

American historians issue politically bankrupt and intellectually dishonest appeal for Kamala Harris

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On the eve of Election Day, a group of American historians has issued a public statement calling for a vote for Kamala Harris. It has been co-authored by eight historians—Kai Bird, Sidney Blumenthal, Ken Burns (best known as a documentarist), Ron Chernow, Beverly Gage, Eddie Glaude, Jon Meacham and Sean Wilentz—and co-signed by dozens of other academics.

It is an appalling document, which exposes both the political bankruptcy of American liberalism and the deplorable role played by its intellectual exponents in propping up the Democratic Party.

The statement does not confine itself to urging a vote for Harris as “the lesser of two evils.” Such an appeal based on this argument would be politically incorrect, but at least it would place some distance between the signatories and the crimes of the Biden-Harris administration. Quite the opposite: The document hails Harris as a heroine of democracy, swinging her terrible swift sword against Trump, the devil.

Reading the text of this statement, one finds it hard to believe that any of its authors and signatories had any knowledge of American history, let alone familiarity with the present state of US society. The statement proclaims:

Since 1789, the nation has prospered under a Constitution dedicated to securing the general welfare, under a national government bound by the rule of law in which no one interest or person holds absolute power. In 1860 an elite interest dedicated to human slavery attempted to shatter the Union rather than accede to the constitutional rule of law by accepting the outcome of the election, plunging the nation into Civil War.

This narrative is based not on history but on myth. It counterposes to Trump’s reactionary battle cry, “Make America Great Again,” a pathetic appeal to “Keep America Great.” Many of the signatories have written books dealing with the inequities of the Constitution as it was originally drafted, and that its evasions on the issue of slavery enabled the Southern slaveholders to claim that it was Lincoln who was violating the Constitution. Moreover, the real political and moral foundation of the Union’s position was grounded not on a narrow reading of the provisions of the Constitution but on the principles proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. But beyond this essential historical point, the historians’ claim that “the nation has prospered under a Constitution dedicated to securing the general welfare” is the sheerest patriotic nonsense, no more believable than the claims that George Washington threw a silver dollar across the Potomac and that the Founding Father never told a lie.

All the basic and essential democratic rights that are formally

recognized in law are the product of amendments to the original Constitution. The Constitution as it existed in the 72 years between 1789 and 1861 protected slavery, a fact that weakened to the point of paralyzing the struggle for abolition. In the end, it was necessary for the North, led by Lincoln and the Radical Republicans, to wage a revolutionary war against the slaveowners. Moreover, preserving in law the results of the military struggle required the passage of three amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth—to the Constitution.

We must also ask the historians: What “nation” and what “general welfare” are they referring to?

In the bloody aftermath of the Civil War, the prosperity and “general welfare” eulogized by the forgetful historians did not include either the ex-slaves, who faced the vengeance and oppression of their former masters, or the Native Americans, who were the victims of US government-sanctioned genocide.

There are a fair number of labor historians among the signatories, but the brutal exploitation of the working class by the ruling capitalist class, accompanied by extreme violence, in the 70 years following the Civil War seems to have escaped their memories.

In short, the statement’s evocation of US history, until the appearance of Trump, as the triumphal procession of truth, justice and the American way is a fabrication.

The signatories condemn Trump’s hostility to “constitutional customs” and the “rule of law.” That claim is true, but it ignores the fact that Trump’s contempt for democratic principles and the “rule of law” can claim numerous precedents in the actions of earlier presidential administrations, both Republican and Democratic. The Obama administration institutionalized the use of targeted assassinations, which included the extra-judicial killings of American citizens. During the past year, the Biden-Harris administration has systematically ignored and violated essential principles of international law in financing and arming Israel’s genocidal war against the people of Gaza.

The historians warn against Trump’s plans to “intimidate, prosecute and imprison” those who are designated as “the enemy within.” But such actions by Trump would be building upon the violations of democratic rights by every administration over the past 85 years, including the jailing of Trotskyists on trumped-up charges of sedition during World War II, the later Smith Act prosecutions of members of the Communist Party, the execution of the Rosenbergs, the Hollywood blacklists and countless other violations of First Amendment rights.

The historians seem to have sleepwalked through the last quarter-century. The massive violations of democratic rights associated with the fully criminal war on terror—legitimized and waged on the basis of colossal lies by the presidential administrations of both parties—have passed them by unnoticed.

The statement descends into the depths of political duplicity in its unstinting praise of Kamala Harris. The historians might have counseled their readers to hold their noses while casting their ballot for Harris. But it was not enough for the historians to advocate run-of-the-mill political opportunism. They have chosen to revel in unrestrained political toadying. Writing in the style of shameless courtiers, they proclaim:

Kamala Harris has dedicated her life to affirming the rule of law and democracy. As a prosecutor and California attorney-general, she pursued justice without fear or favor. As U.S. Senator, she confronted those who would aid and abet the malign use of authority. As Vice President, she has worked to find solutions to urgent problems, domestic and foreign. As a presidential candidate, she has called out her opponent as a disgrace to his oath to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution.

This unctuous drivel is being written about an intellectual lightweight and political cipher whose career is based entirely on her capacity, like all those who make their way ahead within the framework of the capitalist two-party system, to do the dirty work of her corporate paymasters. The authors fail to identify the great social causes for which Harris fought “without fear or favor.” Her tenure as California attorney general was principally distinguished by her ruthlessness and contempt for the poor, such as defending the death penalty and opposing release of inmates from overcrowded prisons and the requirement that police shootings be investigated. Once in the Senate, Harris was quickly moved on to its Intelligence Committee, demonstrating that she enjoyed the confidence of the CIA and the military. Her unquestioned fealty to the interests of US imperialism assured her elevation to the vice presidency under Biden.

The historians observe a guilty silence on her complicity in the Gaza genocide and her enthusiastic promotion of the proxy war in Ukraine. Harris’s four-year stint as vice president is drenched in blood. She made it a point to attend every single one of Biden’s meetings with Netanyahu, directly associating herself with the US-backed massacre of, according to official figures, more than 43,000 Palestinians, including more than 13,000 children.

As for a dedication to the “rule of law and democracy,” as part of the Biden administration Harris has overseen the victimization and persecution of opponents of the genocide, including many students and academics. Indeed, Harris held one of her final campaign events at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where Maura Finkelstein, a Jewish anthropology professor, was fired for statements opposing Israel.

The authors conclude their statement with a final ringing appeal for the election of Harris. They proclaim: “On the outcome of this election, no less than the election of 1860, hangs the fate of both the spirit and letter of the Constitution.” This statement is political and intellectual gibberish. The great issue that confronted the American people in the election of 1860 was slavery. A vote for Lincoln represented a decision to defend the Union against the dictatorship of the slaveowners. As the great historian James McPherson has written, when the Civil War erupted soon after the election, people shot the way they had voted.

What are the great democratic principles that are being upheld by Harris? What profound changes in the economic, political and social structures of the United States is she advancing, “without fear or favor”? Two years before the election of 1860, in public debates in which he confronted Stephen A. Douglas, his future challenger for the presidency, Lincoln articulated the basic principles upon which the struggle against slavery would be based.

Where and when has Vice President Harris—who, when deprived of the

services of a teleprompter, relies entirely on the memorized recitation of scripted platitudes—articulated the principles at stake in the election of 2024? Her brief reference to fascism was quickly withdrawn. The overtly fascist character of the Republican Party and its full-scale involvement in the conspiracies of Trump go entirely unmentioned.

This degraded election campaign has been characterized above all by the exclusion of any mention of the real political, social and economic issues: that the United States is already deeply engaged in a rapidly expanding global war that threatens to escalate into a cataclysmic nuclear conflict; that the United States is riven by massive social inequality, with staggering levels of wealth concentrated in an infinitesimal percentage of the population; that the vast majority of the people are experiencing significant levels of economic distress; and that social life has been profoundly destabilized by the consequences of a five-year pandemic that has claimed the lives of 1.5 million Americans and seriously debilitated millions more.

The silence of the Harris campaign on these conditions—for which the Democratic Party bears full responsibility—is reproduced by the historians. Apart from the personality of Trump, the infernal interloper in America’s democratic paradise, the historians offer no analysis of the causes of his political ascent. No attempt whatever is made to explain why upwards of 70 million Americans will cast their votes for him.

They never pose the critical question: What are the objective conditions underlying the phenomenon of Trumpism and the fascist MAGA movement? How will the election vote, in and of itself, save democracy from destruction? Will the deep-rooted anger and frustration felt by millions of Americans dissolve if Trump fails to obtain an electoral vote majority? The Southern slaveowners responded to their defeat in the elections of 1860 by resorting to a counter-revolutionary insurrection in 1861. After the experience of January 6, 2021, there is no reason to believe that the ultimate fate of American democracy will be decided by the outcome of the election.

Without an analysis of the causes of the emergence of a significant fascist threat in the United States, there can be no serious and successful struggle against it.

The statement of the historians reflects the bankruptcy of what passes for political thought in academic circles. But this intellectual impoverishment is not merely a failing of individuals. In this epoch of intense crisis of the existing social order and the growing confrontation of the two most powerful classes, capitalists and workers, the role of the middle class ideologists of class compromise and the glories of capitalist democracy is reduced to insignificance. Their political bromides assume an irrelevant and absurd character.

Whatever the outcome of Election Day, the United States faces a future of bitter class conflict. The struggle against the horrors of fascism and war requires a clear and farsighted socialist perspective. That will emerge not from the pulpits of academia but from the ranks of the Trotskyist movement, basing itself on the theoretical foundations of Marxism, in the closest connection with the development of the struggles of the working class in the United States and internationally.



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