

Woody Holton retreats from Dunmore Proclamation claims in “historians’ debate” with Gordon Wood

Tom Mackaman
28 October 2021

On Saturday, October 23, the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston hosted a debate between historians Gordon Wood and Woody Holton. The event, titled “The American Revolution from Two Perspectives,” was billed as a discussion of contending historical interpretations of the American Revolution.

However, most of the hourlong debate was given over to provocations from Holton, who repeatedly accused Wood and other scholars who have criticized the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project of being responsible for Republican Party efforts to censor it. Holton’s opposition to censorship is, to say the least, highly selective. While he opposes Republican efforts to censor the 1619 Project—as does the *World Socialist Web Site*—he denounces and would silence all criticism of the 1619 Project from left or scholarly perspectives, as his attacks on Wood made clear.

For those who have followed his antics on social media, Holton’s behavior in the debate with Wood will come as no surprise. More notable is the fact that Holton completely abandoned, when challenged by Wood, his patently false assertion that the Dunmore Proclamation of November 1775, which offered freedom to slaves of masters already in rebellion, was the *cause* of the American Revolution. Holton has made this claim repeatedly in recent months in the *Washington Post*, on History News Network and on Twitter.

Before turning to this aspect of the debate, a word on the two historians may be in order.

Gordon Wood is an Alva O. Way professor emeritus of history at Brown University. Since the publication of his 1970 *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, which won the Bancroft Prize, Wood has been the foremost scholar of the American Revolution. He has been interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* on two occasions. Wood has shown courage and intellectual integrity in criticizing the *New York Times* for its 1619 Project, a position that has brought non-collegial attacks from a handful of historians, Holton included.

The thrust of Wood’s interpretation is that, despite historically conditioned limitations, the American Revolution was a profoundly radical and transformative event, every bit as

radical to American society as the French Revolution of 1789 was to French society. The revolution authored an enormous breakthrough in constitutional state-making and created, especially in the North, a society characterized by mass politics and horizontal class relations, a society that exalted labor and that was dominated by an emergent and commercially-oriented middle class. This thesis is developed in his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993. Wood’s most recent book is *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution*, released this year.

Woody Holton is professor of history at the University of South Carolina. His work has also won numerous prizes, including a Bancroft Prize in 2010 for a biography of Abigail Adams. Holton is sometimes presented as a “neo-Progressive” in the tradition of Charles Beard (1874-1948), but his work has come to have little connection to any form of historical materialism, even to that of Beard, who deduced historical causation from immediate, and very often individual, material interests.

Instead, Holton’s conception of the American Revolution is tailor-made to meet the present political needs of the Democratic Party. Unlike Beard, and much more akin to the old Jim Crow-era “folkways” social scientists, Holton claims to deduce the historical action of the Revolution by imposing on the past the identity categories of the present, particularly the racial ones. His “method” entails the deployment of what he calls “pieces of evidence,” carefully selected and ripped from their context, to prove his “point” and the disregarding of evidence to the contrary.

Holton’s father is Linwood Holton, a Republican governor of Virginia who became a Democrat, and his brother-in-law is Virginia Senator Tim Kaine, Hillary Clinton’s vice presidential running mate in 2016. The family’s fortune is drawn from western Virginia coal mining, certainly one of the most exploitative industries in American history. These biographical facts may go some distance in explaining Holton’s fealty to the 1619 Project, which is central to the Democratic Party’s efforts to eradicate discussion of social class in the past and the

present.

Whatever his motivation, Holton has made himself the most vociferous academic backer of the 1619 Project. In return, the *Times* and the *Post* have promoted Holton. The *quid pro quo* appears to be that Holton is tasked with finding a “factual” basis for the 1619 Project’s key claim, that the American Revolution was a counterrevolutionary plot launched to defend slavery against British emancipation.

Holton did not fare well in this effort against Wood. Challenged by Wood with simple facts well known to historians of the Revolution, Holton again and again retreated in his principal claim, outlined on July 4 in the *Washington Post* and repeated since, that the American Revolution happened because of Dunmore’s Proclamation. The *World Socialist Web Site* has dealt with these claims previously. While Holton has used anticommunist attacks on the WSWS on Twitter, he has not challenged the facts presented in those articles.

Against Wood, Holton’s line of defense had an odd geographical component, as he fled further and further south to find some place in the British colonies where the Dunmore Proclamation could plausibly be said to have been the cause of the Revolution. He began by conceding to Wood that New England was already in a state of revolution well before the Dunmore Proclamation. Then he readily allowed that the Revolution was set in motion after the issuance of the Coercive Acts in 1774. These are key concessions because they acknowledge the actual chronology of events of the imperial crisis.

Holton then tried to move his claim further south, to the most important colony, Virginia. That is where the Dunmore Proclamation had its real effect, he said, because it so enraged slave owners. Wood did not deny that Lord Dunmore angered slave owners, but he pointed out that imperial authority had already begun to disintegrate in 1774, that Dunmore issued his proclamation from a British vessel in the Chesapeake, where he had been forced to flee, and that Virginia was the colony most united behind the revolution and with the fewest loyalists.

In response, Holton retreated still further south, claiming that the real bulwark for slavery in the colonies was in Georgia and South Carolina, where there were more slaves. But he went only so far south, and only where there were just so many slaves, not to the British Caribbean. This was revealed in response to a viewer’s query.

The viewer asked: “If it were the case that the defense of slavery was the major cause, or a primary cause, of the American Revolution, then why did the British possessions in the Caribbean, where slavery was even stronger, not join the revolution? Why did they remain the most loyal area of the empire?”

Holton, flummoxed by the question, meandered for some time before coming up with the following explanation: There were too many slaves in the Caribbean! It would not have been

safe for them to rebel against the (alleged) emancipatory designs of the British Empire in areas that were 80 percent slave. Evidently, the planters in South Carolina, whose population was 60 percent slave, did not entertain the same fears. Perhaps 70 percent is the golden mean?

By this point, Holton had totally conceded the key element of his campaign in defense of the 1619 Project—that Lord Dunmore’s proclamation was a major cause of the Revolution—and had in his own futile efforts laid bare the assertion’s absurdity.

Unfortunately, there turned out to be little discussion of history. Not even halfway through, Holton was given a lifeline by moderator Catherine Allgor of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Allgor moved the discussion to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the celebrity figurehead of the 1619 Project.

Getting his cue, Holton went on the attack. He denounced Wood, who was to blame, Holton said, for efforts to censor the 1619 Project by Republican-controlled school districts. This was because of a letter Wood and four other prominent historians wrote—Wood was joined by Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, James Oakes and Sean Wilentz—and sent to the *New York Times* criticizing, in collegial and didactic fashion, major errors in the 1619 Project. The historians wholly endorsed the effort to study slavery and race in American history, but they asked that major factual errors be amended.

Pointing his finger and raising his voice, Holton looked and sounded the part of an intemperate Southern politician. He repeatedly denounced Wood for allegedly holding the 1619 Project to a “double-standard” and for putting Hannah-Jones “beyond the line,” a belabored and barely comprehensible battlefield metaphor. He demanded that Wood, on the spot, issue some sort of formal apology to Hannah-Jones. He repeatedly misrepresented the historians’ letter as some sort of vicious personal attack on Hannah-Jones.

The moderator, Allgor, allowed Holton to go on and on. Whenever Wood tried to respond, she allowed Holton to speak over him. Only after Wood interjected that when he accepted the invitation to debate, he was told they would be discussing history did the conversation shift. By the calculation of this observer, Allgor afforded Holton at least 75 percent of the “debate.”

This was more than sufficient time for Holton to come across as an unscrupulous provocateur.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact