black victims while overlooking groups as numerous and varied as indigenous Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and almost everyone whose ancestors got here after the Civil War (not to mention confounding characters like African slave traders and white abolitionists). Those exclusions will grow in salience to this debate as the U.S. becomes less demographically black and white than today, but no less in need of a unifying national narrative and civic creed.

What relationship, I wonder, does an indigenous Hawaiian have to 1619? How about Andrew Yang? And what about me? I was born in New Mexico, which entered the union in 1912, and raised in California, whose 1850 constitution banned slave labor by consensus. Circa 1860, travelers still arrived more quickly from Manila than New York City or Washington, D.C., and one in 10 California residents was Chinese. Years before I set foot in any of the 13 original colonies, I visited Spanish missions not far from my house, where the hierarchy of the Church in which I was raised subjugated indigenous people. My ancestors were German farmers who settled in the Midwest in the middle of the 19th century and French Cajuns who were expelled from Canada by the British and harassed in Louisiana by Catholic-hating

Klansmen. I have no English ancestors I'm aware of. If English Virginia circa 1619 was America's true founding, I'm not sure what that means for me, let alone a member of the Chumash tribe or a once-interned Japanese American.

But if America's true founding was the moment in 1776 when universalist ideals were put forth with the aspiration of a nation that would realize them in the future--if those ideals resonated with people from Haiti to France to Russia, with people of all races and religions, benefiting wildly diverse groups as they were more widely realized--*that* moment is equally inclusive of *everyone*, past, present, and future, who shares those ideals.

One might counter that a founding narrative of black subjugation and white oppression needn't be divisive or exclusionary--that everyone born in 2020 is a distinct person from Americans of bygone generations of the same race, that people of any skin color can and should identify with the enslaved victims of 1619 to 1865. I agree. But the 1619 Project itself at times treats African slaves of bygone centuries and African Americans born after Jim Crow ended as one coherent group and bygone slaveholders and today's white Americans as another, echoing a contestable, reductive, widespread, yet perhaps inevitable conceit. For most, ideals are more easily conceived as transcending race than people, even if one believes that, in truth, race is a pernicious fiction.

The horrors of 1619 are worth commemorating, as are the extraordinary contributions of African Americans. The legacy of slavery, which persists, is worth understanding and remedying. Yet the timeless words and values of the Declaration of 1776, as distinct from its fallible, hypocritical author, are still worth uniting around as the moment our unfinished effort to form a more perfect union began.



# The Hidden Stakes of the 1619 Controversy

BR [bostonreview.net/race-politics/david-waldstreicher-hidden-stakes-1619-controversy](https://bostonreview.net/race-politics/david-waldstreicher-hidden-stakes-1619-controversy)

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David Waldstreicher

Seeking to discredit those who wish to explain the persistence of racism, critics of the *New York Times*'s 1619 Project insist the facts don't support its proslavery reading of the American Revolution. But they obscure a longstanding debate within the field of U.S. history over that very issue—distorting the full case that can be made for it.

Last August the *New York Times Magazine* released a special issue they called the 1619 Project, which uses the 400th anniversary of the arrival of “20 and odd” enslaved Africans in Virginia to recast the history of the United States as a story about slavery and its long afterlives. Stocked with good writing and armed with the latest scholarship, lead writer Nikole Hannah-Jones began with a frontal attack on the traditional notion of 1776 as the beginning of an American history of exceptional liberty. She ended her introduction with a soaring call to reconciliation and a new American identity. It was also impossible to miss the challenge that the project's essays and poems posed to the conception of U.S. history as a tidy story of progress ever since the Revolution.

The enthusiastic response to the 1619 Project exceeded even the expectations of the magazine. Tens of thousands of extra copies sold out immediately. Teachers announced plans to use the essays in schools, as the project's designers had hoped. In response, rightwing magazines began to offer stinging rebukes. Some of the ruckus reprised debates about recent books on the antebellum South by historians such as Walter Johnson and Edward Baptist, who locate the roots of modern American capitalism within plantation slavery, setting the stage for the 1619 Project's emphasis on disturbing continuities in the present.

Later, after this initial wave of critique, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an essay calling the project “racialist” and went on to publish rebukes in interviews with four prominent historians—Gordon Wood, James Oakes, James McPherson, and Victoria Bynum—while Sean Wilentz criticized the project in the *New York Review of Books* in November. A backlash built momentum, culminating in December with a letter from those five historians addressed to the *Times Magazine*'s editor-in-chief, Jake Silverstein. The magazine's publication of this letter, along a response from Silverstein defending the project's interpretations and the scholarship on which they were based, has triggered an ongoing roiling debate.

The letter writers had three main objections, all concerning passages in the project's lead essay by Hannah-Jones—none of which concern the other line of controversy, especially among conservative commentators, about the relations between capitalism and slavery (coverage of the letter to the *Times* has monopolized the most recent discussion, leading that theme to drop out of the conversation). The first concerns her assertion that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery” and that “we may never have revolted against Britain . . . if [the founders] had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue.”

The second concerns her depiction of Abraham Lincoln as not committed to black equality, and the third concerns her contention that across U.S. history, black people have “for the most part . . . fought alone” in their struggles for freedom.

These are perennial issues in the history of emancipation and civil rights. It is no coincidence, though, that the first claim, about the American Revolution, has proved the most controversial. This dispute reflects deep fault lines in the field of U.S. history over interpretations of the Revolution, particularly in terms of its relationship to slavery and the status of African Americans. Though it rarely spills out into public view in quite the way it has recently, there is a longstanding debate within the academy over just how revolutionary the American Revolution really was.

Some historians, espousing what we might call the establishment view, insist that it is anachronistic to see slavery as central to our understanding of the decades-long revolutionary period. According to this view, the Revolution was in fact fundamentally antislavery, since it led to what Bernard Bailyn called in his 1967 study *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* a “contagion of liberty” that made it possible for Americans to think critically about ending the institution. Such accounts emphasize that various Northern states restricted the slave trade and began to institute gradual emancipation during and after the Revolutionary war, and that enslaved people used the ideals of equality voiced during the Revolution to press their own case for freedom. Although a civil war was fought over what the government could and could not do about slavery, these historians say, Lincoln and other members of the Republican Party envisioned a path to emancipation under the Constitution and made it happen.

This is the accepted orthodoxy underwriting the contention, made in the letter sent to the *Times*, that it is just wrong—as well as bad politics—to tell schoolchildren that some or many or even any American revolutionaries fought to defend their property in slaves from a powerful imperial government. Hannah-Jones wrote that defending slavery was a primary motivation for independence in 1776, but the pushback from Wood and Wilentz was far more absolute. This was not surprising to academics who have followed the work of these historians. Wilentz argues in his latest book, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation's Founding* (2018), that the Constitution was antislavery in its essence and most of its subsequent workings, and has repeatedly gone out of his way to attack those who emphasize the proslavery politics of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Andrew Jackson. And for his part, Wood, a student of Bailyn, called talk of slavery and the Constitution in Staughton Lynd's pathbreaking work “anachronistic” in his 1969 book *The Creation of the American Republic* and has never let up. According to his view, the founders belonged to a “premodern” society and didn't talk or think about slavery or black people. In response to Silverstein's response, he wrote, “I don't know of any colonist who said that they wanted independence in order to preserve their slaves. No colonist expressed alarm that the mother country was out to abolish slavery in 1776.”

On the other side of this debate is a growing number of scholars—Woody Holton, Annette Gordon-Reed, Michael McDonnell, Gerald Horne, and myself, among others—who question the establishment view of the Revolution and the founders. These historians, most of them younger than Wood or Wilentz, see a multi-sided struggle in an American Revolution that was about colonizing and winning power and authority. They see slavery as more than a peripheral matter.

They do not take for granted that the story is primarily one of uncovering the motives and beliefs of the founders. Their work has considerably undercut the glass-half-full version of the narrative, which sees the end of slavery as a long-term consequence of American idealism and independence.

In ambitious works that explore the “unknown” revolutions that contributed to the independence movement, for example, books such as Gary Nash’s *The Unknown American Revolution* (2005) and Alan Taylor’s *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (2016) have challenged Wood’s sunnier version of events. In their hands the story loses some of its traditional romance but gains a deeper sense of realism. Other scholars, such as Robert Parkinson in his book *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (2016), have shown just how concerned the revolutionaries were, in both the North and the South, with slaves as an internal enemy. Perhaps most important of all, newer histories show how Africans and their children themselves forced the issue onto the agenda of the revolutionaries and the empires competing for dominion, especially in wartime. If we were talking about any other revolution or civil war, we wouldn’t be surprised that enslaved people fought on both sides, depending on which side seemed more likely to improve their condition.

The resistance to this new scholarship by the deans of the establishment bears some similarities to the denunciations leveled at Charles Beard and the Progressive historians a hundred years ago when they began to develop the argument that perhaps the Constitution benefited the wealthy more than it helped ordinary (white) people. The newspaper editor—and later corrupt twenty-ninth president—Warren Harding heaped shame on Beard for desecrating the image of the Revolution. A few years later he started using the term “founding fathers” in his stump speeches. This time around, historians who emphasize slavery and reaction, including the reaction against antislavery, are accused by the doyens of U.S. history (and now a few of their somewhat younger successors, such as Wilentz) of being ideological purveyors of identity politics—as if Pulitzer and Bancroft prize-winning scholars such as Holton, Gordon-Reed, and Taylor are not, in fact, extending and enriching the field.

The split between these two camps is hinted at in Adam Serwer’s fine recap of the 1619 Project controversy for *The Atlantic*, “The Fight over the 1619 Project Is Not About the Facts,” published in late December as the debate was still heating up. Serwer writes:

The clash between the *Times* authors and their historian critics represents a fundamental disagreement over the trajectory of American society. Was America founded as a slavocracy, and are current racial inequities the natural outgrowth of that? Or was America conceived in liberty, a nation haltingly redeeming itself through its founding principles?

What Serwer misses is that this is not simply a clash between the *Times* authors and a group of historians: it is also a pre-existing argument between historians themselves. (Wilentz, in his subsequent reply to Serwer in *The Atlantic* this week, tries to perform a magician’s act and render invisible the very existence of that debate, much as he ignores the scholarship when he is not mischaracterizing its substance.) The arguments made by the 1619 Project are largely based on the work of scholars such as Horne, Holton, Taylor, myself, and others (indeed, Hannah-Jones and Silverstein have acknowledged as much). By bringing the critical ideas of these scholars to a

wide audience, the 1619 Project essentially drew back the curtain on a vital debate within the field of U.S. history. By responding with such force, critics of the project have helped define the contours of this debate. It is an important one for us to have, in part because this is an argument that goes all the way back to the founding itself.

In the years leading up to the Revolution, the politics of slavery proved polarizing, and the most deeply committed patriots, including John Adams and Jefferson, sought to control it and usually to tamp it down. Their private papers amply demonstrate their knowledge that the enslavement of Africans was tyranny of the most extreme sort. But they mostly kept such thoughts to themselves and their antislavery friends abroad, saving their loudest protests for what they described as their own enslavement—by the British. This questionable rhetorical tactic met with mixed results. By 1767 American protesters who claimed that unfair taxes amounted to a form of enslavement were being called out for their hypocrisy, even by their friends. “Oh! ye sons of Liberty, pause a moment, give me your ear,” asked Boston merchant Nathan Appleton. “Is your conduct consistent? can you review our late struggles for liberty, and think of the slave-trade at the same time, and not blush?” He also mocked racial justifications for slavery: “Methinks were you an African, I could see you blush.” Ending slavery was the only way to “shew all the world, that we are true sons of Liberty.”

A transatlantic battle of the pundits and politicians raged. Pioneering antislavery activist Granville Sharp quoted from ads for fugitive slaves in New York newspapers and opined that the colony deserved “the name of New Barbary, instead of New York.” Liberals such as colonial agent Benjamin Franklin were in the best position to justify those increasingly referred to on both sides of the Atlantic as “the Americans.” He wrote in London newspapers that slavery on the continent didn’t amount to much and was the fault of the English merchants who controlled the trade. Franklin also blamed the West Indies planters, whose lobbyists argued that simple racial inferiority explained slavery.

When Gordon Wood complains that no American founders said they were declaring independence in order to keep their slaves, he neglects the fact that most revolutionaries who tried to explain American protest were embarrassed about slavery. Long before anyone stated why they chose sides in ’76, they all learned that saying that they wanted to protect *that* property would have undermined their claims against the British by exposing them as hypocrites. It wasn’t a selling point in the pamphlet war; it was something to be defensive and quiet about.

That changed decisively in 1775, after Lord Dunmore, royal governor of Virginia, followed through on his threats to arm slaves—threats that had earlier been voiced on the floor of Parliament. Then suddenly the patriots spoke openly and often about slaves—as the enemy. No one ever had to say, “let’s rebel to keep our slaves” because they could say, and did say in Boston as well as in Virginia—at the very same time as the more famous battles of Lexington and Concord—let’s rebel because slaves are being armed against us. All this culminated in Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence, in which he penned a tortured, now often mocked paragraph that tried elaborately to suggest that the British were in league with “African corsairs” (slave traders) to make war against innocent Africans, who the British now were attempting to turn against the Americans.

Jefferson had tried out this blame of the British for the slave trade in his much-praised *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774); the hysterical, baldly hypocritical wartime version made it past Adams and Franklin on the Declaration committee, but not the Continental Congress, where, according to Jefferson in his memoirs, deep Southerners and New Englanders alike balked at the antislavery precedent that it would have set. (Franklin, however, had suggested adding that the King had “incited domestic insurrections among us” into the Declaration’s culminating complaint against the King for setting “the merciless Indian savages” against the colonists. The final Declaration of Independence, in other words, didn’t mention slavery explicitly, but the liberation of slaves by the British provides its ultimate justification.) To give the revolutionary ideology or movement all the credit for antislavery is essentially to echo without acknowledgment Franklin and Jefferson’s spin. It’s politics, and all the more dangerous when it claims to have all the “facts,” as Wilentz and Wood do.

Revolutions are measured by results as well as intentions, by effects as well as causes. And here too the record is mixed—in some regards the war only strengthened slavery, and in others it did indeed open new paths for dismantling it. Emancipation in the North was only conceivable with the revolutionary transfer of sovereignty to states that could, and in some cases quickly did, emancipate or legally permit voluntary emancipation. This development, along with the thirty to hundred thousand Africans who became free during the war years, created free black communities that ultimately formed the mainstay of an abolitionist movement that destabilized U.S. politics and inspired a slaveholders’ revolt and a civil war.

This is more than the proverbial butterfly’s wings—a lot more. It may not persuade us fully that the arc of history bends toward justice, but it should make it clear that the Revolution and the Civil War are fundamentally linked events. Both were civil wars. Both were nationalist revolts. Like most civil wars and especially those in the Americas, both precipitated the liberation of slaves, in a complicated dance of self-emancipation and contingent policy. Both led to reconstructions that reshaped constitutions. Much of the debate about how, and how much, to see slavery as a fundamental aspect of the founding, including the contention about how proslavery or antislavery the Constitution was or became, will be more satisfactorily addressed by thinking of the first century or so of United States history as two revolutions, two civil wars, two emancipations, two reconstructions, and a lot of not-so-great compromises.

But if results matter, numbers matter too. And the unavoidable fact is that in the American Revolution, slaveholders won the freedom to determine the future of slavery under a constitution that protected their interests in multiple, complicated, and especially *political* ways. The infamous Three-Fifths Clause, which counted three-fifths of “all other persons”—meaning the enslaved—for representation and taxation gave the South more power to shape all federal legislation as well as presidential elections. The Constitution of 1787 hardwired slavery into the political order, without ever mentioning the word “slavery.” This enabled the liberals of 1787 to walk away having not admitted there to be “property in man” but having done much that would prove to be worse.

With friends like these the enslaved hardly needed enemies. Quickly, systematically, the number of free people of African descent rose in the North and in Southern towns, but the number of enslaved in the United States increased far more. The domestic slave trade encouraged and facilitated by the



new national market moved a million people from the Chesapeake and the coastal regions to the new cotton districts and actually un-domesticated slavery, making it worse than it already was. It is debatable whether any of that would have happened in anything like the way that it happened without the sovereignty and power that the Revolution and Constitution accorded to the master class, the ways it freed them from imperial or national oversight.

In short, the story of African Americans confirms both the radical and the conservative—even reactionary—nature and results of the American Revolution, and quite possibly more the latter than the former. This is true both because any revolution ought to be measured by its effects on working people, and because the freedom-loving Revolution was supposed to be about liberty and humanity, not just taxes or nation-making. Even if one insists that the paradox is nothing of the sort because in the end, liberty was about property and thus about slavery, the mixed results were inherent, not accidental. What happened to African Americans forms not so much an exception as the revealing rule: that the Revolution had both radical and reactionary results.

Where does all this leave us? We should view with a wary eye any accounts of the two U.S. revolutions that insist that only the emancipation, or only the hypocrisy, matters. In this we can follow two commentators on those revolutions, the enslaved New England poet Phillis Wheatley and the abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

In the case of Wheatley, it has taken a long time for scholars to appreciate just how engaged she was in the linked revolutionary and slavery controversies. Indeed, she epitomizes the link because she herself advanced it. One of Wheatley's first circulated poems celebrated the repeal of the Stamp Act. In October 1772, in a poem celebrating Lord Dartmouth's ascent to Secretary of State for the colonies, Wheatley directly compared the critique of slavery to colonial protest: "Thus I deplore the Day, / When Britons weep beneath Tyrannic Sway." (By "Britons" she meant Americans.) She wrote this poem to be hand delivered to Dartmouth by an English lobbyist, a canny diplomatic move that helped set in motion her trip to London to secure publication of her book of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Boston patriots had been afraid to touch her manuscript because they worried it would encourage attacks on patriot hypocrisy already common in England. In the book itself she downplayed to some degree the link she had made between herself, and criticisms of slavery and race thinking, to the colonial protest movement. Both patriots and Tories who read her book could ally the antislavery ethos she embodied and conveyed to their political outlook, implicitly as well as explicitly. Wheatley hedged her bets.

In a sense, the Revolution cut off Wheatley's newfound British antislavery ties. So did her emancipation upon returning to Boston. Despite publishing poems celebrating the war effort, General Washington, and the prospects of the new nation, she was unable to get her proposed second volume into print, and she died penniless in 1784. Was she a victim of a racist, proslavery American Revolution? Yes, and no—or, more precisely, only if one shrinks the Revolution to the war. She had made her fame and her freedom in "the American Revolution." She was hardly the only person to lose in Boston's war-ravaged economy or the only public figure to die young for lack of work or patronage. To depict her as a victim of a lost (potentially more egalitarian) British-Atlantic world, as Mark Peterson has recently done in his rich history of Boston as an Atlantic "city-state," is to miss or understate what she accomplished. She helped force the issue of the

relationship between the American Revolution and the politics of slavery into public consciousness. She could hardly have done more: no one did. We can respect her choice of the patriot movement without presuming that she was uncritical of the results.

Similarly, Frederick Douglass has been cited as a severe critic of the republic, and of the founders' hypocrisy. In 2019 his Fifth of July address from 1852 received more attention than ever, with its coruscating, and poetic, distancing of black Americans from white: "The Fourth of July is yours, not mine. . . . You may rejoice, I must mourn." One hundred and seventy years ago, Douglass blasted his country for its original and lasting sins in the same kind of language that frames the 1619 Project.

But this is the same Douglass who had recently decided to cast his lot with an antislavery interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. How that came about is instructive, too. The blame game that Wilentz and others have sought to play on the 1619 Project's journalists is as much about political strategy as it is about history, and it can be traced all the way back to the split among abolitionists in 1840. Garrisonian radicals insisted that the Constitution was a "covenant with death." They also tied the struggle against slavery and for black citizenship to the plight of women. The liberals, by contrast—who went on to found antislavery political parties—saw these positions as divisive and strategically unsound. It might be fine for fashionably progressive circles in eastern cities, but it wouldn't play well in Ohio. (Not coincidentally, Wilentz has been writing for years about such progressive-liberal splits, while consistently championing traditional Democratic Party politics—opposing first Barack Obama, then Bernie Sanders, and now anyone else who indulges "high-minded politics," in the present or the past.)

Douglass himself had split with Garrison for a number of reasons, including a sense that he should be leading rather than following. Not coincidentally, he changed his mind about the Constitution and about abolitionists working with political parties. Some have thrown up their hands or criticized his seeming inconsistency, but there was a deep logic, as well as political savvy, here. It is the same understanding that Wheatley had: that to celebrate what was good and criticize what was lacking in the American Revolution were two sides of the same civic coin. Both were necessary for political reasons, but not least because both were true.

So it is all the more important to push back critically against the voices who would insist that the American Revolution and the Constitution were innocent of slavery—but also against the notion that they had no antislavery implications whatsoever. It remains important to question the myth that the founders never thought about slavery politically and that black people were not "central" actors of the period. Similarly, we should interrogate the debatable but equally problematic notion that no white person with power ever really meant that all men are created equal. The Revolution was a triumph *and* a tragedy precisely because it was an emancipation *and* a betrayal of its egalitarian potential. Denying the radicalism or the reaction against it is to deny that the American Revolution actually was a revolution.

Revolutions must be measured by what they do for everyone. Because revolutions do concern and involve those at the bottom, they inspire backlashes. The fact that both radicals and reactionaries, not to mention the descendants of fighters both for liberty and for slavery, have had, and still have,

a reasonable claim on the American Revolution explains a lot of what we are going through politically right now. What else can we expect in a republic built on slavery as well as on antislavery, and on the denial of both aspects of our past?

Racism is a product as well as a cause of our politics, starting with the American Revolution—and we should stop blaming those who wish to explain its persistence.

A bridge over the fault lines in the scholarship might be built by emphasizing both the proslavery and antislavery dimensions of the American Revolution and Constitution. This sort of understanding would also make better sense of the Civil War. But it would require us to see the American Revolution as more like other revolutions in history: filled with idealism, but also with selfish motives, and characterized by violent backlashes. Most of all, it would require us to accept that racism is a product as well as a cause of our politics, starting with the American Revolution, and that we should stop blaming those who wish to explain its persistence.