

# Factional warfare erupts in New York Times over the 1619 Project

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On Sunday, *New York Times* publisher A.G. Sulzberger issued a statement to newspaper staff defending the newspaper's 1619 Project. Sulzberger called the Project, a series of essays published in August 2019, to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first slaves in colonial Virginia, "a journalistic triumph" that "sparked a national conversation." He praised Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones as a "brilliant and principled journalist" and said the 1619 Project is one of his "proudest accomplishments" as publisher. Having been dragged into a "conversation" that has imposed heavy costs on his newspaper's purse and reputation, Sulzberger's praise of Hannah-Jones is as sincere as a kiss on the lips from a mob boss.

*New York Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein, who publicly tweeted Sulzberger's statement on Sunday evening, had posted a remarkably similar comment on Twitter a day earlier. This was followed on Monday by a formal statement from *Times* executive editor Dean Baquet, published on the New York Times Company website.

Like Sulzberger, Silverstein said he was "proud" of the 1619 Project. He called Hannah-Jones a "national treasure," a phrase normally used to describe parks like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon. Baquet went even further. He hailed the 1619 Project as "one of the most important pieces of journalism the *Times* has produced," thus placing it on the same level as the newspaper's publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. Baquet added that he continues to "reject" criticism of its failures, lauding the 1619 Project as "principled, rigorous and groundbreaking journalism."

The gentlemen doth protest too much. There is clearly an air of desperation about this orchestrated, top-level public relations campaign. Such statements are made when necks are on the line and heads about to roll.

The immediate trigger for Sulzberger's memorandum was a Friday column written by *Times* opinion writer Bret Stephens, "The 1619 Chronicles." Stephens is one of the *Times*' leading columnists. An anti-Trump conservative, he pointed to the absurdity of many of the Project's historical claims as well as its disregard for basic journalistic principles. Stephens concluded that the 1619 Project was "a thesis in search of evidence."

Stephens quoted at length from historian James McPherson's interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, to which he provided a link. In early September 2019, the WSWS produced the first major exposure of the racist falsifications of the 1619 Project, a few weeks after its rollout amidst an unprecedented media blitz. The WSWS followed this with interviews with scholars who dismantled the 1619 Project's major claims—McPherson, Victoria Bynum, James Oakes, Gordon Wood, Dolores Janiewski, Adolph Reed, Jr., Richard

Carwardine, and Clayborne Carson.

The Stephens column brought into the open the bitter conflict raging at the *Times* over its creation and promotion of the 1619 Project.

Sulzberger's statement claimed that Stephens' op-ed does not signify "an institutional shift" away from the Project. But in the memo's second paragraph, Sulzberger rejected the demands of the Project's backers that Stephens be censored and even fired. "I believe strongly in the right of Opinion to produce a piece, even when—maybe even especially when—we don't agree with it as an institution," Sulzberger wrote.

The factional warfare within the *Times* included a Twitter attack improperly issued in the name of the Times Guild, a reporters' union affiliated with the Communications Workers of America (CWA). The Guild tweeted, "It says a lot about an organization when it breaks it's [sic] own rules and goes after one of it's [sic] own. The act, like the article, reeks."

The Guild later deleted the tweet after a "furor" erupted among *Times* staff against this transparent demand for managerial censorship of a fellow journalist—to say nothing of its mangling of the English language. The Guild declared that whoever issued the attack on Stephens had done so without permission.

It has not yet been revealed who authored the since-deleted tweet. One likely suspect is Hannah-Jones herself, who has become notorious for Twitter tirades against anyone who dares challenge her. The *Washington Post* reported on Tuesday that Hannah-Jones was "livid" when she learned that Stephens' article would appear and sent emails to Stephens and *Times* opinion page editor Kathleen Kingsbury "prior to publication," apparently in a bid to block it.

Aimed at propping up the 1619 Project, the statements from Sulzberger, Baquet and Silverstein have only added new layers of dishonesty. This has been the pattern from the beginning.

There is nothing for the *Times* to be proud of. The 1619 Project is a travesty of both history and journalism that has humiliated the *Times* and undermined its self-proclaimed status as "the newspaper of record." As for the "conversation" to which Sulzberger refers, this emerged over and against a vicious campaign waged by Hannah-Jones and Silverstein to shut down debate and smear opponents, including the *World Socialist Web Site* and the eminent historians whom it interviewed.

Hannah-Jones repeatedly attacked on Twitter anyone who exposed the false claims of the Project. She denounced *World Socialist Web Site* writers as "anti-black racists." She rejected McPherson, a revered historian who has dedicated his life to the study of the Civil War era, as a "white historian" unqualified to write on "black history."

None of the immense body of scholarship on the subject of slavery

left any discernable trace on Hannah-Jones' "framing essay," which is the centerpiece of the 1619 curriculum. Every one of her arguments can be found in the work of just one historian, the late black nationalist Lerone Bennett, Jr., and his two best-known books, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, and his discredited *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*.

To this day, the *Times* has not revealed its methods in producing the Project. In fact, when the 1619 Project was published it did not even bother to include a bibliography—though it immediately began sending the print version out to cash-strapped public schools.

Concerned about the educational implications of teaching children false history, four eminent historians interviewed by the WWS—McPherson, Wood, Bynum and Oakes—joined Sean Wilentz of Princeton University in December 2019 in writing a public letter to the *Times* asking for corrections of basic errors of fact in the 1619 Project. Silverstein wrote a condescending reply insinuating that the scholars were motivated by petty professional jealousies.

Silverstein's letter dismissing the historians appeared on December 20, 2019. It has now been revealed, by cached versions of the 1619 Project, that *only two days earlier*, on December 18, the *Times* had surreptitiously deleted from the original text (posted on the *Times*' website) its central claim, that the year 1619, and not 1776, represents the "true founding" of the United States. This alteration only came to light a little over a month ago, on September 18. Hannah-Jones immediately compounded the original deceit by declaring she had never made this "true founding" statement—though she had repeatedly done so. Hannah-Jones then deleted her entire Twitter feed, which included tens of thousands of tweets.

Now the *Times* treats the deletion of the 1619 Project's thesis as a minor change. But back in December, Silverstein did not admit that it had been made in his letter rejecting the five historians. He did, however, insist that "during the fact-checking process, our researchers carefully reviewed all the articles in the issue with subject-area experts."

This turned out to be yet another lie. On March 6, 2020, one of those fact-checkers—Northwestern University historian Leslie Harris—published an article on *Politico* revealing that she had "vigorously disputed" the Project's claim that the American revolution had been launched as a counterrevolution against British plans to free the slaves.

It is not clear who the *Times*' other fact-checkers may have been, but the 1619 Project was replete with errors and distortions. To cite one example, Hannah-Jones' assertion that Lincoln viewed blacks as "an obstacle to national unity" had already been dismantled by numerous historians in response to its original author, Lerone Bennett, Jr.—including in a book review of Bennett Jr.'s *Forced into Glory* written by McPherson and published in the *Times* on August 27, 2000, titled "Lincoln the Devil."

Five days after Harris' criticism, on March 11, 2020, Silverstein authored a wording change—an "update," he called it—to the 1619 Project stating that only "some" of the colonists wished for independence "because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery." The "update" left the basic chronological and logical errors in place. Silverstein did not recall the hundreds of thousands of magazines already sent out to school children. Neither did he apologize to the historians he maligned in his December letter, even though they had pointed to this error, among many others.

In sum, Sulzberger's "national conversation," from the standpoint of the *Times*, has been nothing but a series of failed face-saving

retreats and cover-ups.

Sulzberger's most basic lie is his claim that the 1619 Project ever had anything to do with history. From the beginning, it was aimed at concentrating national attention on racial divisions under conditions in which social inequality—that is, division along class lines—is reaching explosive levels. It was the culmination of a race-obsessed campaign in which, to cite one example, *Times* readers were told that the crisis in American public education is a result, not of cash-starved schools, but of "white parents."

As Baquet put it in a leaked speech that he gave to *Times* staff last summer:

[R]ace and understanding of race should be a part of how we cover the American story ... one reason we all signed off on the 1619 Project and made it so ambitious and expansive was to teach our readers to think a little bit more like that. Race in the next year—and I think this is, to be frank, what I would hope you come away from this discussion with—race in the next year is going to be a huge part of the American story.

This has so far backfired. Working class Americans, black as well as white, draw inspiration from the great and ineradicable achievements of the two American revolutions. They believe human equality is a principle to be fought for and made real, not a "founding myth," as the *Times* sneered. The lynch-mob style attacks on statues of Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln and Grant, encouraged on Twitter by Hannah-Jones, anger and disgust them. Worse, the clear connection of these attacks to the 1619 Project has allowed Trump and his fascist supporters to posture as custodians of the democratic heritage of the American Revolution and the Civil War.

No amount of self-serving flattery by Sulzberger and his dishonest editors can disguise the fact that the 1619 Project and those responsible for its publication have been discredited.



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