

# *New York Times* science writer Donald McNeil Jr. is latest victim of identity politics frenzy

Fred Mazelis  
11 February 2021

The forced resignation of *New York Times* science correspondent Donald G. McNeil Jr. is the latest disgraceful expression of the reactionary role of identity politics.

McNeil, whose association with the *Times* goes back nearly 45 years, was a guide on a newspaper-sponsored 2019 trip to Peru for high school students and their parents. Afterward, some six of the students or their parents, out of more than two dozen on the trip, complained that he had used a “racist slur.”

In his resignation letter, McNeil explained the incident that led to the end of his career at the *Times*, which has taken him to 60 countries and included coverage of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I was asked at dinner by a student whether I thought a classmate of hers should have been suspended for a video she had made as a 12-year-old in which she used a racial slur. To understand what was in the video, I asked if she had called someone else the slur or whether she was rapping or quoting a book title. In asking the question, I used the slur itself.”

*Times* Executive Editor Dean Baquet authorized an investigation, and McNeil received a reprimand for this behavior. This took place in September 2019, nearly 18 months ago. The issue surfaced again, however, after a recent story in the *Daily Beast*. In response to the latest publicity, Baquet sent a letter to the paper’s staff saying that McNeil’s language was “offensive and that he showed extremely poor judgment,” but adding “that it did not appear to me that his intentions were hateful or malicious.”

Indeed, it should be noted, the repetition of the “N-word” in context, as far back as Mark Twain, is not only not racist but can be quite the opposite.

Among a significant and noisy number of *Times* writers and staff, however, Baquet’s denunciation of McNeil was far from sufficient. In effect, they demanded a new “trial”

of the journalist, on the same charge. Some 150 staff signed a letter that complained that “we have given a prominent platform—a critical beat covering a pandemic disproportionately affecting people of color—to someone who chose to use language that is offensive and unacceptable by any newspaper’s standards.”

Heavily involved in this effort was Nikole Hannah-Jones, the creator of the since-discredited 1619 Project published by the *Times* in 2019, as well as John Eligon, described by the newspaper as “a national correspondent covering race.”

Various news outlets have reported that when a reporter from the right-wing *Washington Free Beacon* asked Hannah-Jones about her own use of the N-word on Twitter, she responded by tweeting the reporter’s question and included his phone number. Allegedly, she kept the phone number online for 71 hours, before finally deleting her entire Twitter history, including the 2016 tweet she was asked to comment on.

Hannah-Jones asserted the deletions were entirely coincidental and had no connection to the controversy. “Some of you may be aware, as I said this on here more than once, I auto delete my tweets at regular intervals now,” she tweeted February 9.

According to a report in the *Guardian*, among the complaints made against McNeil was that he did not agree with the use of the term “white privilege.” Furthermore, the letter insisted that the matter of racist intent was “irrelevant.” “[W]hat matters,” the letter went on, “is how an act makes victims feel; [McNeil’s] victims weren’t shy about decrying his conduct on the trip.”

“Victims”? This is the realm of “microaggressions,” part of the dogma and practice of identity politics in the corporate world and academia, a well-honed and frequently used technique to settle scores and part of the frenzied competition for jobs, perks and other privileges.

Even though Baquet had expressly referred to the lack

of racist or hateful intent only a week earlier, the *Times* editor reversed course in response to the outcry orchestrated by Hannah-Jones and others. Last Friday, Baquet and Joe Kahn, the paper's managing editor, sent out a new letter, including the following:

"We are writing to let you know that Donald McNeil Jr. will be leaving the company. Donald joined *The Times* in 1976 and has done much good reporting over four decades. But we feel that this is the right next step.

"We do not tolerate racist language regardless of intent. We are committed to building a news report and company that reflect our core values of integrity and respect, and will work with urgency to create clearer guidelines and enforcement about conduct in the workplace, including red-line issues on racist language."

The editors also sent out an apology from McNeil, an exercise in self-abasement in which he referred to his "extraordinarily bad judgement" and extended his sincerest apology to the students, his colleagues and the *Times* itself.

Whatever McNeil's reasons for sending this letter, many of his colleagues were outraged over the affair. As reported in the *Washington Free Beacon*, longtime labor reporter Steven Greenhouse, writing on the page of a private Facebook group for current and former *Times* staffers, asked, "whatever happened to the notion of worker solidarity, to giving a fellow worker the benefit of the doubt?" Greenhouse, who retired in 2014, pointed to McNeil's history of fighting for the interests of his colleagues, including on such issues as employee pensions when they were threatened by management.

Greenhouse angrily claimed that McNeil's critics were "far more willing to sympathize with these privileged 15- and 16-year-olds than with a longtime colleague who has done much great work for the *Times* over the years."

Further criticism came from PEN America, which issued a statement in the name of its president, Suzanne Nossel, that acknowledged the history and significance of racist language, but added, "For reporter Donald McNeil to end his long career, apparently as a result of a single word, risks sending a chilling message. That the paper apparently altered its course in relation to this incident as a result of public pressure is a further worrying signal. The *Times'* readers depend upon its journalists and editors to be able to carry out their work without fear that a lone errant statement may cost them their job."

The long career that PEN refers to has not yet been removed from the *Times'* own website. It includes the following:

"Donald G. McNeil Jr. is a science and health reporter specializing in plagues and pestilences. He covers diseases of the world's poor and wider epidemics, including Covid-19, AIDS, Ebola, malaria, swine and bird flus and Zika. ...

"He joined *The New York Times* in 1976 as a copy boy and has been a night rewrite man, an environmental reporter, a theater columnist and an editor. From 1995 to 2002 he was a foreign correspondent in Africa and Europe and has reported from 60 countries.

"He has won awards for stories about places that have successfully fought AIDS, about patent monopolies that keep drug prices high in Africa, about diseases that cannot be eradicated, about cancer victims in poor countries dying without pain relief and about the Love Canal toxic waste dump.

"His articles and his appearances on the *Times* podcast 'The Daily' helped raise awareness of the pandemic threat posed by Covid-19."

McNeil's work was featured in the newspaper until days before he was suddenly ushered out the door. On January 25, the *Times* published an interview he conducted with Anthony Fauci, entitled, "Fauci on What Working for Trump Was Really Like."

The fate of McNeil expresses the backward and destructive logic of identity politics, embraced and promoted by the *Times* with increasing ferocity in recent years. Everything is viewed through a racial prism, one that assumes racism is unchanging and everywhere. The aims here are to spread confusion and division, especially within the working class, and also to cultivate a new and more "diverse" upper middle class base in order to defend the interests of American capitalism.

The dishonest weaponizing of racial epithets in this manner has absolutely nothing to do with fighting racism and discrimination. On the contrary, it is directed toward whipping up communal tension and division and must be exposed and opposed.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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