

Nikole Hannah-Jones' Center for Democracy and Journalism: Racialist politics in the service of US imperialism

Dominic Gustavo
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It has been nearly one year since the opening at Howard University in Washington D.C. of the Center for Democracy and Journalism, the official aim of which is to cultivate a new generation of black investigative reporters. Its presence at Howard—the most prestigious historically black college or university (HBCU)—the explicitly racial slant of its presentation, and the involvement in its work of celebrities, corporate interests and powerful state actors, merits a serious analysis.

The center was founded by celebrity-journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones—best known as the creator of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, which put forward a race-centered distortion of American history, framing it entirely in terms of racial conflict and eliminating the class struggle. Racialist author and reparations advocate Ta Nehisi-Coates was also a co-founder.

Described as a “first-of-its-kind academic center committed to strengthening historically informed, pro-democracy journalism,” the center opened on November 17, 2022 with much fanfare. It featured lengthy addresses by Hannah-Jones, Howard University's millionaire president Wayne A.I. Frederick, and former US President Barack Obama.

The center's website proclaims that it is “committed to defending journalism as a necessary and crucial tool for a functioning, more racially equitable, and just democratic system.”

Hannah-Jones, who along with Ta Nehisi-Coates has become very wealthy giving speeches and writing books about the structural racism that supposedly pervades American society, was showered with funding for her center by powerful private foundations, including the Knight Foundation, Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation and the Democracy Fund, among others. Initial funding for the center amounted to \$20 million.

Given the amount of corporate money provided for this endeavor, its grandiose stated goals and the fact that nearly a year has passed since its official opening, it is necessary to ask: What has been accomplished by this center?

The center has hired several academics such as Dr. Kali-Ahset Amen, who serves as its executive director. Earlier this year, Amen gave a talk at Texas Southern University (TSU), discussing a partnership with its School of Communication. In June, the university's student newspaper announced that the center had instituted a visiting professorship program set to begin in the spring of 2024, whereby investigative journalists and scholars would be invited to spend a semester at Howard.

But the center's website is bare of substantive information about its activities aside from a handful of articles reposted from the university's newspaper *The Dig*, and an advertisement for an upcoming event it sponsors entitled The Democracy Summit. There are no courses listed, no discussion of work the center is doing with Howard students, and in fact no evidence that it has produced or contributed to a single piece of

journalism.

Of the five news articles posted from the student newspaper on the website, two link to stories discussing the center's opening. A third publicizes that the center has been gifted yet another multi-million dollar corporate foundation grant, this from the the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The article says the foundation will provide “general, unrestricted funding” for journalism focused on “racial health disparities.” It outlines, in vague terms, work that will take place in the future.

The center counts two subscribers to its YouTube channel, which has managed to upload a single video five months ago. This is a two-minute long clip of Obama endorsing the center. The video has 79 views as of this writing.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reached out to the center for clarification, asking how many journalism courses were being taught and how many students were part of these courses. No response has yet been received.

Perhaps the upcoming “Democracy Summit” on November 14, marking the one-year anniversary of the center's opening, will provide additional data as to what programs and projects, if any, will be offered by the center.

Regardless, there is an obvious gap between the funding and media attention lavished upon the center and its actual output. Despite its stated aims of helping the “black community,” there is no indication that the center has done anything to improve the lives or education of Howard's majority-black student body, many of whom live in poorly maintained, moldy and mice-infested dormitories. Nor, for that matter, has it provided any assistance or opportunity to the underpaid university staff and faculty.

In an indication of her high profile “credentials,” and of the social forces that Hannah-Jones represents, she was recently involved in the September 21-23 Texas Tribune Festival, where she rubbed shoulders with representatives of the entire American political establishment as part of an event that included the fascist Republican Senator Ted Cruz, the reactionary Democratic Senator Joe Manchin, and Neera Tanden, who serves as a policy adviser to US President Joe Biden.

Given the Center for Democracy and Journalism's limited output, it is fair to ask of Hannah-Jones' credentials to head up a heavily endowed university studies program. She had managed to write a mere 23 articles over her seven years working at the *New York Times* before the major corporate foundations granted her the Howard sinecure—and after she had threatened to sue the University of North Carolina for not speeding her through to tenured professor status at another endowed professorship that had been promised her.

It was, of course, the 1619 Project that gave Hannah-Jones fame as a “journalist.” This pretentious effort at so-called “long form journalism” put forward a number of demonstrably false claims about American history: that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution, a

conspiracy by slaveholders to preserve slavery; that black people have always fought alone against an inherently racist white society; and that race struggle, not class struggle, is the motor force of history.

These historical falsifications were thoroughly debunked by the *World Socialist Web Site* and by principled historians. But the purpose of the 1619 Project was not to provide a serious historical analysis. This re-imagining of the past was to provide the basis for the achievement of present-day political aims, most importantly the accumulation of wealth by a privileged middle-class milieu.

The politics of personal identity—of race, gender and sexuality—are the means by which the interests of this narrow stratum are expressed, serving as a vehicle for obtaining access to greater wealth and privileges. Self-centeredness and greed are the chief characteristics of these people—along with hatred of the working class and of socialism. Today, this layer serves as the main constituency of the Democratic Party.

The recent scandal surrounding the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University is an indication of the money-grubbing character of this social layer. This center, founded by Ibram X. Kendi, was funded to the tune of \$43 million by major corporations and other wealthy donors eager to show their “progressive” credentials in the midst of the mass, multi-racial protests that erupted following the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. Last week, with little to show for the last three years, Kendi fired most of the center’s staff with most if not all of the \$43 million having mysteriously disappeared.

Time will tell whether Hannah-Jones’ center at Howard will be marked by such complete debacle. But it is certain that even if it does not, if for instance the center hires a full-time staff and begins to churn out work, the social and political forces involved will guarantee that such work will further the interests of US imperialism, against the American and international working class.

As it lurches towards a new world war, the US state is anxious to transform American colleges and universities into training centers for the specialized technicians required to run the US military-intelligence apparatus. A no less critical role is to be played by the layer of academics bribed by the bourgeoisie to provide an ideological justification for class oppression. In this way identity politics has been utilized as an essential bulwark of the capitalist order, hence its adoption by the Democratic Party, representing wide layers of the bourgeoisie and the affluent upper-middle classes.

Howard University, as the most prestigious HBCU, is seen as an integral part of this process of militarization. Here, the noxious mixture of racist ideology and the war aims of American imperialism finds its most advanced expression.

The \$90 million Pentagon contract awarded to Howard for the opening of a war research center dedicated to the improvement of the US military’s killer drones, represents an unmistakable step in this direction. This was celebrated in the corporate press as a historic advance for the “black community.” It is no such thing. Instead, it demonstrates the ever-closer entwinement of racist politics and the predatory aims of American imperialism.

The presence of Obama at the center’s founding and his promotion of its operations exposes its true nature most clearly.

Obama, who oversaw a massive expansion of the reach and power of the US state, is by any objective measure one of the world’s leading war criminals and a vicious opponent of the freedom of the press. He extended Washingtons’ brutal neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and North Africa, destroying entire societies in Libya and Syria. Obama personally presided over the infamous “Terror Tuesday” meetings in the White House, during which individuals marked for death-by-drone—no trial needed—were selected.

His administration utilized the power of the state to prosecute more whistleblowers than all other US administrations combined, by a factor of

three. One such target was Edward Snowden, who exposed the National Security Administration’s systematic spying on millions of Americans, and who was therefore threatened with prosecution and forced to seek asylum overseas. Whistleblowers Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, who exposed war atrocities committed by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan, were similarly persecuted by the Obama White House. Yet we are to believe that this center, bearing the Obama stamp of approval, will uphold principled investigative journalism in the interests of democracy? What nonsense!

The Obama administration also presided over the largest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in history with the 2009 Wall Street bailouts. The criminals who crashed the economy with their reckless speculation were rewarded with hundreds of billions of dollars, while wide swaths of the working population, of all races, had their lives upended.

Obama is a ruthless defender of American capitalism and implacable enemy of the international working class and of socialism. Yet his administration is portrayed by the racials of the 1619 Project as the culmination of “black history”! Here the ideology of black nationalism has truly come full circle. Its past representatives, from some “black power” groups to the Black Panthers, presented themselves as a force of opposition and declared their enmity to America’s wars abroad and their solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Now their political descendants, comfortably ensconced in the upper-middle class and tied by a million threads to Wall Street and the state, have fully crossed over into the camp of US imperialism.

This positive view of Obama and what he represents is not shared by the majority of the Howard student body, or for that matter with youth throughout the world. Obama’s legacy—of endless war, inequality and authoritarianism and the preparation of the political ground for Donald Trump—is widely reviled. This legacy can never win any genuine popular support.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, fights to mobilize youth and students against endless war, inequality and climate change. At Howard, the IYSSE has covered the student occupations in response to filthy dorms, as well as the struggles of faculty and staff for higher wages. Student socialists have also exposed the money grubbing of Hannah-Jones and the layer she represents.

Earlier this year, the IYSSE submitted an application to hold a public anti-war meeting on campus at Howard as part of an international campaign aimed at mobilizing the working class and youth against the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The university denied the application without explanation in what was undoubtedly a political decision, taken to ensure that the students of Howard are denied access to a socialist, anti-war perspective. This was an assault not just on the IYSSE, but on the fundamental democratic rights of the students at Howard, who have a right to hear left-wing, socialist views.

Moreover, it demonstrates how isolated and vulnerable the university administration and its state backers are. Clearly they fear that the socialist politics of the IYSSE will find substantial support among the majority working class student body of Howard. The same forces that carried out this anti-democratic act of censorship are behind this pretentiously named Center for Democracy and Journalism.

The racist politics promoted by Hannah-Jones and Howard University’s administration offer no solution to the great problems confronting the youth—the threat of world war with Russia and China, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the defense of democratic rights, the climate catastrophe, and the impoverishment of the working masses on a world scale. These will only be resolved by the unification of the working class behind an international, socialist program.

We call upon all students and youth, and in particular the students at Howard who agree with this perspective, who wish to join the fight for socialism and against war and inequality, to get into contact with us and fight for the building of a section of the IYSSE at Howard University.



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