

The Times' 1619 Project is damned with faint praise

# Hannah-Jones receives Pulitzer Prize for personal commentary, not historical writing

Tom Mackaman, David North  
9 May 2020

There are occasions when an award is a humiliation. Such is the case with Nikole Hannah-Jones' Pulitzer Prize for the lead essay to the *New York Times'* 1619 Project, won in the category of Commentary—that is, opinion-writing.

The Pulitzer Prize in the prestigious category of History went to Professor W. Caleb McDaniel of Rice University for *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America*.

The “Commentary” prize is a major comedown for the *New York Times*, which staked to this racist “reframing” of American history immense editorial resources, untold millions of dollars, and its credibility as the self-proclaimed “newspaper of record.” The Pulitzer Prize committee took no specific notice of the 1619 Project itself. Given the cost of the 1619 Project, winning the prize for Commentary is akin to a Hollywood multi-million-dollar blockbuster winning the Oscar for nothing more than best makeup.

The Pulitzer went only to Hannah-Jones, and not to the *Times* or the 1619 Project, which was released on August 13, 2019, amidst an unprecedented publicity blitz, to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first slaves in colonial Virginia. The initial glossy magazine was over 100 pages long and included ten essays, a photo essay, and poems and fiction by 16 more writers. It has been followed by podcasts, a lecture tour, school lesson plans, and even a commercial run during the Academy Awards. The 1619 Project was a massive institutional enterprise. But what the *New York Times* wound up with was nothing more than an individual award for Commentary. This is certainly the most expensive consolation prize in the history of the Pulitzers.

In a departure for the Commentary Award, Hannah-Jones won only for her *single* essay titled, “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.” One cannot help but suspect that the *Times* brought considerable pressure to bear to eke out this minimal recognition of the 1619 Project’s existence. Hannah-Jones beat out finalists considered for a whole year’s work. Her competitors were Sally Jenkins, a sturdy sports writer for the *Washington Post*, and Steve Lopez of the *Los Angeles Times*, for his series of columns on homelessness in America’s second-largest city.

The Pulitzer board cited Hannah-Jones for her “sweeping, deeply reported and *personal* essay” (emphasis added). The word choice is revealing and damning. The Board did not evaluate her essay, which defined the content of the 1619 Project, as rising to the level of a history. This is not an insignificant judgment. In the realm of scholarly work, the profound difference between the writing of a historical work

and the spinning out of opinions is of a fundamental character. As Hegel, among the greatest of all philosophers of history, once wrote: “What can be more useless than to learn a string of bald opinions, and what more unimportant?” While a reporter’s “personal” thoughts about history may prompt a “public conversation,” as the Pulitzer citation acknowledges, they do not provide the basis for the overturning of documented history, much less a new curriculum for the schools.

The “public conversation” to which the Pulitzer citation refers was set into motion by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which published in the first week of September 2019 a comprehensive rebuttal of the 1619 Project. The WSWs followed this with a series of interviews with leading historians that subjected the *Times'* unprecedented and extravagant foray into history to a withering critique: Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes, Gordon Wood, Adolph Reed, Jr., Dolores Janiewski, Richard Carwardine and Clayborne Carson.

The central argument advanced in the essays and interviews was that the 1619 Project was a travesty of history. The WSWs' exposure of the 1619 Project's shoddy research, numerous factual errors and outright falsifications attracted a huge audience and was the subject of discussion in numerous publications.

The *Times* responded desperately, lashing out at its critics. As Carson, the editor of the Martin Luther King papers, pointed out, “the saddest part of this [is] that the response of the *New York Times* is simply to defend their project.”

On December 20, 2019, *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein asserted that the 1619 Project had proved the astounding fact, hitherto suppressed by historians, that all of the American experience, present and past, was the ineradicable spawn of “slavery and the anti-black racism it required,” including America’s “economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, its diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence from Britain.”

The 1619 Project's central claims ran roughshod over virtually every field of historical research. Slavery was transformed into an exceptionally American “original sin,” and a vehicle for the transmission of racism, not a global system of labor exploitation with ancient roots. The American Revolution was reduced to a conspiracy

of white founders defending slavery against the enlightened British aristocracy.

According to Hannah-Jones and the *Times*, the Civil War was not about the destruction of slavery, but was rather a war between racist brothers, an interpretation first developed by Jim Crow historians more than a century ago. There was no interracial abolitionist movement and no labor movement whatsoever. Despite claims about putting “black people at the very center,” there were no black people as historical actors to be found, only victim-symbols of white oppression. There was no Frederick Douglass, no Martin Luther King, no Harlem Renaissance, no Great Migration. Racism itself was transformed into a supra-historical and biological impulse that, as Hannah-Jones wrote, “runs in the very DNA of this country.” In this new narrative there was no room whatsoever for American Indians, indentured servants, immigrants, farmers and wage workers.

Moreover, Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project loudly and crudely insisted that *only* African Americans could intuitively grasp this history. In rolling out its special edition, the *Times* boasted, “Almost every contributor in the magazine and special section—writers, photographers and artists—is black, a nonnegotiable aspect of the project that helps underscore its thesis.” Hannah-Jones claimed on Twitter that “white historians” could never sufficiently rid themselves of racism to understand African American history, and therefore could be disregarded.

The Pulitzer board was not unmindful of the fact that among the “white historians” that Hannah-Jones and the *Times* denounced were previous Pulitzer winners Gordon Wood and James McPherson—the leading historians of the American Revolution and Civil War, respectively. These two scholars have dedicated their lives to the study of America’s twin revolutions. As a young historian in his twenties, decades before the publication of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom*, McPherson wrote a significant study of the movement against slavery, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*.

The exclusion of the 1619 Project from the History category leaves the integrity of the Pulitzer selection criteria and the prestige of the earlier awards to Wood and McPherson unmolested.

When Wood and McPherson joined Sean Wilentz and two other eminent historians interviewed by the WSWS, Victoria Bynum and James Oakes, in writing a letter to the *Times* pointing to egregious errors of fact in the 1619 Project, Silverstein published a scornful and dismissive letter insisting that the project had “consulted with numerous scholars of African-American history and related fields” and that the whole effort had been “carefully reviewed [by] subject-area experts.”

However, in early March, one of the 1619 Project’s own “subject-area experts,” Professor Leslie Harris of Northwestern University, revealed that her objections to the 1619 Project’s pivotal argument—that the American Revolution was waged to defend slavery against imminent British emancipation—had been disregarded. The patently false claim that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution to defend slavery was the essential foundation of Hannah-Jones’ thesis that the “true founding” of the United States was not 1776, but 1619. Silverstein offered a modest wording change to “correct” this “mistake,” but what remained of the credibility of the lavishly-funded enterprise had been reduced to rubble.

It is worth contrasting the Pulitzer board’s language for the prizes in History and Commentary. While it cited Hannah-Jones for her “personal” essay, it called McDaniel’s *Sweet Taste of Liberty* “a

*masterfully researched* meditation on reparations based on the remarkable story of a 19th century woman who survived kidnapping and re-enslavement to sue her captor” (emphasis added).

McDaniel’s book is an impressive example of historical research, involving voluminous reading in the existing literature, as well as the discovery of documents relating to the struggle of a former slave contending with powerful historical forces. It includes in its notes numerous citations of the works of McPherson, and upholds the revolutionary significance of the Civil War. Like McPherson, McDaniel, at Rice University in Texas, happens to be a “white historian.” We are compelled to note this otherwise irrelevant detail because, according to the reactionary nationalist ideology of Hannah-Jones and the race-obsessed editors of the *Times*, McDaniel should not have been able to fathom “the nuances of what it means to be a black person in America.” The historian’s award-winning work discredits this racist prejudice. Evidently, the three academics who decided to award professor McDaniel the Pulitzer for History were not influenced by the sort of zoological criteria espoused by Hannah-Jones and the *Times*.

The *Times*’ own muted response to Hannah-Jones’ prize in Commentary is revealing, and stands in stark juxtaposition to the shameless self-promotion, “Pulitzer buzz,” and arrogant denunciation of critics that accompanied the 1619 Project’s first months. One can imagine the crowing that would have followed a Pulitzer for the *New York Times* in the History category. Instead, the *Times*’ noticeably low-key coverage of the 2020 Pulitzer selections refers to the prize won by its heavily promoted reporter-celebrity in a short paragraph about 225 words into the article.

The 1619 Project was never about history or even serious journalism. From its inception, in the leaked words of *Times*’ executive editor Dean Baquet, it was an “ambitious and expansive” campaign, under conditions of mounting opposition in the working class, to make race “the American story” (emphasis added). This effort has fared badly. The contrast between the boastful claims made by the *Times* and the actual content of the 1619 Project recalls the ancient epigram:

What could he produce to match his opening promise?  
Mountains will labour: what’s born? A ridiculous mouse!



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**