

POLICY NOTE

The 1619 Project: Sloppy scholarship and distorted history under consideration for Washington schools

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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Key Findings

1. Education officials are considering adopting The 1619 Project history curriculum for Washington public schools.
2. The 1619 Project is a series of essays written by a newspaper reporter and published by *The New York Times Magazine*.
3. Respected historians have found The 1619 Project represents poor research methods and contains a number of factual errors.
4. Lincoln scholars have found The 1619 Project includes serious gaps in teaching about the Civil War era, and misrepresents President Lincoln's pivotal role in ending the institution of slavery.
5. The National Association of Scholars found The 1619 Project contains a number of flaws and violates the ethical standards of journalism and published academic research.
6. The 1619 Project presents an inaccurate understanding of the past, denies students access to the rich texture of American history, and teaches students to hate their country.

Introduction

The 1619 Project is a series of essays published by *The New York Times Magazine* on August 14, 2019.¹ The lead essay was written by Nikole Hannah-Jones, who is a newspaper reporter, not a historian.² In the essay she asserts that the “true founding” of America occurred not in 1776, when the United States was founded, but in 1619, when the first captive Africans landed in North America. Her conclusion is that America was founded in 1619 to “ensure slavery would continue.”³ Even after significant factual errors were found in her work, the author was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.⁴

In an effort to change how American history is taught to children, *The New York Times* is making The 1619 Project available to public schools in the form of curricula, lesson plans, activities and reading guides for students. The Random House Group is publishing an expanded version of the essay, producing an illustrated novel and issuing four 1619 Project publications targeted at young people.⁵

Education officials are now considering whether to introduce The 1619 Project curriculum in Washington state schools. For example, administrators at Seattle Public Schools are urging teachers to present The 1619 Project to students as authentic American history.^{6,7}

1 “The 1619 Project,” by Nikole Hannah-Jones, *New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019, at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.

2 The title of Nikole Hannah-Jones’ lead essay is “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.”

3 “Down The 1619 Project’s Memory Hole,” by Philip W. Magness, *Quillette*, September 19, 2020, at <https://quillette.com/2020/09/19/down-the-1619-projects-memory-hole/>.

4 “Nikole Hannah-Jones wins Pulitzer Prize for 1619 Project,” by Jeff Barrus, May 4, 2020, Pulitzer Center, at <https://pulitzercenter.org/blog/nikole-hannah-jones-wins-pulitzer-prize-1619-project>.

5 “Series of books planned, based on NYT’s ‘1619 Project,’” Associated Press, *The Seattle Times*, November 20, 2019, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/series-of-books-planned-based-on-nyts-1619-project/>.

6 “Seattle Public Schools Library Newsletter,” Seattle Public Schools, August 26, 2019, at https://www.seattleschools.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_543/File/District/Departments/LibraryServices/Newsletter/LibraryNewsletterIssue2.1_ADA.pdf.

7 “Series of books planned, based on NYT’s ‘1619 Project,’” Associated Press, *The Seattle Times*, November 20, 2019, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/series-of-books-planned-based-on-nyts-1619-project/>.

Historians find factual errors and flawed analysis in 1619 Project

A number of respected historians have found The 1619 Project curriculum to be riddled with basic errors and thematic inaccuracies.

Brown University Professor Gordon Wood, the preeminent historian of the American Revolution, and four historians from Princeton and other universities, say there is no historical evidence for the claim that the American Revolution was fought to protect slavery. They write:

“On the American Revolution, the [1619] 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....

Historians also found The 1619 Project contains a false understanding of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, and their principled view of the fundamental equality that is inherent in the founding of American democracy.

“Still other material is misleading. The [1619] 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.”⁸

Civil War scholars identify additional errors

In addition, twelve respected historians of the American Founding and the Civil War era criticize The 1619 Project for not considering the larger historical context of slavery:⁹

- The 1619 Project is in error because historically forced labor was not exclusive to North America, but was common around the world.
- The experience of millions of people of a 400-year period cannot be compressed into a single-size interpretation focused only on one aspect of history.
- The assertion that every aspect of American life can only be viewed through the lens of slavery is restrictive and inaccurate.

8 “We respond to the historians who critique The 1619 Project,” Jake Silverstein, *The New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>.

9 “Twelve scholars critique The 1619 Project and the New York Times Magazine Editor Responds,” History News Network, The George Washington University, January 19, 2020, at <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/174140>.

- The 1619 Project assertion that “America wasn’t a democracy until black Americans made it one” ignores the foundational contributions of millions of other Americans.
- The 1619 Project assertion that “American capitalism is brutal; you can trace that to the plantation” ignores the historical fact United States’ growth and prosperity was largely based on a free-market economy, not on the plantation system.
- The Project 1619 assertion that “Segregation caused your traffic jam” ignores the many complex social and economic factors that create conditions in America; not all of today’s problems were created by the historical legacy of slavery and racism.

These historians say The 1619 Project gives “problematic treatment of major issues and personalities of the Founding and Civil War eras,” including construing slavery as a capitalist venture, while failing to note Southern slaveholders scorned capitalism.¹⁰ The ethics of capitalism rejects the idea that human beings can be property.

The historians also show The 1619 Project misrepresents the historical record on Abraham Lincoln’s views of “colonizing” black citizens back to Africa, without mentioning Lincoln’s leadership role in ending slavery, or the deaths of thousands of white Americans in a war to end slavery.

The 1619 Project also fails to inform students that Frederick Douglass described Lincoln as “emphatically the black man’s president.”

Finally, these historians say:

“We do not believe that the authors of The 1619 Project have considered these larger contexts with sufficient seriousness, or invited a candid review of its assertions by the larger community of historians.”¹¹

National Association of Scholars condemns 1619 project as poor scholarship

The National Association of Scholars, citing pervasive and significant errors, has called The 1619 Project poor scholarship and has called for The Pulitzer Committee to revoke her Prize, saying Nikole Hannah-Jones’ lead essay is itself false.

The Association notes the failure of *The New York Times* to listen to its own fact-checker, historian Leslie M. Harris, who warned the newspaper that the assertion “the patriots fought the American Revolution in large part to preserve slavery in North America” was plainly false.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me.” by Leslie M. Harris, *Politico*, March 6, 2020, at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248>.

The National Association of Scholars describe Nikole Hannah-Jones' refusal to correct her errors or discuss her claims with the academic community. They say that she and *The New York Times* have violated the code of professional journalistic ethics by altering the historical record in an effort to deceive the public.¹³

Project 1619 publisher quietly changed its text

In December 2019, publishers at *The New York Times Magazine* quietly deleted the language “understanding 1619 as the true founding of America” from the digital version of Nikole Hannah-Jones' article. They did so secretly, without informing the public, in violation of core journalistic standards.¹⁴ They were unable to alter the print edition, however, which remains part of The 1619 Project's publishing record.

Later, on March 11, 2020, Jake Silverstein, Editor-in-Chief of *The New York Times Magazine*, declined to print corrections or address the false claims made by The 1619 Project, as identified by a wide range of respected scholars in the field of American history.

In declining to make corrections, the publisher did not reveal that he had earlier deleted the “true founding” language from the original digital version of the article.¹⁵

Then, on September 19th, Phillip W. Magness, senior research fellow at the American Institute for Economic Research, revealed that *The New York Times* had surreptitiously changed the digital version of The 1619 Project in December, without informing the public.¹⁶

Conclusion

The 1619 Project is poorly researched, and riddled with flaws and disgraced by unprofessional journalistic behavior.

If school administrators adopt the 1619 Project curriculum for Washington public schools, they will be denying students an understanding of the rich texture of American history, and of the steady success of Americans of all races in overcoming the moral failings inherited by early colonists 400 years ago –failings that existed throughout the world at the time.

Independent scholarship finds that America was founded on the ideal of freedom, and of equal opportunity and justice for all. Protecting the true record of America's founding is essential to inspiring efforts to achieve these noble ideals.

13 “Pulitzer Board must revoke Nikole Hannah-Jones' Prize,” by Peter Wood, President, National Association of Scholars, October 6, 2020, at: <https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/pulitzer-board-must-revoke-nikole-hannah-jones-prize>.

14 “Down The 1619 Project's Memory Hole,” by Phillip W. Magness, *Quillette*, September 19, 2020, at <https://quillette.com/2020/09/19/down-the-1619-projects-memory-hole/> and “Pulitzer Board must revoke Nikole Hannah-Jones' Prize,” by Peter Wood, President, National Association of Scholars, October 6, 2020, at: <https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/pulitzer-board-must-revoke-nikole-hannah-jones-prize>.

15 “An Update to The 1619 Project,” by Jake Silverstein, *The New York Times Magazine*, March 11, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/magazine/an-update-to-the-1619-project.html>

16 “Down The 1619 Project's Memory Hole,” by Phillip W. Magness, *Quillette*, September 19, 2020, at <https://quillette.com/2020/09/19/down-the-1619-projects-memory-hole/>.



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Otherwise, public school children are receiving poor instructional material, like the flawed 1619 Project, and are simply being taught to hate their country.

Contrary to the false claims of The 1619 Project, documentary evidence and eyewitness accounts show that the United States is founded on the fundamental principle that “all men are created equal,” and are equal before the law and should enjoy the liberties and benefits of equal citizenship. While the United States, like all other countries in the world, inherited immoral institutions from the past, the true progress of the country has been toward ever-greater personal freedom and participation in democratic self-government.

As public officials, school board members, administrators and teaching staff have a moral obligation to ensure that children receive an education that is fair, accurate and unbiased. Only by teaching the truth about America’s history can students be prepared to understand the nation’s historical struggle and moral progress, and be fully prepared to participate in the civic life of their country.