

# It is all just a metaphor: The New York Times attempts yet another desperate defense of its discredited 1619 Project

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On October 16, *New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein issued a new defense of the 1619 Project in which he now argues that its best-known claim—that the year 1619 and not 1776 represents the “true founding” of the United States—was a metaphorical turn of phrase not intended to be read literally. Further confusion is attributed to an editorial error arising from the difficulties of managing a “multi-platform” media operation. Published under the title, “On Recent Criticism of The 1619 Project,” Silverstein’s essay is a convoluted lawyer’s argument that attempts to palm off historical falsification as merely minor matters of syntax, punctuation, and a somewhat careless use of metaphor.

When the 1619 Project was published in August 2019, to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first African slaves in colonial Virginia, no historical claims were too grandiose for Silverstein and lead writer and project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones. The 1619 Project, the *Times* proclaimed, would “reframe” all of American history to show that the past and the present can only be understood through the prism of slavery and the “endemic” racial hatred of whites for blacks.

In supporting this larger claim, the 1619 Project asserted that the events of 1776 were, in essence, a preemptive counterrevolution aimed at thwarting a British plan to end slavery in North America. Then, in the aftermath of the separation from Britain, black Americans “fought back alone,” the *Times* asserted, to “make America a democracy”—without the assistance of abolitionists, the Union army, Abraham Lincoln, or any other white person, all of whom benefited from slavery and “white capitalism.”

Furthermore, according to Hannah-Jones and the *Times*, “true” history had been suppressed by dishonest “white historians” hellbent on maintaining their racist “founding myth” of 1776. After two centuries of a historical narrative centered on the false elevation of 1776, the 1619 Project declared that “it was finally time to tell our story truthfully.”

In spite of Silverstein’s deletion of the “true founding” claim and his other word changes, the *Times*’ essential position remains the same: The American Revolution was a retrograde event, in which the defense of slavery was the critical motivation. Yet, to this day neither Silverstein nor any other defender of the 1619 Project has bothered to confront the obvious historical questions that this position raises in relationship to both American and world history:

If the American Revolution was a reactionary event, why was it hailed by contemporaries beyond the shores of the United States as the dawn of a new democratic age? Did the American Revolution play no role in the chain of events that produced the French and Haitian revolutions, as well as the industrial revolution, the working class, and socialism? Why was Tom Paine made an honorary citizen of the new French Republic? If the proclamation of human equality in the Declaration of Independence is only a “founding myth,” and not a discovery whose revolutionary meaning tears through all subsequent history, how do we explain the fact

that every progressive social movement has inscribed this maxim on its banner? How was it that the United States developed, within a generation, a mass anti-slavery movement, and within “four score and seven years” a great Civil War that destroyed slavery? Were all those who identified the American Revolution with the cause of freedom, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King included, merely dupes of the American founding fathers?

The most obvious error made by the 1619 Project—that the American Revolution was waged to stop British abolition of slavery—became indefensible after the *Times*’ own fact checker, Leslie Harris of Northwestern University, felt compelled to admit that she had “vigorously” opposed it. Silverstein tried to manage this exposure of the *Times*’ dishonest suppression of the fact-checker’s objection with a clever “cut and paste” modification of Hannah-Jones’ false claim. The original categorical denunciation of pre-1619 Project historiography had read:

Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact 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. By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. [Emphasis added]

Silverstein added two words so that the amended version now reads:

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. [Emphasis added]

In the original version, the defense of slavery is presented as “one of the primary reasons” the colonists decided for separation from Britain. In the 1619 Project version 2.0, the concern over the fate of slavery motivates only “some of”—How many? Who? Where?—the colonists. Presto! Problem solved. Or so Silverstein thought. But the modified statement is still false. Far from being “conflicted” over slavery, until 1833 the British Empire maintained its own lucrative slave plantations in the Caribbean, where Loyalist slaveowners fled, human property in tow of His Majesty’s Navy.

As for the Project's quietly-deleted "true founding" thesis—which was emblazoned on the *Times* website and repeated again and again by Hannah-Jones on social media, in interviews, and her national lecture tour—Silverstein now claims that this was the product of nothing more than a minor technical error, the sort of snafu that is an inevitable outcome of difficulties for modern-day editors, such as himself, in managing a "multiplatform" publication and "figuring out how to present the same journalism in all those different media." With all of these formats to tend to, the beleaguered editors of the *Times* just couldn't get the story straight! Silverstein does not seem to grasp that the criteria of objective truth do not change as one moves from printed newspaper to website, or from Facebook to Twitter. What is a lie in one format remains a lie in another.

In addition to chalking up the mistaken "true founding" claim to his far-flung editorial responsibilities, Silverstein attempts to defend Hannah-Jones by implying that readers failed to appreciate "the sense that this was a metaphor." He should have been more attentive, he says, to "online language [that] risked being read literally." This is among the most inspired of Silverstein's excuses. From here on in, whenever *Times* correspondents like Judith Miller are caught lying, its editors may claim that the journalists are writing in metaphors that are not to be read literally.

Silverstein cites the original, "metaphorical," version of the 1619 Project. This is the version that was sent out to school children. It read, with emphasis added:

1619 is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation's birth. *What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that our defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619?*

He then quotes the revised passage, that has been made to the online publication only:

1619 is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation's birth. *What if, however, we were to tell you that the moment that the country's defining contradictions first came into the world was in late August of 1619?*

Perhaps Silverstein hopes his readers will carelessly jump over this scissors-and-glue work. He writes that the difference in the two passages is "to the wording and the length, not the facts." But actually, there to be read *literally* in black and white, the first passage refers specifically to an allegedly false "fact." If a metaphor is being employed in the original version, it is very well concealed.

Silverstein repeats Hannah-Jones' conceit that historians have ignored the African American experience. Such a claim exposes both Silverstein's and Hannah-Jones' ignorance of historical literature. The 1619 Project is as much a falsification of historiography as it is of history.

Since the 1930s, an enormous body of scholarship has developed on the periods of American history that the 1619 Project breezes through as so many turnstiles in the unfolding history of white racism: the colonial era

and the emergence of slavery; the American Revolution and the entrenchment of slavery in the antebellum South with the development of cotton production; the development of the "free labor North," antislavery politics and the destruction of slavery in the Civil War; the struggle for and ultimate failure of Reconstruction; and the replacement of slavery by sharecropping, Jim Crow segregation, industry and wage labor. These vast subjects have attracted the attention of significant historians, and fascinating and intense debate among them and their students—W.E.B. Du Bois, Eric Williams, Kenneth Stampp, Stanley Elkins, C. Vann Woodward, Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Eugene Genovese, Don Fehrenbacher, David Potter, James McPherson, Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, Eric Foner, David Brion Davis, Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, and James Oakes, to name only a few.

This scholarship has been ignored by the 1619 Project. There is no evidence that Hannah-Jones' passing acquaintance with American history extends beyond her reading of two books by the black nationalist Lerone Bennett, Jr., the longtime editor of *Ebony* magazine.

In an attempt to buttress the claim that the 1619 Project is finally bringing to light suppressed history, Silverstein cites a recent study of US history textbooks by the Southern Poverty Law Center that found popular history textbooks do not provide "comprehensive coverage of slavery and enslaved peoples." As if it aids his cause, he points to one of the study's key findings, that "only 8 percent of high school seniors were aware that slavery was the central cause of the Civil War."

No doubt it is true that American students know little about slavery and its centrality to the Civil War. But this speaks to a larger crisis of historical consciousness. The public schools, starved of funding, have shifted limited resources away from social studies and the arts to "practical" pursuits, a process pushed forward by Barack Obama, who said in office that "folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree." The same shifting of resources away from history has taken place at the universities. There were over 19 million Americans enrolled in college in 2017, but only 24,255 graduated with degrees in history—a 33 percent decline since 2001—while 381,000 degrees were awarded to business majors.

Under these conditions, is it really any wonder that high school seniors know little about the causes of the Civil War or even precisely when it took place? But what share of American high school and college graduates can explain the causes of either World War I or World War II, or even correctly identify the years during which these wars were fought? What percentage of American students could state with even approximate accuracy the years of the American involvement in Vietnam, let alone explain the reasons underlying its intervention?

The lack of knowledge is even greater when it comes to the subject that is virtually absent from public discussion in the United States: the history of the working masses and the class struggle that they have waged against American capitalism. This is a subject that involves the fate of the vast majority of the population, including the countless millions of impoverished immigrants who arrived on the shores of America and then fought to "raise the dignity of labor," to use an old phrase. This history finds not the slightest echo in the 1619 Project, which does not acknowledge the existence of class struggle in the United States.

There is plenty of oppression and suffering in the history of what John Brown called "this guilty land" to go around. The United States has long been the country with the most powerful and ruthless capitalist class on the planet. Before that it was home to the richest and most powerful slave owning class. But the explosive development of industrial capitalism in the aftermath of the Civil War gave rise to the most polyglot working class. Under these conditions the great challenge confronting the socialist movement has always been to unite workers across innumerable racial, national, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional barriers to confront their

common antagonists.

The 1619 Project has been a case study in historical ignorance and dishonesty. Silverstein's latest exercise in self-justification continues the pattern of falsification and evasion. When the 1619 Project was criticized as poor journalism, Silverstein claimed it was history; and when it was criticized as bad history, he claimed it was mere journalism. Now, when it is proven that the 1619 Project's central thesis is false, Silverstein announces that the argument was merely metaphorical and not meant to be taken literally.

In the end, the *New York Times*' argument is a variation of a crooked politician's age-old evasion: "We know that you *think* you *know* what we said. But what you *read* is not what we *meant*."



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