

A letter to the Chronicle of Higher Education on the *World Socialist Web Site*, Nikole Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project

David North
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The following letter was sent on June 13 from David North, chairperson of the WSWs International Editorial Board, to the editors of the Chronicle of Higher Education and Jack Stripling, a leading writer for the Chronicle and author of the June 11 article, “What the Hell Happened? Inside the Nikole Hannah-Jones tenure case.”

The article by Stripling references Walter E. Hussman Jr., an Arkansas newspaper publisher and donor to the Hussman School of Journalism, who opposed the granting of a tenured position to Nikole Hannah-Jones at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Neither the Chronicle of Higher Education nor Stripling has acknowledged receipt of the letter or given any indication that the Chronicle intends to publish it. The WSWs is therefore publishing it here.

June 13, 2021

To the editors:

Re: “What the Hell Happened?”

I am writing in my capacity as the editorial board chairperson of the *World Socialist Web Site* (wsws.org) and editor and co-author of *The New York Times’ 1619 Project and the Racist Falsification of History*.

In Jack Stripling’s account of the rejection of tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones, there is the following passage:

“‘I read the stuff on the World Socialist Web Site,’ [Walther E.] Hussman told The Chronicle, sounding a bit aghast at how far he had descended down the rabbit hole, ‘and they were criticizing. I mean, I tried to read everything.’”

The Oxford Dictionary defines “rabbit hole” as “a bizarre, confusing, or nonsensical situation or environment, typically one from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.”

The clear implication of this passage is that the *World Socialist Web Site* is a disreputable source, one that should not be cited and has no place in a review of Hannah-Jones’ credentials. Therefore, Hussman’s reading of its critique of

the 1619 Project, according to Stripling, discredits his opposition to Hannah-Jones’ appointment.

In fact, the *World Socialist Web Site’s* critique of the 1619 Project included extensive interviews with several of the most celebrated scholars of the history of the American Revolution and Civil War, including Pulitzer Prize winners Gordon Wood and James McPherson, Lincoln Prize winners James Oakes and Richard Carwardine, and other respected historians such as Victoria Bynum (author of *The Free State of Jones*), Adolph Reed Jr. and Clayborne Carson. These scholars were interviewed by the WSWs not because of their private political views but on account of their outstanding scholarly work.

The interviews and the contributions of other writers, including that of co-editor Thomas Mackaman and my own, comprehensively exposed the falsification of history in the 1619 Project’s lead essay written by Hannah-Jones—most notably the claims that the American Revolution was fought to maintain slavery and that the African American struggle for civil rights was waged largely alone.

The work of the *World Socialist Web Site* attracted widespread attention not only because of the detailed, authoritative and comprehensive character of its critique. It also came as a surprise to many that this refutation of the 1619 Project came from an avowedly left-wing and socialist source. This challenged the commonly accepted narrative that opposition to the 1619 Project came exclusively from the political right. Moreover, many of the essays in *The New York Times’ 1619 Project and the Racist Falsification of History* documented the historically reactionary provenance of the 1619 Project’s efforts to make race and anti-black racism the driving force of American history. The *World Socialist Web Site* was particularly critical of the *New York Times’* elimination of the class struggle from its historical narrative.

For the record, *The New York Times’ 1619 Project and the Racist Falsification of History* includes a chapter that

demolishes the Trumpian effort to counter the 1619 Project with its own brand of xenophobic myth-making.

In light of the serious contribution that the *World Socialist Web Site* made to the analysis of the 1619 Project, Jack Stripling's derogatory reference is highly inappropriate.

First, Stripling's essay implicitly and uncritically endorses the narrative that there are simply no intellectually respectable grounds that could justify the rejection of tenure to Hannah-Jones; and that it was necessary for Hussman to descend "far down" into a disreputable socialist "rabbit hole" to come up with reasons to oppose her appointment.

Second, it does not seem to have occurred to Stripling that he should have examined the essays and interviews in the WSWS that apparently influenced Mr. Hussman. The impact of the WSWS on the controversy surrounding the 1619 Project has been prominently noted by such well-known establishment publications as *The Atlantic* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Journalistic objectivity should have led Stripling to examine whether the WSWS's interviews and essays provided a legitimate basis for Hussman's opposition to Hannah-Jones' appointment. Instead, Stripling goes so far as to portray Hussman as sounding "aghast" that he had descended to the depths of the "rabbit hole" of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Stripling's crude reference to the *World Socialist Web Site* is a telling example of the enduring presence of the "anti-red" hatreds of the McCarthyite era on journalism and intellectual life in the United States. His unspoken assumption is that the arguments of Marxists and socialists are illegitimate and should not be part of the public discourse. Stripling is, apparently, unaware that this outlook was challenged by students and faculty at the University of North Carolina during the historically significant protests against the "Act to Regulate Visiting Speakers," passed by the state legislature in June 1963 to bar academics and speakers deemed sympathetic to the Communist Party and other left-wing organizations from addressing students on campus. The law was overturned in 1968.

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.

A review of the fight against the "Act to Regulate Visiting Speakers" would have provided a broader context to the current claims that the denial of tenure to Hannah-Jones is a serious attack on academic freedom. The UNC faculty and students of the 1960s waged an important struggle against the suppression of free speech on campus. Their protests raised democratic issues of a fundamental character, rooted in the US Constitution, that are hardly present in the arguments being made on behalf of Hannah-Jones' claim to

a tenured post at UNC.

Stripling's attitude to the *World Socialist Web Site* exemplifies the basic problem that underlies the defense of the 1619 Project and the work of Hannah-Jones. It is based not on an objective study of historical facts but on an ideologically driven racial narrative.

Thus, Jack Stripling frames his story as one of "a Black woman named Nikole Hannah-Jones, who is waiting for the mostly white trustees of one of the nation's oldest public universities to grant her an honor that her new colleagues say she more than deserves."

But that is the very question that a conscientious journalist should have carefully explored. Does Hannah-Jones, on objective grounds, "deserve" the appointment? Does her work as a journalist withstand serious scrutiny? Is it correct to assume that Hussman's opposition to her appointment lacks all intellectual legitimacy and is based, notwithstanding his denials, on racial prejudice? Why has Hannah-Jones' work been sharply criticized by highly respected historians whose commitment to civil rights and racial equality is unquestioned?

Had Mr. Stripling taken the time to review the critique of the *World Socialist Web Site*, rather than dismissing it in such a contemptuous manner, he might have discovered information that seriously challenges the racial narrative advanced by Hannah-Jones and her legion of advocates.

Yours sincerely,

David North

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