

# The 1619 Project and the falsification of history: An analysis of the New York Times' reply to five historians

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On December 20, the *New York Times* replied to a letter signed by five prominent historians requesting that the *Times* correct the historical falsifications upon which the 1619 Project, launched in August, is based.

This is the *Times*' first public response to the interviews of four of the letter's signatories, Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes and Gordon Wood, in the *World Socialist Web Site*. The fifth signatory, Sean Wilentz, published a separate critique of the 1619 Project in the *New York Review of Books*.

The historians are among the most widely read and respected authorities on US history. Together, they have dedicated a combined 250 years to analyzing the American Revolution, the Civil War and Reconstruction.

## The historians' letter

The five signatories assert their "strong reservations about important aspects of the 1619 Project" and state they "are dismayed at some of the factual errors in the project and the closed process behind it." The scholars continue:

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.

The signatories focus on the central falsification:

[The *Times*] 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.

The signatories state:

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.

Further, the historians raise troubling questions about how the *Times* produced the project, writing:

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.

The signatories conclude:

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.

## The response of the New York Times

The *New York Times Magazine* editor in chief Jake Silverstein rejected the historians' objections and refuses to correct the mistakes or explain the process leading to the publication of the 1619 Project essays.

"We are familiar," writes Silverstein, "with the objections of the letter

writers, as four of them have been interviewed in recent months by the World Socialist Web Site.”

He continues:

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?

Silverstein’s response to questions raised by the historians about the background of the 1619 Project is evasive and disingenuous. The 1619 Project is not merely a journalistic endeavor. It was launched by the *Times* with the explicitly declared intention of changing fundamentally the teaching and understanding of the history of the United States. The introduction to the project states that its purpose is to “reframe the country’s history, 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.”

The articles published in the *New York Times Magazine* are only the first salvos of a broader campaign involving the expenditure of immense financial and editorial resources. The *Times* is planning the publication of a series of books and other printed material. It is developing curricula that are already being taught to millions of schoolchildren in history and social studies classes.

Eradicating the distinction between historiography and journalism, the *New York Times* violates the professional standards and ethics of both fields. When challenged on its numerous factual errors, the paucity of its source material, and the ignoring of the scholarly literature, the *Times* excuses itself by arguing that its authors do not claim to be historians. But when it is pointed out that the authors have failed to present accurately, as is expected of competent journalists, the conflicting arguments in the debate over America’s founding, the *Times* proclaims that it is writing a new history.

Historians and journalists serve different functions. Journalism lives in the present, observing, assessing and commenting on what is happening. Of course, the best journalism is informed by a knowledge of history. But it operates with a perspective, and with an array of source material, entirely different from that required for the writing of history.

The preoccupation of journalists is with events and controversies of their own time. Historians strive to understand, reconstruct and explain the conditions and events of another time different in many ways from their own. The subjects of their work are generally not among the living and cannot be interviewed. An anachronistic approach to history—that is, one which judges the *dramatis personae* of another historical period on the basis of modern-day standards which were not known, let alone actionable, in the times in which they lived—is among the worst of all intellectual errors, exceeded only by getting the facts plainly and obviously wrong. The *New York Times*’ 1619 Project can serve as a future case study for both an anachronistic approach to history and a deplorable indifference to factual accuracy.

To the extent that there is a method to the 1619 Project, it is pragmatic in the most vulgar sense of the word. The writers rummage carelessly through the past, cherry-picking incidents to concoct a narrative that conforms to their preconceived racialist viewpoint. They explain historical events in terms of what the authors claim, often incorrectly, to have been the immediate motives of the actors. Of what Friedrich Engels referred to as the “motive behind the motives”—that is, the objective economic, technological, and social forces and processes operating independently of

the consciousness of individuals—there is barely a word. The protracted political and ideological evolution of the conflict between the colonists and the British Empire is ignored.

Based on what is written in the 1619 Project essays, readers would have no idea whatever of the profound influence exerted by the Enlightenment on the leaders of the Revolution, or that there existed a complex connection between Britain’s conflict with the colonies and the global politics of the second half of the 18th century.

### **The *Times* disregards historical scholarship**

The *Times* justifies its racial approach by claiming that slavery and the experience of African Americans are subjects long neglected by historians. In fact, the slave system—its origins, changing economic role in pre- and post-revolutionary North America, and its social, political and cultural significance over a period spanning several centuries—has been the subject of voluminous research. The essays that introduce the 1619 Project evince no familiarity with the massive body of work produced by generations of historians. The 1619 Project essays are not footnoted, nor are the readers provided with a bibliography.

Ignoring the historiography of the Revolution and Civil War, the 1619 Project presents issues that have been subject to decades of intense and rigorous scholarly debate as settled. There is a substantial body of literature on the points the project addresses: in particular, the interaction between the revolution and slavery, the influence of slaveowners on the drafting of the Constitution, and, in the Civil War era, Lincoln’s changing attitudes on race and abolition.

Had the *Times*’ editors approached the 1619 Project as serious journalists, they would have had a particular obligation, at the very least, to take notice of and reference the disputes of the recent past—disputes that were open and ongoing even as Hannah-Jones and her co-authors were preparing their essays for publication. Many of these disputes were covered in the *Times* before the newspaper committed itself in recent years to racial politics.

In 2015, the *Times* published an article written by Sean Wilentz, in its opinion section, in which the historian opposed “the myth that the United States was founded on racial slavery.” Wilentz described this myth as “one of the most destructive falsehoods in all of American history.” The *Times* did not challenge Wilentz’ views at the time. But it failed to consult Wilentz in the preparation of the 1619 Project essays. This was not an accidental mistake, but a conscious decision to exclude from the Project all countervailing arguments. [1]

### **The *Times*’ “closed process”**

The five signatories asked the *Times* to explain the “closed process” by which the project was compiled. They noted that the *Times* bypassed experts, disregarded “matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism,” and displaced “historical understanding by ideology.”

Silverstein answers with disingenuous generalities. He states that the *Times* “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.” He does not explain how individuals were selected to participate in the “group meeting” or in the “individual conversations.” It is evident from Silverstein’s vague reply that the *Times*

made no attempt to include in either the “group meeting” or “individual conversations” historians who represented a variety of interpretative tendencies. Clearly, the *Times* was not interested in listening to what historians who disagreed with the predetermined line of the 1619 Project had to say.

In view of their exclusion from the discussions from which the Project emerged, it is appropriate to recall what the *Times* once wrote about the work of Professors Wood and McPherson. The *Times* praised Gordon Wood’s *The Creation of The American Republic, 1776-1787* when it was originally published in 1969 as “one of the half dozen most important books ever written about the American Revolution.” Forty years later, in the November 27, 2009 edition of the *Times*, reviewer Jay Winik had this to say of the author of *Empire of Liberty*, a history of the United States from 1789 to 1815:

A final word about Gordon S. Wood himself. Who better to untangle this extraordinary but frequently overlooked story than a distinguished Pulitzer Prize winner and an author of several classic works about the Revolutionary era? On every page of this book, Wood’s subtlety and erudition show. Grand in scope and a landmark achievement of scholarship, “*Empire of Liberty*” is a tour de force, the culmination of a lifetime of brilliant thinking and writing. [2]

As it turned out, this was not the *Times*’ “final word” on the work of Gordon Wood. In a lengthy essay published in the July 22, 2011 issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, Wood was lauded by David Hackett Fisher as the “Historian of the American Revolution.” The reviewer described Wood’s singular contribution to the understanding of the founding of the United States and the society that emerged from the Revolution:

He went deep into primary materials and made an open-minded effort to understand the language and thought of 18th-century Americans in their own terms. After 10 years of research he reported his results, first in a short essay reprinted in this collection, then in the 1969 book “*The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*.” Leading his readers into the sources, Wood demonstrated that Americans in those years invented “not simply new forms of government, but an entirely new conception of politics.” They rejected ancient and medieval ideas of a polity as a set of orders or estates. In their place they created a model of a state that existed to represent individual interests, and to protect individual rights. [3]

Nor was the *Times* sparing in its appreciation of the work of James McPherson. In 1988, the *Times*’ reviewer, in an enthusiastic essay that appeared on the front page of its Sunday book review section, gave the following appraisal of McPherson’s history of the Civil War period, *Battle Cry of Freedom*:

The Civil War is the most worked-over topic in United States history, one of the most written about in the history of the world. It is therefore a particular pleasure to report that “*Battle Cry of Freedom*” ... is the best one-volume treatment of its subject I have ever come across. It may actually be the best ever published. [4]

In the light of what the *Times* has written about the scholarly work of professors Wood and McPherson, their exclusion from discussions on the framing and content of the 1619 Project was clearly a conscious decision, arrived at in bad faith.

### **The New York Times and the American Revolution**

Professors Wood, McPherson, Oakes, Bynum and Wilentz challenge the essential claim upon which the 1619 Project’s condemnation of the American Revolution is grounded. The historians assert unequivocally that it is “not true,” as the *Times* asserts, that “the founders declared the colonies’ independence of Britain ‘in order to ensure slavery would continue.’” They call the allegation “astounding,” adding, “every statement offered by the project to validate it is false.”

Silverstein responds:

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.

Defending the claim that “uneasiness among slaveholders in the colonies about growing antislavery sentiment in Britain and increasing imperial regulation helped motivate the Revolution,” Silverstein argues that “large numbers of the enslaved came to see the struggle as one between freedom and continued subjugation.”

This assertion rests on one episode in the Revolution, the issuing of the Dunmore Proclamation in 1775, which, writes Silverstein, “offered freedom to any enslaved person who fled his plantation and joined the British Army.” He cites one sentence from a recent book by historian Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, in which she writes: “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.” Declaring, on this narrow foundation, the world historical significance of the Dunmore Proclamation, Silverstein writes: “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.”

Professor Jill Lepore is a thoughtful writer, but the importance that she assigns to the Dunmore Proclamation is supported with only one statement by Edward Rutledge, a delegate from South Carolina to the Continental Congress. Moreover, Lepore proceeds to undermine her appraisal of the impact of the Proclamation as she goes on to state in the very same chapter of her book:

Aside from Dunmore’s proclamation of freedom to slaves, the strongest impetus for independence came from brooding and tireless Thomas Paine, who’d immigrated to Philadelphia from England in 1774. In January 1776, Paine published an anonymous pamphlet called *Common Sense*, forty-seven pages of brisk political argument. “As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand,” Paine explained, “I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet.” Members of Congress might have been philosophers,

reading Locke and Montesquieu. But ordinary Americans read the Bible, Poor Richard's Almanack, and Thomas Paine.

Paine wrote with fury, and he wrote with flash. "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind," he announced. "'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent—of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time.'" [5]

Professor Lepore is caught in an evident contradiction. If, as her reference to Dunmore suggests, American independence was instigated by a threat to the permanence of slavery, how is this reconciled with her admission that "the strongest impetus for independence" was generated by Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, which made the case for the liberation of all mankind? As is typical of his slapdash journalistic method, Silverstein seizes on one ill-considered passage by Professor Lepore, but ignores her more carefully considered appreciation of the ideological motivations of the American Revolution.

### The Dunmore Proclamation

Let us now investigate the Dunmore Proclamation. It is not a newly discovered issue: the Dunmore Proclamation has long drawn the attention of historians. Much has been written on it, with Benjamin Quarles' 1958 article in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, "Lord Dunmore as Liberator," among the most cited. [6] Only recently have racial-nationalist historians attempted to endow Dunmore's act with a progressive character. This falsification of history has far-reaching consequences. *The conclusion that must follow from the Times' glorification of the Dunmore Proclamation is that the defeat of the colonists by the British would have been the preferable outcome of the war; for the British were waging a war of social liberation against the efforts of the colonists to perpetuate slavery.*

The Dunmore Proclamation was issued in November 1775 by John Murray, Fourth Earl of Dunmore (1730-1809), who was appointed governor of New York and then of Virginia by King George III.

The presentation of the Dunmore Proclamation as the critical trigger event of the revolution ignores the chronology of the American rebellion. The Dunmore Proclamation was issued a decade after the Stamp Act (passed by the British Parliament on March 22, 1765), nearly five years after the Boston Massacre (March 5, 1770), two years after the Boston Tea Party (December 16, 1773), over a year after the convening of the First Continental Congress (September 5, 1774), seven months after military hostilities began with the battle of Lexington and Concord and the initiation of the Siege of Boston (April 19, 1775), six months after the Battle of Fort Ticonderoga (May 10, 1775) and five months after the Battle of Bunker Hill (June 17, 1775). Even in the southern states, the revolutionary movement was already far advanced by the time Dunmore issued his order.

Lord Dunmore was a representative of the British aristocracy. As a 15-year-old in 1745, Dunmore had participated with his father in the reactionary Jacobite revolt to restore the Stuart "Bonnie Prince Charlie" to the throne. [7] Eventually, the Dunmore family overcame the political difficulties created by this ill-advised allegiance. He ascended to the position of governor of Virginia upon the death of Norborne Berkeley, Fourth Baron of Botetourt. Upon becoming governor, Dunmore launched a vicious war to conquer territory in the Ohio River Valley primarily from the Shawnee Indians, a population of mound builders who had lived in the

region for over 1,500 years. [8]

Dunmore led an expedition through parts of modern Pennsylvania and West Virginia, subdued the Shawnee, and opened up the valley for settlement. Soon after concluding the expedition in late 1774, Dunmore turned his attention to the growing revolutionary mood among the colonists.

As governor, Dunmore had refused to sign a bill closing the slave trade to Virginia. But confronted with the threat of rebellion, Dunmore saw the need for a tactical initiative. He wrote to Lord Dartmouth on March 1, 1775 that he hoped freeing the colonists' slaves would "reduce the refractory people of this Colony to obedience." [9] He acted in November 1775, issuing a proclamation that applied only to adult male slaves belonging to owners who actively opposed the crown. The "divide and conquer" maneuver was a well-practiced ruse of the British to crush dissent.

Dunmore was acting on behalf of a British monarchy that was building a global empire based on the exploitation, enslavement, pillaging and military subjugation of the peoples of the world. The Irish, the Indians and the Chinese were being subjected to brutal oppression that would last hundreds of years. Well into the 20th century, the crimes of British imperialism are recalled by the Amritsar massacre, the gassing of Iraq, the suppression of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, and countless other acts of colonial and imperialist brutality.

As Sylvia Frey wrote in her 1983 article "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution":

Dunmore was no champion of emancipation. A slaveowner himself, he persistently invited slave defections without, however, freeing his own slaves or unleashing the black violence feared by the horror-stricken proprietor class....

The narrow limits of the policy were, moreover, purposely and unashamedly designed to accommodate the army's time-honored practice of taking spoils of war. Military expediency joined to the practice of despoiling the enemy produced a policy of ambivalence that both contradicted and invalidated even their limited and selective offer of freedom. [10]

While there is evidence that thousands of slaves escaped to join the British forces in the hope of securing freedom, the British treated these runaways with such extreme brutality that many runaways soon fled the British. Loyalist forces returned slaves whose owners switched their support to the crown, subjecting the slaves to brutal punishment as captured fugitives.

The British armed a small minority of the runaways, but the vast majority were made to perform dangerous and brutal labor with virtually no pay and little food. There is evidence that many were ultimately sold off into the West Indian slave trade. Frey notes that of the 800 who escaped to Dunmore's forces, most died of disease by 1776 due to lack of food, clothing and shelter. Of course, these slaves cannot be blamed for seeking freedom with the British. However, they were tossed aside when the imperial ploy to maintain control of the colonies fell through. One critical episode—the evacuation of Dunmore's forces from the British lord's headquarters at Gwynne's Island—testifies to the tragic fate of slaves who had been misled by Britain's cynical promises:

When finally routed by American forces the British vessels slipped their cables and fled Gwynne's Island, abandoning cannon, cattle, horses, furniture, tents for seven to eight hundred men, and several hundred sick, dying and dead blacks... Although

the total number of dead cannot be ascertained, one American officer counted 130 graves, “or rather holes,” as he put it. In the seven-week occupation of Gwynne’s Island, American sources estimated that five hundred of Dunmore’s people died, most of them blacks. Twenty years later, “the shocking remembrance of thousands of miserable negroes who had perished there with hunger and disease” still remained. [11]

Nor can the reference to the Dunmore Proclamation explain the increasingly vocal abolitionist sentiments in the North. In 1775, the first abolitionist society in the world was founded in Pennsylvania, while Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Rhode Island banned slavery between 1777 and 1784. Four years after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, Congress banned slavery in the Northwest Territories with the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787.

In contrast, Lord Dunmore left the colonies to become royal governor of Bermuda from 1787 to 1796, where he enforced a brutal slave system and personally owned a significant number of slaves.

The *Times* also does not mention the established fact that thousands of freed blacks and slaves served in the racially integrated Continental Army after January 1, 1777, when the ban on black conscription was lifted. Baron Von Clozen, a German officer serving in the French Royal Deux-Ponts, estimated that up to a quarter of the Revolutionary army was black. In 1783, the Virginia legislature passed an Emancipation Act granting freedom to all slaves who had “faithfully served agreeable to the terms of their enlistment, and have thereby of course contributed towards the establishment of American liberty.” [12]

If Dunmore’s Proclamation triggered the American Revolution, how does the *Times* account for the century and a half of antecedent colonial history, which culminated in the development of a popular political movement against oligarchy, aristocracy and monarchic rule?

Franklin, Washington, the Adamses (both Samuel and John), Jefferson, Paine and many others were the greatest representatives of an extraordinary generation of revolutionaries. They did not hold identical views on many subjects, including the eventual fate of slavery. But the argument that any of the principal leaders of the Revolution, let alone their mass following among the colonial population, were fighting to defend slavery against the threat of a British-led emancipation movement is historically and politically preposterous. It can be legitimately said that the Founders did not know or agree among themselves on how to end slavery, but none of them initiated and led the Revolution in order to save it.

The leaders of the American Revolution were confronted with the complex challenge of simultaneously waging a war against the world’s most powerful military and maintaining the unity of 13 colonies that previously did not consider themselves part of the same nation.

### **The historical context of the American Revolution**

Karl Marx wrote in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

The American rebellion against British rule was a bourgeois democratic revolution. It was in the nature of such revolutions to promise more than they can deliver. There is no question that compromises were made to secure the unity of the colonies in the struggle against Britain and, later, to achieve agreement on a constitution for the new United States of America.

Historians may find fault, if they wish, with the morals of those who made these compromises. But they must still provide an accurate account of the historical context and political constraints which led to the decisions of the Founders. No such analysis is provided by the authors of the 1619 Project. Everything is explained in terms of the alleged racial hatreds of “white” people. That is the one constant in the 1619 Project narrative, which it applies to its discussion of the entirety of American history—from the 17th to 21st century.

The Founders compromised with the slaveholding southern colonies in order to establish and maintain national unity. But this does not alter the fact that the American Revolution was a monumental event that changed the course of world history. The objective event was greater than the fault-ridden mortals who found themselves in the leadership of the Revolution. Professor Jonathan Israel explains in *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848*:

The American Revolution, preceding the great French Revolution of 1789–99, was the first and one of the most momentous upheavals of a whole series of revolutionary events gripping the Atlantic world during the three-quarters of a century from 1775 to 1848–49. Like the French Revolution, these were all profoundly affected by, and impacted on, America in ways rarely examined and discussed in broad context... Its political and institutional innovations grounded a wholly new kind of republic embodying a diametrically opposed social vision built on shared liberty and equal civil rights. The Revolution commenced the demolition of the early modern hierarchical world of kings, aristocracy, serfdom, slavery, and mercantilist colonial empires, initiating its slow, complex refashioning into the basic format of modernity. [13]

An anachronistic approach to the Revolution—that is, interpreting an event in a manner that is inconsistent with, or not relevant to, the general historical conditions prevailing at the time of its occurrence—works against an understanding of the event and the subsequent development of American and world history. As Wood writes in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, the democratic principles of the revolution called into question the previously unquestionable:

Americans now recognized that slavery in a republic of workers was an aberration, “a peculiar institution,” and that if any Americans were to retain it, as southern Americans eventually did, they would have to explain and justify it in new racial and anthropological ways that their former monarchical society had never needed. The revolution in effect set in motion ideological and social forces that doomed the institution of slavery in the North and led inexorably to the Civil War. [14]

The *Times*’ racialist presentation also undercuts a *genuine* understanding of the historical roots of the growth of anti-black racism in the South. The historian John Shy wrote:

By 1783, Southern slave owners, previously content to run a system more flexible and less harsh in practice than it appeared in the statute books, realized as never before how fragile and vulnerable the system actually was, and how little they could depend on the cowardice, ignorance, and gratitude of their slaves.

Troubled by the agitation, even within themselves, created against slavery by the rhetorical justification of the Revolution, slaveowners set about giving legal and institutional expression to a new level of anxiety about the system. New rules governing slavery and a new articulation of racist attitudes may have been one of the most important, enduring, and paradoxical legacies of the Revolutionary War. [15]

The period separating the end of the Revolutionary War from the beginning of the Civil War was just 78 years—equal to the distance between 1941, when Franklin Roosevelt was president, and today. In this brief timespan, an economic mode of production based on slavery, which had existed for thousands of years, was abolished through mass social struggle. Such profound transformations have their roots in objective processes, decades, if not centuries, in the making, of which even the events' leaders could not have been fully conscious. But that does not undermine the Revolution's lasting historic significance, nor does the fact that the participants did not hold contemporary views on questions of race and identity.

### **The *Times* and Abraham Lincoln**

Defending Hannah-Jones against the historians' claim that her portrayal of Lincoln as a racist was "misleading," Silverstein responds:

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... The story of abolition becomes more complicated, and more instructive, when readers understand that even the Great Emancipator was ambivalent about full black citizenship.

It is undoubtedly true that Lincoln is the most revered of American presidents, but this is not because he has been the subject of endless and uncritical eulogies by historians. The contradictions in Lincoln's political evolution and views have been the subject of innumerable books. Professor Oakes, one of the five historians who signed the letter to the *Times*, is certainly not an uncritical admirer of Lincoln. He evaluates the president in the context of the political conditions of his time. An article published by the *Times* on February 12, 2013, reporting the awarding of the Lincoln Prize to Oakes for his book *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, cites a passage in which the historian sums up his view of the president:

There's too much hyperbole in the way we talk about Abraham Lincoln. He was neither the Great Emancipator who bestrode his times and brought his people out of darkness, nor was he in any way a reluctant emancipator held back by some visceral commitment to white supremacy. In the evolution of wartime antislavery policy, Lincoln was neither quicker nor slower than Republican legislators. Instead they seemed to move in tandem. [16]

One of the central conceits of the 1619 Project is that it is advancing a daring, highly original and long overdue reevaluation of the Civil War and the role of Abraham Lincoln. Hannah-Jones was not "simply reminding the public" that Lincoln supported colonization, as Silverstein dishonestly claims. In her opening essay she asserts that Lincoln was a racist who viewed "black people [as] the obstacle to national unity."

Silverstein's claim that support for colonization in the 1840s and 1850s marks Lincoln as a racist is based on an anachronistic and moralistic appraisal that strips the issue out of its historical context.

From the aftermath of the Revolution to the run-up to the outbreak of the Civil War, colonization defined the mainstream position of opponents of slavery. Prominent colonization proponents like Whig Party leader Henry Clay "considered slavery's end an important element in unifying and modernizing the nation." [17] Clay believed that "the two races could not exist together in equality and in harmony" and that "for the good of the black race, the immediate abolition of slavery, with its expected sinister results, was not practical, and another option must be found." [18]

Abolitionism developed both out of and in opposition to the limitations and racist roots of the colonization perspective. Lincoln, like most Whigs, supported colonization well into the 1850s. But amidst the breakdown of the Compromise of 1850 and the breakout of militia warfare in the Kansas-Nebraska Territories, the Whig Party was destroyed by its inability to tackle the question of slavery head-on, with its southern members largely supporting the pro-slavery Democratic Party and its northern, anti-slavery members—including Lincoln—becoming Republicans in the mid-1850s. The significance of Lincoln's decision in 1862 to issue the Emancipation Proclamation was a radical break from the perspective that had dominated anti-slavery politics for the prior half-century.

Ironically, it was among sections of the black nationalist movement in the 20th century that proposals for colonization—advocating that African Americans move "back to Africa" to establish their own societies in countries like Liberia—found renewed popularity. As Clay biographer James C. Klotter notes, "the Pan-African movement of Marcus Garvey and others in the next century could recognize much of their rhetoric in the words of the ACS [American Colonization Society] a hundred years earlier." [19] Both viewed the harmony of blacks and whites as impossible—a position which shares much in common with Hannah-Jones' emphasis on the unbridgeable, unique historical "experiences" of blacks and whites.

### **The decisive influence of Lerone Bennett, Jr., on the 1619 Project**

Much of what Nikole Hannah-Jones writes in her introductory essay to the 1619 Project is indistinguishable from the anti-Lincolnism that was fairly common among black nationalist writers in the 1960s. In fact, the entire framework of the 1619 Project and, in particular, its evaluation of Abraham Lincoln, is to be found in an essay published in 1968 by the widely circulated African American *Ebony* magazine. Written by the racial-nationalist historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. (1928-2018), its title asked, "Was Abraham Lincoln a White Supremacist?" The author answered his question in the affirmative. Bennett wrote:

Over the years, the Mythology of the Great Emancipator has become part of the mental landscape of America. Generations of schoolchildren have memorized its cadences. Poets, politicians, and long-suffering blacks have wept over its imagery and drama.

No other American story is so enduring. No other American story is so comforting. No other American story is so false.

Abraham Lincoln is not the light because he is in fact standing in the light, hiding our way: because a real emancipation proclamation has become a matter of national survival and *because no one has ever issued such a document in this country* — because, finally, lies enslave and because the truth is always seemly and proper, it has become urgently necessary to re-evaluate the Lincoln mythology. [20]

Bennett continued to add—with increasing levels of vituperation, superficiality and dishonesty—to his indictment of Lincoln over the next three decades, culminating in his 1999 book, *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*. In this work Bennett denounced “White Americans who have worked night and day for more than 140 years to perpetuate the memory of a White separatist who wanted to deport all African Americans and who provides, moreover, the greatest example in all history of the wisdom of standing idly by in a great national crisis like slavery or apartheid or the Third Reich.” [21]

If the editors and scribes of the 1619 Project had spent more time researching their subject, they might have discovered an essay in the February 11, 1968 edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, a lengthy reply to Lerone Bennett, Jr. written by editorial member Herbert Mitgang. The essay's title asked the question: “Was Lincoln Just a Honkie?” Mitgang summarized Bennett's indictment, which anticipated all the arguments that would be made by Hannah-Jones a half-century later.

The main points stated about Lincoln are that he was a firm believer in white supremacy; that he was not opposed to slavery; that even his opposition to the extension of slavery was late and hypocritical; that he grew during the war—but not much, because he really was not a humanitarian; that the Emancipation Proclamation was a political stratagem to buy time and forestall a real act to free the slaves; that Lincoln intended Reconstruction to be strictly for white people. [22]

Mitgang presented a detailed refutation of Bennett's arguments, reconstructing the evolution of Lincoln's views on slavery from the 1840s to the end of his life. Mitgang did not glorify Lincoln, but he forcefully argued that the 16th American president came to play a monumentally progressive role in the history of the United States. His words serve as a condemnation of the actions of his successors in the editorial offices of the *Times*. Mitgang wrote:

To brand Lincoln a white supremacist is to call the Emancipation Proclamation, the constitutional amendments against slavery and for freedom, and the defeat of the Confederacy and its inhuman “institution” anti-Negro acts. To judge a President by selective quotations, and apply these a century later as a means of clouding contemporary yearnings, is historical mischief and sad. [23]

Bennett's name does not appear in Hannah-Jones' essay, nor is his article and later book referenced. One cannot avoid the conclusion that the *Times* considered it ill-advised to associate the 1619 Project with Bennett's writings, which have been largely discredited among historians. But the influence of his writings on the 1619 Project is obvious. Hannah-Jones herself stated, in an interview published in the *Daily Press* on November 8, 2019, that reading Bennett's *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619-1962* while still a high school

student in Iowa deeply affected her. “I just remember being struck that we have grown up knowing about the Mayflower and 1620 but had never heard of the White Lion [the name of the ship that transported the Africans to the English colonies in 1619].”

Hannah-Jones' devotion to the work of Lerone Bennett may help explain why James McPherson was not consulted by the editors of the 1619 Project. McPherson wrote a critical review of Bennett's *Forced Into Glory*, which was published in the August 27, 2000 edition of the *New York Times*. He tore Bennett's misrepresentation of the Emancipation Proclamation to pieces. McPherson concluded his review of *Forced Into Glory* with the following observation: “Bennett fails to appreciate the acuity and empathy that enabled Lincoln to transcend his prejudices and to preside over the greatest social revolution in American history, the liberation of four million slaves.”

The editors of the *Times* are less bombastic than Bennett, but they are not more accurate. Silverstein's claim that Lincoln was “ambivalent about full black citizenship” discounts the fact that the 14th Amendment, which guaranteed the right of citizenship to freed slaves, could not have become reality without both the Emancipation Proclamation and Union victory in the war. The 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments were collectively called the Civil War Amendments because they enshrined in constitutional law what the war had accomplished through political and military deeds.

In calling attention to the influence of Bennett's writings on the 1619 Project, one proviso must be made. Bennett did acknowledge the critical role of abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips in advancing the struggle for emancipation and African American equality. That is ignored by Hannah-Jones, who claims that in the fight for democracy African Americans fought “alone.”

### The 1619 Project's selective recollection of oppressions

The *Times* claims its racist narrative is justified because “it is difficult to argue that equality has ever been truly achieved for black Americans.” In fact, equality *could never* and never *has been achieved* for the great majority of the population in capitalist America. But before examining the question of contemporary inequality in the United States, one is obligated to call attention to the fact that Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project as a whole display indifference to the oppression and suffering of all other, i.e., non-African American, inhabitants of the American continent.

The *Times*' Project is a politically-motivated falsification of history. It presents the origins of the United States entirely through the prism of racial conflict.

The existence of chattel slavery was one of the greatest crimes committed on the guilty soil of the United States. But the blood drawn by the slaveowners' lashes was, to some significant extent, as Lincoln so memorably declared in his Second Inaugural, paid for with the blood of the several hundred thousand soldiers who perished in the Civil War of 1861-1865. But there was no such retribution for the genocidal wars waged against the original inhabitants of the American continent. Their fate receives no mention in the 1619 Project.

What of the extreme brutality confronting the waves of Irish immigrants fleeing famine? Or of the Italians who were viciously stereotyped, abused, and, during the Red Scare of the early 1920s, deported? One wonders if Hannah-Jones has ever heard of Sacco and Vanzetti. Or of the exploitation of Chinese “coolie” labor. And what of the internment of the Japanese Americans? What of the Jewish immigrants, who faced decades of vicious anti-Semitic prejudice in “Christian” America? Not a word about these elements of the harsh “immigrant experience” is to be found in the 1619 Project essays. And the entire vast subject of the American labor

movement, with its violent struggles and innumerable martyrs, is not mentioned.

All of the many instances of oppression should be documented and remembered. Each victim of injustice, in whatever form, has a legitimate claim on the conscience of mankind. But sympathy, in and of itself, is inadequate. It is necessary that the real causes of the crimes be understood. For this, a moralistic and anachronistic attitude toward history is not only inadequate. It is a barrier to identifying, and, ultimately, removing the objective causes of the many forms of oppression and exploitation that developed within the United States in the aftermath of both the Revolution of 1775-1783 and the Civil War of 1861-1865.

For all the magnificent principles and ideals proclaimed by the two great revolutions that erupted on the American continent between 1775 and 1865, these events were, in the final analysis, bourgeois revolutions. There existed, inevitably, a gap between the ideals they proclaimed and their real social-economic and political purpose.

The Revolution of 1775-1783 paved the way for the vast expansion of capitalism on the North American continent and the development of a new form of capitalist nation state. After the still maturing North American bourgeoisie threw off the shackles of colonial rule, the class tensions within the new society developed rapidly.

As the Revolution broke down the old aristocratic system, Gordon Wood notes, “growing opportunities for wealth turned social mobility into a scramble” and “expectations of raising one’s standard of living—if only to buy new consumer goods—seeped deeper and deeper into the society and had profound effects on the consciousness of ordinary people. Instead of creating a new order of benevolence and selflessness, enlightened republicanism was breeding social competitiveness and individualism; and there seemed no easy way of stopping it.” The Revolution, Wood writes, “was the source of its own contradictions.” [24]

These contradictions found expression in the Constitution itself, drafted by erstwhile revolutionary politicians who now held state power. The new ruling class confronted the dangers of popular plebeian democracy in the rebellion of poor farmers in Shays’ Rebellion of 1786-87 and would soon confront it again in the Whiskey Rebellion of the early 1790s.

Wood explains, “The federal Constitution of 1787 was in part a response to these popular social developments, an attempt to mitigate their effects by new institutional arrangements.” [25] While the Constitution sought to establish a strong federal state, so powerful were the democratic aspirations of the masses of people, unleashed by the Revolution itself, that the Bill of Rights emerged as a compromise to protect the people against the government. For the past 200 years, the Bill of Rights has provided the framework for all discussion of social change, reform and even revolution.

### **The contemporary context of the 1619 Project**

The *Times*, as we have already noted, states that “it is difficult to argue that equality has ever been truly achieved for black Americans.” The implicit claim that inequality—socioeconomic and political—is the exclusive fate of African Americans is a stunning demonstration of the blindness and self-absorption that characterizes the outlook of the editors and writers of the 1619 Project.

The *Times*’ racist attack on the American Revolution and Civil War takes place under conditions of growing opposition to social inequality in the United States. After decades of their suppression, mass demonstrations and strikes by workers are emerging as powerful manifestations of social opposition. Significantly, the mass demonstrations and strikes of 2019 involved in every case the unified action of the working class. There is not

a single example of unified action by workers being disrupted by differences related to race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual preference. The protests were not the actions of different “identities,” but rather of a social class.

The movement of the working class in the United States is part of a global process. In 2019, people of all races and many nationalities participated in mass demonstrations and protests demanding equality and democratic rights. Though the skin pigmentation of the people of Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, France, Haiti, Sudan and Hong Kong differ, the demands of the masses of people are similar.

Inevitably, the emergence of the mass working class movement is finding its political reflection in a renewed interest in socialism as an alternative to capitalism. Of course, popular understanding of socialism and how it is to be achieved is still very limited. But the process of political radicalization will gather speed as the mass movement grows and social conflict becomes increasingly intense. The ruling class, supremely sensitive to any intellectual, cultural and political tendency that threatens its wealth and power, is alarmed by the incipient spread of socialistic sentiments and ideas. President Trump proclaims that socialism will not be allowed to come to power in the United States.

Trump gives expression to the ruling class’ fear of socialism in an obscene and fascistic language that is consistent with his political persona and objectives. He relentlessly scapegoats immigrants as a means of disorienting and misdirecting the social anger generated by economic hardship experienced by broad sections of the working class, i.e., the overwhelming majority of the population.

Democrats employ a different, and certainly more politically sophisticated, strategy, which is no less directed toward fomenting divisions in the working class. It is based on the relentless promotion of various forms of “identity” politics.

Over the course of the last three decades, the Democratic Party has become more closely identified with finance capital, even winning a majority of the votes of affluent Americans in the 2016 and 2018 elections. The Democrats’ obsessive focus on race and identity is aimed at undermining the development of class consciousness. To the extent that the Democratic Party retains an electoral base among African American workers, it seeks to root this not on an appeal to their economic interests, but rather to their racial identity.

Support for this political stratagem is particularly pronounced among affluent African Americans who have benefited from various forms of racially grounded affirmative action programs, which have provided access to positions that make possible the accumulation of substantial wealth. In his brief reference to inequality, Silverstein refers only to the disparity between black and white household income. It should be noted that the figures he provides to accentuate this disparity are distorted by the inclusion of mega-millionaires and billionaires in the calculation of white household income. Significantly, Silverstein avoids any reference to the extreme growth of social inequality *within* the African American population. From 2007 to 2015, the share of the total wealth among African Americans owned by the richest 1 percent of African Americans soared from 19 percent to over 40 percent. [26]

The politics of racial identity have flourished under conditions where the wealthiest African Americans are separating themselves from the vast majority of black workers, the poorest 60 percent of whom own negative wealth. Meanwhile, white people who belong to the working class—those who the *Times* alleges benefit from “privilege”—are dying at unprecedented rates from diseases of social despair, including alcoholism, suicide and opioid overdose.

### **The political consequences of historical falsification**



It is not our contention that every editor and writer involved in the 1619 Project is engaged in deliberate deception or is merely chasing career opportunities. As always, many individual factors and motivations are at work. Some are merely ill-informed. There are some who may sincerely feel they are making amends for the history of racial discrimination in the United States. And there are those, to be blunt, who welcome the opportunity to profit handsomely off of speaking fees, book contracts, corporate promotions, and all manner of revenues generated by diverse forms of pseudo-intellectual huckstering. Hannah-Jones' acceptance of the sponsorship of Shell Oil, which is implicated in the murderous oppression of the Ogoni people in Nigeria, is a deplorable example of the latter.

The falsification of history invariably serves very real, even if unstated, contemporary political interests. The racial narrative is intended to replace one that is based on the analysis of objectively existing social and class interests. The *New York Times*, as a corporate entity and, more importantly, a powerful voice of the ruling class and its state, has a very real political agenda, which is closely coordinated with the Democratic Party. Silverstein never explains why the *Times* now adopts, as the basis of an essential change in the teaching of American history, the race-based narrative of Lerone Bennett, Jr., which it explicitly and forcefully rejected 50 years ago. Nor does he explain why the *Times* rejects the criticisms of Gordon Wood and James McPherson, whom it was describing less than a decade ago as the leading authorities in the fields of Revolutionary and Civil War era studies.

Clearly, it is not the historical events that have changed. But the political imperatives and social interests that determine the editorial policy of the *New York Times* have. That alone is a good reason why the writing of history and the determination of historical curricula that is intended to guide the teaching of youth should not be determined by the corporate management of newspapers. The justification of the domestic and global interests of American capitalism, the relentless quest for corporate profitability, the effort to suppress the class struggle, and the justification of staggering levels of social inequality are not compatible with the pursuit of historical truth.

Whatever the *Times* believes to be the advantages of pursuing a racial narrative to secure an electoral majority for the Democratic Party, this is a politically dangerous and utterly reactionary strategy, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Those who argue for a history of "black America" are legitimizing a history of "white America" as well. They are assisting the racist politicians of the fascistic right. The creation of different "racial narratives" is aimed at presenting the races as "intrinsically different" from one another, to borrow a phrase from Democratic politician Stacey Abrams. Past efforts to expose the lie of racial differences are being undermined. When the advocates of race-based politics claim that "white privilege" is based on the real interests of "white people," they are opposing—in violation of reason, science and the counsel of history—the unity of the working class in the struggle against capitalism, authoritarianism, and the growing threat of war.

During the past several months, since its publication in September 2019 of its initial critique of the 1619 Project, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have been asked by journalists representing bourgeois publications to explain why we oppose the *New York Times*' initiative. These questions, which generally arise from genuine curiosity rather than political malice, reflect the extent to which the "left" is identified with "identity politics." In response, we explain that the exaltation of such politics has nothing in common with the theory, principles, and political program of the socialist movement. The historical slogan of the socialist movement is "Workers of the World, Unite!" not "Races of the World, Divide!"

The falsification and repudiation of the enduring principles and aims of

past revolutions deprive the contemporary revolutionary movement of an essential historical orientation. The dismissive, cynical and even nihilistic attitude toward the struggles of the past undermines an appreciation of the enduring value of their real advances, however limited and contradictory, toward the ultimate achievement of true democracy, universal prosperity and genuine human equality, which are the real aim of the socialist movement.

As Marxists, we understand and have settled accounts with the limitations of the *bourgeois-democratic* revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. We know very well the difference between ideological rationalizations and historically determined realities. But those who are not inspired by the world-historical and universal ideals proclaimed by Jefferson's immortal Declaration and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address are neither socialists nor revolutionaries. Those who glibly surrender positions won through the shedding of blood in the past will never conquer new ones. Particularly in a period of global class struggle, the underlying revolutionary principles that made the struggles of 1776 "the cause of all mankind" acquire renewed and accentuated significance.

The uncompromising defense of the progressive heritage of the first two American revolutions is necessary for resisting intellectual retrogression and political reaction, educating the working class, and, on that basis, building a powerful American and international socialist movement.

Notes:

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[15] Shy, John, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, University of Michigan Press, 1990, p. 257.

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[17] Klotter, James C., *Henry Clay: The Man Who Would Be President*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 200.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 198.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

[20] Bennett, Jr., Lerone, "Was Abraham Lincoln a White Supremacist?" *Ebony Magazine*, February 1968, Vol. 23 No. 4, p. 35.

[21] Bennett, Jr., Lerone, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*, Johnson Publishing, 2007, p. 25.

[22] Mitgang, Herbert, "Was Lincoln Just a Honkie?" *New York Times Magazine*, February 28, 1968.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Wood, Gordon, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Vintage Books, 1993, pp. 229-230.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 230.

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