

Commentary...

# 1619 vs. 1776 – history education is a battleground

By Jim Cornelius  
Editor in Chief

*“There are two things that I believe to be true. First, that America has a long history of brutal and shameful mistreatment of racial minorities — with black Americans its chief victims. And second, that America is a great nation, and that American citizens (and citizens of the world) should be grateful for its founding. Perhaps no nation has done more good for more people than the United States. It was and is a beacon of liberty and prosperity in a world long awash in tyranny and poverty.”*

— David French, *The National Review*

History is always a battleground. Ideologues mine it for raw materials that can be fashioned into weapons to deploy in contemporary culture wars. Given how intense our political and cultural conflicts have grown in the past few years, it’s not surprising that there is furious dustup underway over what history is taught to young people.

In this corner, we have the 1619 Project; in the opposite corner we have the 1776 Commission.

The 1619 Project was launched in August 2019 by *The New York Times* and framed thus:

“In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the English colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed. In the 400th anniversary of this fateful moment, it is finally time to tell our story truthfully.”

The 1619 Project was

hailed in some quarters as a long-overdue refocusing on the centrality of slavery and the Black experience in the creation of America. Critically, the Project asserts that this past is not dead — and not even past — that the legacy of slavery is part of the warp and weft of the American fabric, tainting its culture and all of its institutions.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, the reporter who conceived of the Project and wrote its framing essay was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary. The Project is being proposed in some quarters as foundational material for teaching American history.

The 1619 Project has been heavily criticized — and not just by people who are ideologically hostile to its premise. It took particularly telling hits for distorting the influence of slavery in motivating the American Revolution. Hannah-Jones acknowledged that her essay’s bald assertion to that effect was too strong.

“I think someone reading that would assume that this was the case: all 13 colonies and most people involved,” she told an *Atlantic* reporter. “And I accept that criticism, for sure.”

The 1619 Project’s focus on the continuity and persistence of racism creates a fundamental pessimism that shortchanges the truly radical nature of the moment in 1776 when the American colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. In writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder, set a bar that he himself failed to meet — recognizing that all men are created equal. But the fact remains that the bar was set.

Whatever progress we have made in racial justice

can be laid to the imperative to — as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it — “be true to what you said on paper.”

As Gordon S. Wood, author of “The Radicalism of the American Revolution” points out, “The notion of equality was really crucial. When the Declaration says that all men are created equal, that is no myth. It is the most powerful statement ever made in our history, and it lies behind almost everything we Americans believe in and attempt to do.”

There is no question that there is a deep ideological tinge to the 1619 Project. Hannah-Jones is an advocate for reparations for the descendants of slaves. Many of the essays are loaded with a profound hostility to capitalism.

This inevitably has led to a no less ideologically freighted backlash. President Trump announced last month the formation of a “1776 Commission” to promote “patriotic education” and a “pro-American” curriculum.

He stated that, “Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country.”

We need to be careful here. Simply returning to the kind of triumphalist narrative that once fed Americans a heavily sanitized, feel-good version of our history is no antidote to pessimism. It’s a recipe for cynicism, because we can no longer hide from the darkness in our past. There is no honest version of American history that can step around the original sins of chattel slavery and the displacement of indigenous peoples in the ethnic cleansing of the North American continent.

But we should be at a point where we grasp hold of paradoxes, like that outlined by David French above, without melting down.

In an op-ed for *The Scotsman*, Professor Richard Finlay and Dr. Alison Cathcart wrote of the Scots (who have their own contemporary battles over history): “One feature of a mature democracy is the respect it accords to its past, which means accepting it in its entirety, warts and all. There are good points and bad points in all national histories and accepting both is vital to avoiding the pitfalls of narrow, triumphalist chauvinism or debilitating defeatism. Neither of which is healthy.”

There’s a question as to

whether the United States qualifies as a “mature democracy.” The republic certainly is venerable in age — but our current conduct of its business cannot be described as “mature.” Perhaps according respect to the past would improve our efforts — but that means truly engaging with it. Sisters students get some Oregon history in elementary school, and a couple of years of U.S. history instruction in 8th and 10th grade. Maybe they need a lot more, plumbed to greater depth. That’s not so easy to deliver in an educational climate that is short on time and resources — but it’s worth it. I’m biased by my love for the subject, but, truly, it provides knowledge and insight you can use every single day.

As writer James Carlos Blake notes, “History is human nature writ large, and the better you understand the past, the better you’ll understand people in general, including those of our own day.”

And knowing our history helps us think critically about the narratives we’re fed by culture warriors working agendas that may threaten the integrity of that “beacon of liberty and prosperity in a world long awash in tyranny and poverty.”

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