

1619, Revisited

The loudest criticism of the Times project has been neither productive nor scholarly.

By Nicholas Guyatt

Nicholas Guyatt is the author of “Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation.”

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More than a year after its appearance in The New York Times Magazine, the 1619 Project continues to drive its critics to distraction. Last month, President Trump convened a “White House Conference on American History” to defend the “magnificent truth about our country” from the “toxic propaganda” of the project.

Earlier this month, 21 scholars published an open letter to the Pulitzer Prize Board demanding that the Prize for Commentary awarded to Nikole Hannah-Jones’s lead essay be rescinded. And on Oct. 9, the Times columnist Bret Stephens wrote that the project’s “categorical and totalizing assertions” had squandered a precious opportunity to reorient the national debate on race in American history. Mr. Stephens’s conclusion was sober: “The 1619 Project has failed.”

The five distinguished historians who wrote to The Times last December to ask for “corrections” were more specific: They rejected the claims that Abraham Lincoln had failed to accept Black equality, that Black people had largely fought for their rights without the help of white allies, and that “one of the primary reasons” the colonists had waged the American Revolution was to protect slavery.

This final assertion, which appeared fleetingly in Ms. Hannah-Jones’s lead essay, became the weakest spot against which the project’s critics were determined to press. In the spring of this year, The Times rewrote one line in her essay to note that “some of the colonists” saw the Revolution as a way to preserve slavery. Some critics of the project declared victory, and wondered if the entire endeavor might now be undone.

Instead, 1619 continued to resonate, not least in the extraordinary uprisings that followed the killing of George Floyd in May. With the project now seeming prophetic rather than heretical — or perhaps prophetic *and* heretical — a new line of argument emerged. Just after Mr. Trump’s impromptu conference on American history last month, the Princeton historian Sean Wilentz criticized both the conference and the project, writing that historians may one day conclude that they were “closely matched symptoms of the same era, feeding off each other.”

Although Professor Wilentz had previously expressed support for 1619's ambitions, he now presented Mr. Trump's version of American history and the Times project as equidistant from evidence and historical truth. Americans should set aside "ideological distortion" on both sides and choose "legitimate historical writing" instead. Mr. Stephens does something similar in his recent column. Despite the noble goals of the project, its "overreach" has allowed Mr. Trump and his supporters to argue that what the president calls "fake news" is now promoting fake history: "As unbidden gifts to Donald Trump go, it could hardly have been sweeter than that."

Writing as a professional historian with no involvement in the 1619 Project, I believe that criticism of the project is not only legitimate but necessary. Argument isn't an obstacle to the work of historians; it is the work of historians. In recent years historians have written a great deal about how slavery and racism influenced the American Revolution (and vice versa) without reaching a consensus view; they've also conducted a lively debate over slavery's role in the shaping of American capitalism.

Historians of good faith and excellent method can and should explore these questions without fear or rancor, or at least without any more rancor than academics usually generate when they quarrel with one another. But in the loudest criticism of 1619 has been a level of vitriol that is neither productive nor scholarly. Professor Wilentz told *The Washington Post* that, when he first read Ms. Hannah-Jones's lead essay, "I threw the thing across the room." His Princeton colleague Allen C. Guelzo has dismissed the project as a "conspiracy theory." Prominent critics have looked to shut down the project's assertions rather than engage with them, and have even suggested that the project's authors bear some responsibility for the president's endless culture wars.

What's going on here? In part, I think, the answer is gate-keeping. The project's critics were clearly upset by its arguments, but does anyone think that the same essays published in another venue would have created anything like this reaction?

There is also something generational about this sense of horror at the storming of the citadel: among liberals of a certain age, *The Times* has a sacred status in American life. Some of the project's liberal critics are also accustomed to shaping the national conversation on the American past. That *The Times* would have published the project without the benefit of their expertise clearly came as a shock. "I had no warning about this," the distinguished historian Gordon S. Wood told the *World Socialist* website about 1619. "No one ever approached me."

But the visceral reaction is also an acknowledgment that the 1619 Project radically challenges a core narrative of American history. Liberals and conservatives alike have imagined the story of the United States as a gradual unfolding of freedom. The Declaration of Independence is the seed of equality which eventually flowers for every American; white people — from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Abraham Lincoln to Lyndon B. Johnson — are indispensable allies in the work of racial progress.

The 1619 Project finds this narrative wanting. Its authors describe a nation in which racism is persistent and protean. White supremacy shapeshifts through the nation's history, finding new forms to continue the work of subjugation and exclusion.

This is bracing to Americans who've been taught that the extension of freedom is the nation's perpetual purpose. Nonetheless, the criticism directed at the project — and especially at Ms. Hannah-Jones's essay — has been wildly disproportionate. The project's authors can't have imagined that their work would tear the Fourth of July from the national calendar, and yet so many of their critics have insisted that the counternarrative of 1619 might unravel even the most cherished assumptions about the nation's values and purpose.

On the face of it, this fragility seems misplaced. The traditional narratives of American history die very hard indeed. But the 1619 Project has complicated long-held certainties about that history, forcing Americans (especially white Americans) to look at both the past and the present with fresh eyes.

While the old arguments about the moral unity of the American past will continue to generate fierce headwinds for future scholars who follow in the project's footsteps, the extraordinary public interest in 1619 has suggested something truly profound: that Americans have the capacity to think differently about their history. In this sense, the 1619 Project has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its creators.

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