

The New York Times Magazine

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.

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,

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