

New York Times Magazine editor Jake Silverstein attempts to slither away from central 1619 Project fabrication

Tom Mackaman
16 March 2020

On Wednesday, editor-in-chief of *The New York Times Magazine* Jake Silverstein announced that the 1619 Project would slightly amend its claim that the American Revolution was a racist endeavor undertaken to fight plans by the British Empire to end slavery.

In “An Update to the 1619 Project,” Silverstein claimed that a modification to the Project’s lead essay, by Nikole Hannah-Jones, would serve as a “clarification to a passage” whose “original language could be read to suggest that protecting slavery was a primary motivation for all of the colonists.”

Silverstein’s “update” is nothing more than a cynical face-saving exercise necessitated by the revelation that the 1619 Project disregarded its own fact-checkers. On March 6, Professor Leslie Harris of Northwestern University published an exposé on *Politico* entitled, “I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The *Times* Ignored Me.” Harris wrote that she “vigorously disputed the claim” that the American Revolution had been waged to defend slavery. She explained:

“[S]lavery in the colonies faced no immediate threat from Great Britain, so colonists wouldn’t have needed to secede to protect it. It’s true that in 1772, the famous Somerset case ended slavery in England and Wales, but it had no impact on Britain’s Caribbean colonies, where the vast majority of black people enslaved by the British labored and died, or in the North American Colonies. It took 60 more years for the British government to finally end slavery in its Caribbean colonies.”

In his update Silverstein does not apologize to the five eminent historians who, in a letter sent in December to the *Times*, specifically objected to the claim that the Revolution was undertaken in defense of slavery. Historians Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon Wood asked that this assertion be corrected, along with several other egregious errors and distortions in the Project.

In an arrogant reply published in the December 29 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Silverstein dismissed the historians’ letter. He claimed dishonestly that the entire Project was carefully

vetted “during the fact-checking process [by] subject-area experts” and that “we don’t believe that the request for corrections to The 1619 Project is warranted.”

Silverstein’s belated effort in damage control does not withdraw the 1619 Project’s assertion that 1776 was a “lie” and a “founding mythology.” The *Times* editor is attempting to palm off a minor change in wording as a sufficient correction of a historically untenable rendering of the American Revolution. Hannah-Jones’ passage now reads, with the changed phrase in italics:

“Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons *some of* the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere.”

This passage is still false. Protecting slavery could not have been a significant cause of the American Revolution, because, far from posing a threat to slavery, the British Empire controlled the slave trade and profited immensely from its commerce in people, as well as from its Caribbean plantations which remained loyal during the war for independence.

Yet in his article, Silverstein reiterates the initial error and compounds it with new layers of confusion. He writes, “We stand behind the basic point, which is that among the various motivations that drove the patriots *toward* independence was a concern that the British *would seek or were already seeking* to disrupt in various ways the entrenched system of American slavery” [emphasis added].

There is no evidence for any of this. The chain of events that led “toward” independence had already emerged with the Stamp Act Crisis of 1765, seven years before the Somerset ruling. “The British” did not seek to disrupt “American slavery” until Lord Dunmore’s proclamation of 1775—issued after the war of independence had begun—offered emancipation to slaves and indentured servants who took up arms against masters *already in rebellion*. The proclamation in fact explicitly *preserved* slavery

among loyal British subjects, many of whom would live out their days under Dunmore in his final post as royal governor of the slave-rich Bahamas.

Silverstein claims that the 1619 Project is rooted in scholarship of “the past 40 years or so” that, he says, reveals “that the patriots represented a truly diverse coalition animated by a variety of interests, which varied by region, class, age, religion and a host of other factors” as opposed to “those [who] assume unanimity on the part of the colonists, as many previous interpretive histories of the patriot cause did.” This is a strawman. No serious scholar—going back a century to Charles Beard—has ever denied that there were various interests at stake in the Revolution and that wide layers of the colonial population were drawn into struggle in a war that killed more Americans as a share of the population than any other outside of the Civil War, and that lasted longer than any until the current imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (both of which the *Times* has relentlessly supported).

In fact, it is the *Times* that has portrayed the American Revolution as an episode of “unanimity on the part of the colonists.” The 1619 Project presents the revolution as a simple conspiracy of white Founding Fathers waged to preserve slavery and create a sham democracy. The crowning achievements of this conspiracy, in Hannah-Jones’ telling, were the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. On this question, Silverstein, Hannah-Jones and the historians they cite—Lerone Bennett, Gerald Horne, Woody Holton and David Waldstreicher—find themselves in alignment with John C. Calhoun and the other fire-eating defenders of slavery in the late antebellum. Though these historians draw a minus sign where fire-eaters drew a plus, all agree that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution founded a slavocracy, not a bourgeois democracy.

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.

They disregard Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists who found in the Constitution the legal machinery for slavery’s ultimate destruction, and in the Declaration their “sacred scripture,” in the words of the great scholar of American slavery, the late David Brion Davis. Indeed, what is most glaring about the 1619 Project’s falsification is that it disregards the fact that the American Revolution ultimately led to the destruction of slavery. Just “four score and seven years later,” as Lincoln counted the years backwards from Gettysburg in 1863, an institution that had existed since the ancient world, and in the new world for 350 years, was destroyed.

Silverstein’s article made no comment on the many other factual errors and distortions that comprise the 1619 Project that have been exposed by the *World Socialist Web Site* and leading historians. These include:

- Its presentation of slavery as a uniquely American “original sin,” fully formed—legally and racially—from the very beginning in 1619 just like it was at the time of the Civil War. Professor Harris reports that she also objected to this error in her fact-checking, but no change has been made.
- Its tendentious selection of quotes from Lincoln designed to make him appear to be a racist, clearly taken from Bennett’s

discredited biography of Lincoln, *Forced into Glory*.

- Its assertion that black Americans fought back “for the most part... alone” to make America a democracy. This disregards the hundreds of thousands of Americans who died in the Civil War, as well as the clearly interracial character of the abolitionist, civil rights, and labor movements.

- Its false claim that it places black Americans at “the very center” of American history when, in fact, the Project includes no black Americans as historical actors. Those who do appear are mere symbols, the playthings of the true historical actor, “anti-black racism” which is ineradicably rooted in a “national DNA.” Neither Frederick Douglass nor Martin Luther King are even mentioned.

- Its argument that all manner of social problems in contemporary America—from lack of health care to obesity to traffic congestion—are the direct outcomes of the “original sin” of slavery, and therefore are functions of racial identity, not capitalist exploitation.

None of this is a matter of semantics. Silverstein’s latest foray only adds a new layer of dishonesty to the sordid 1619 Project affair. Were he serious about valuing criticism, as he claims, Silverstein might have written the following:

“We thank the historians who have brought to our attention the many errors in the 1619 Project. We are compelled to acknowledge and correct these errors. We have written to schools that have already received copies of material from the Project asking that they return them, and that they withhold them from students until the errors and distortions, and the processes that led to them, can be corrected. We profoundly apologize to the historians whose scholarship and professionalism we maligned. The *Times*’ will seek their assistance in preparing a revised edition of the 1619 Project. Finally, as painful as it is to do, we recommend to our readers that they study the essays and interviews criticizing the 1619 Project published in the *World Socialist Web Site*.”

We will not hold our breath waiting for such a statement.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact