

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project

Five historians wrote to us with their reservations. Our editor in chief replies.

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The letter below was published in the Dec. 29 issue of The New York Times Magazine.

RE: [The 1619 Project](#)

We write as historians to express our strong reservations about important aspects of The 1619 Project. The project is intended to offer a new version of American history in which slavery and white supremacy become the dominant organizing themes. The Times has announced ambitious plans to make the project available to schools in the form of curriculums and related instructional material.

We applaud all efforts to address the enduring centrality of slavery and racism to our history. Some of us have devoted our entire professional lives to those efforts, and all of us have worked hard to advance them. Raising profound, unsettling questions about slavery and the nation's past and present, as [The 1619 Project](#) does, is a praiseworthy and urgent public service. Nevertheless, we are dismayed at some of the factual errors in the project and the closed process behind it.

These errors, which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or “framing.” They are matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism. They suggest a displacement of historical understanding by ideology. Dismissal of objections on racial grounds — that they are the objections of only “white historians” — has affirmed that displacement.

On the American Revolution, pivotal to any account of our history, the project asserts that the founders declared the colonies' independence of Britain “in order to ensure slavery would continue.” This is not true. If supportable, the allegation would be astounding — yet every statement offered by the project to validate it is false. Some of the other material in the project is distorted, including the claim that “for the most part,” black Americans have fought their freedom struggles “alone.”

Still other material is misleading. The project criticizes Abraham Lincoln's views on racial equality but ignores his conviction that the Declaration of Independence proclaimed universal equality, for blacks as well as whites, a view he upheld repeatedly against powerful white supremacists who opposed him. The project also ignores Lincoln's agreement with Frederick Douglass that the Constitution was, in Douglass's words, “a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT.” Instead, the project asserts that the

United States was founded on racial slavery, an argument rejected by a majority of abolitionists and proclaimed by champions of slavery like John C. Calhoun.

The 1619 Project has not been presented as the views of individual writers — views that in some cases, as on the supposed direct connections between slavery and modern corporate practices, have so far failed to establish any empirical veracity or reliability and have been seriously challenged by other historians. Instead, the project is offered as an authoritative account that bears the imprimatur and credibility of The New York Times. Those connected with the project have assured the public that its materials were shaped by a panel of historians and have been scrupulously fact-checked. Yet the process remains opaque. The names of only some of the historians involved have been released, and the extent of their involvement as “consultants” and fact checkers remains vague. The selective transparency deepens our concern.

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We ask that The Times, according to its own high standards of accuracy and truth, issue prominent corrections of all the errors and distortions presented in The 1619 Project. We also ask for the removal of these mistakes from any materials destined for use in schools, as well as in all further publications, including books bearing the name of The New York Times. We ask finally that The Times reveal fully the process through which the historical materials were and continue to be assembled, checked and authenticated.

Sincerely,

Victoria Bynum, distinguished emerita professor of history, Texas State University;
James M. McPherson, George Henry Davis 1886 emeritus professor of American history, Princeton University;
James Oakes, distinguished professor, the Graduate Center, the City University of New York;
Sean Wilentz, George Henry Davis 1886 professor of American history, Princeton University;
Gordon S. Wood, Alva O. Wade University emeritus professor and emeritus professor of history, Brown University.

Editor's response:

Since The 1619 Project was published in August, we have received a great deal of feedback from readers, many of them educators, academics and historians. A majority have reacted positively to the project, but there have also been criticisms. Some I would describe as constructive, noting episodes we might have overlooked; others have treated

the work more harshly. We are happy to accept all of this input, as it helps us continue to think deeply about the subject of slavery and its legacy.

The letter from Professors Bynum, McPherson, Oakes, Wilentz and Wood differs from the previous critiques we have received in that it contains the first major request for correction. We are familiar with the objections of the letter writers, as four of them have been interviewed in recent months by the World Socialist Web Site. We're glad for a chance to respond directly to some of their objections.

Though we respect the work of the signatories, appreciate that they are motivated by scholarly concern and applaud the efforts they have made in their own writings to illuminate the nation's past, we disagree with their claim that our project contains significant factual errors and is driven by ideology rather than historical understanding. While we welcome criticism, we don't believe that the request for corrections to The 1619 Project is warranted.

The project was intended to address the marginalization of African-American history in the telling of our national story and examine the legacy of slavery in contemporary American life. We are not ourselves historians, it is true. We are journalists, trained to look at current events and situations and ask the question: Why is this the way it is? In the case of the persistent racism and inequality that plague this country, the answer to that question led us inexorably into the past — and not just for this project. The project's creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones, a staff writer at the magazine, has consistently used history to inform her journalism, primarily in her work on educational segregation (work for which she has been recognized with numerous honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship).

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Though we may not be historians, we take seriously the responsibility of accurately presenting history to readers of The New York Times. The letter writers express concern about a “closed process” and an opaque “panel of historians,” so I'd like to make clear the steps we took. We did not assemble a formal panel for this project. Instead, during the early stages of development, we consulted with numerous scholars of African-American history and related fields, in a group meeting at The Times as well as in a series of individual conversations. (Five of those who initially consulted with us — Mehrsa Baradaran of the University of California, Irvine; Matthew Desmond and Kevin M. Kruse, both of Princeton University; and Tiya Miles and Khalil G. Muhammad, both of Harvard University — went on to publish articles in the issue.) After those consultations, writers conducted their own research, reading widely, examining primary documents and artifacts and interviewing historians. Finally, during the fact-checking process, our researchers carefully reviewed all the articles in the issue with subject-area experts. This is no different from what we do on any article.

As the five letter writers well know, there are often debates, even among subject-area experts, about how to see the past. Historical understanding is not fixed; it is constantly being adjusted by new scholarship and new voices. Within the world of academic history, differing views exist, if not over what precisely happened, then about why it happened, who made it happen, how to interpret the motivations of historical actors and what it all means.

The passages cited in the letter, regarding the causes of the American Revolution and the attitudes toward black equality of Abraham Lincoln, are good examples of this. Both are found in the [lead essay by Hannah-Jones](#). We can hardly claim to have studied the Revolutionary period as long as some of the signatories, nor do we presume to tell them anything they don't already know, but I think it would be useful for readers to hear why we believe that Hannah-Jones's claim that "one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery" is grounded in the historical record.