



Department of History
136 Dickinson Hall
Princeton, New Jersey 08544-1017
T 609.258.4159 F 609.258.5326

December 4, 2019

James Bennet
Editorial Page Editor
The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

Dear Mr. Bennet,

On behalf of our colleagues who have also signed the attached letter, we are sending this to your attention. We have also sent copies to Messrs. Baquet, Silverstein, and Sulzberger.

We request that the Times publish the letter in full.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James M. McPherson".

James M. McPherson, George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of American History Emeritus

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sean Wilentz".

Sean Wilentz, George Henry Davis Professor of American History

December 4, 2019

Dean Baquet, Executive Editor
James Bennet, Editorial Page Editor
Jake Silverstein, Editor-in-Chief, The New York Times Magazine
A.G. Sulzberger, Publisher

The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

Dear Sirs,

We write as historians to express our strong reservations about important aspects of the New York Times's 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 curricula and related instructional material.

We applaud all efforts to address the foundational 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 origins, 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 only the objections of "white historians" — has affirmed that displacement.

On the American Revolution, for example — 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 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, including 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 invented in the 1830s by proslavery champions like John C. Calhoun, and later picked up by a minority of the abolitionists.

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 as yet failed to establish any empirical veracity or reliability and have been seriously challenged by other historians. Instead, the project is offered as an authoritative historical 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.

We ask that the Times, according to its own high standards of accuracy and truth, issue prominent corrections of all of 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 whereby the historical materials were and continue to be assembled, checked, and authenticated.

Sincerely,

Victoria Bynum, Distinguished Professor of History Emerita, Texas State University

James M. McPherson, George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of American History Emeritus,
Princeton University

James Oakes, Distinguished Professor, The Graduate Center, CUNY-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 Professor and Professor of History Emeritus, Brown
University