



New York Times' '1619 Project' unjustly weakens America abroad

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The New York Times' decision of recent days to make a "clarification" to one sentence in the lead essay of its "1619 Project" won't do much to quell a growing fight over the meaning of America's founding — a fight with profound implications for the nation's continuing influence around the world.

That's because the project remains an audacious effort to reframe our history from one centered around our ideals to one focused on our troubled racial past. Rather than pinpoint our founding as 1776 with the Declaration of Independence, it seeks to refocus attention on 1619, when "more than 20 enslaved Africans" arrived in Virginia.

The New York Times launched the project in August with a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, carrying 10 essays on how slavery's legacy continues to shape major aspects of our society. The project also includes a podcast, a book to come and, perhaps most consequentially, a history curriculum for high school students. The project is reportedly a finalist for the National Magazine Awards and a strong contender for a Pulitzer, which will further enhance its influence.

The clarification seems more an effort to rescue the project than correct the record. In her lead essay, *The New York Times'* Nikole Hannah-Jones originally wrote, "[O]ne of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery." Now, after months of criticism from some of the nation's most renowned historians, *The New York Times* announced that it revised the sentence to read that "some of the colonists" were so motivated — a change that does nothing to undermine the project's main thrust.

Let's be clear: No one should sugarcoat the brutality of slavery, dismiss the horrors of Jim Crow, downplay the bloody violence that met the civil rights movement or ignore the racism that continues to plague our society. Nor should one dismiss a new interpretation of American history out of hand simply because it's new, for history is a somewhat moving target and new information often forces us to look anew at the past.

Nonetheless, the project is troubling, for it continues to make slavery's preservation a key reason behind America's founding without offering any information to support the claim. It also suggests, through the Hannah-Jones essay that frames the project, that America has made little real progress on race and that whatever progress it has made was driven almost entirely by African-Americans.

All of that makes the United States a decidedly dishonorable enterprise, with no standing to serve as a global beacon for anything.

Because *The New York Times* never seemed very concerned about getting the history right, its clarification seems grudging at best.

Earlier this year, Princeton's Sean Wilentz and James McPherson, Brown's Gordon Wood, Texas State University's Victoria Bynum and the City University of New York's James Oakes wrote to *The New York Times* to say, "[T]he 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."

The magazine's editor in chief, Jake Silverstein, refused to make corrections, dismissing charges that the project includes "significant errors" and seems driven less by "historical understanding" than ideology.

It was only after Northwestern's Leslie Harris — in a piece for *Politico* this month — wrote about her experience that the magazine changed its tune. After arguing "vigorously" with a *Times'* fact-checker against the notion that "the patriots fought the American Revolution in large part to preserve slavery in North America," Ms. Harris wrote, she "listened in stunned silence" when Mrs. Hannah-Jones repeated the charge on a radio show on which they both appeared as *The New York Times* launched the project.

Mrs. Hannah-Jones, who inspired the project, understands what's at stake. "In June 1776," she wrote, "Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned these words: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' For the last 243 years, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty."

Indeed, the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Federalist Papers and the nation's other founding documents helped inspire activists to unseat colonial rule in the developing world, topple the Soviet empire and continue challenging autocrats all across the globe.

If, as the 1619 Project suggests, America is a nation whose founding rests on nefarious rather than honorable motives, the nation can hardly continue to inspire would-be democrats around the world to pursue their goals. Nor — if convinced by the project — will future generations of Americans feel empowered to promote our ideals.

For its fact-less assertions and the harm they could bring, the project should be denounced, the book ignored and the curriculum rejected.

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