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Spring 2022 Book Reviews

## The 1619 Lesson

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If the young are taught the terrible falsehood that “racism is and always was the dominant ideology,” then the American experiment will hang by the thinnest thread, and we will have no Lincolns to save it.

by Daniel J. Mahoney



A self-respecting people must be a self-critical people, open to introspection and ready to repent of real sin. But self-criticism is not the same as self-loathing. Reckless and willful distortion of the historical record betokens not integrity, but ingratitude toward those who have left the American people a noble civic and moral inheritance. The “1619 Project” represents everything to be avoided in this regard. It is an effort to identify the American story unilaterally with irredeemable racism, systematic oppression, unprecedented violence, and Hitlerian malignity.

The Project first appeared in a special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* dated August 18, 2019. At that time it comprised a series of articles on a theme outlined by the black journalist and activist Nikole Hannah-Jones in her flagship essay, “America Wasn’t a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One.” In 1619, a ship arrived at Point Comfort, Virginia, “bearing a cargo of 20 to 30 enslaved Africans.” Hannah-Jones sought to make that landing into America’s founding moment, eclipsing the Pilgrim settlements and the Mayflower Compact (1620), the Declaration of Independence and the Constitutional Convention (1776 and 1787), and “the new birth of freedom” heralded by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address (1863). To the 1619 Project, slavery is more than America’s “original sin”: it is a moral stain that the nation can never escape or overcome. No subsequent developments truly matter. America is a nation with the soul of a “forced-labor camp,” as Hannah-Jones repeatedly calls plantations like Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. Whites are ontologically guilty, and blacks seemingly can do no wrong.

This effort to valorize recrimination and prohibit civic reconciliation was lauded by journalists, racial activists, “progressive” educators, “woke” capitalists, and one of our two major political parties. Hannah-Jones was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Commentary, and the 1619 Project was quickly adopted as the basis of history and civic curriculums in school systems across the country. Charles R. Kesler pointed out in a *New York Post* op-ed that the mayhem which overtook many American cities after George Floyd’s death was inspired by the inconsolable hatred Hannah-Jones preaches. The riots of summer 2020 are thus best understood as “the 1619 riots.” In a tweet that quickly followed (and was just as quickly removed), Hannah-Jones enthusiastically agreed. Strikingly, however, she denied that the willful destruction of property, broken windows, and arson had anything to do with violence. “Violence,” in her view, is the unique prerogative of whites. Other contributors, especially Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander, go out of their way to minimize the violence that accompanied the mass demonstrations in summer 2020. They paint a picture of “brutal” police attacking “peaceful protesters,” an account of events that strains credulity.

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The project’s willful distortions of fact have received criticism from many corners. Distinguished scholars such as James M. McPherson (perhaps the greatest living historian of the Civil War), Sean Wilentz (a liberal patriot of the first order), CUNY History Professor James Oakes, and award-winning historian Gordon S. Wood challenged Hannah-Jones’s lies and distortions, her tendentious ideology, and her absurd claim that Americans asserted their independence from Great Britain in order to preserve chattel slavery against abolitionists in the mother country. The community activist Robert Woodson founded 1776 Unites, a broad coalition of black thinkers, activists, and ministers (as well as independent-minded liberals and secularists) who, as their name suggests, reiterated their commitment to the principles of the Declaration of Independence. 1776 Unites emphasizes civic pride, moral agency, and the self-respect of black Americans who will not stoop to partake in a debilitating cult of racial resentment and victimization.

The black political scientist Wilfred Reilly is an active participant in 1776 Unites. In a special January 2022 issue of *National Review*, Reilly firmly refuted the misrepresentations, half-truths, and startling omissions that define the 1619 Project. As he argued, contributors to the Project ignored the nuanced but deeply felt patriotism of most thinkers and activists, black and white, who fought to end slavery. These abolitionists did not reject or mock the principles of '76. To the contrary: they abhorred slavery *because* they affirmed the liberty and equality of all human beings under “Nature’s God.” Reilly helpfully highlights a long lineage of black American patriots from Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr., to Robert Woodson and Thomas Sowell. The implication is clear: America cannot be healed by men and women who hate their country, loathe its principles, and see nothing but racism in its most noble truths and affirmations.

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But these many eloquent objections have not stopped Hannah-Jones and her collaborators from distributing their message all over America, with the help of lavish funding and public honors. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* is now available in a beautifully printed and produced volume that expands the original contributions, adds some new essays and themes, and includes a large admixture of poetry and fiction to accompany the prose essays, some of which first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. No doubt in response to the criticism described above, the essays are occasionally more nuanced than the originals. But the broad emphases remain the same, and the ideological Manichaeism remains dominant as ever. There is a marginally greater willingness to acknowledge that Abraham Lincoln was anti-slavery (although incorrigibly racist), and the contributors ever-so-slightly qualify the claim that the American Revolution was fought to preserve race-based slavery. Mostly, though, Hannah-Jones responds to her critics not with good arguments but with predictable indignation and ad hominem. In an introductory preface, she confesses herself shocked that “a small group of historians attempted to discredit” the 1619 Project, as if she expected that her anti-American slander would receive nothing but praise. And in response to Lincoln scholar Allen Guelzo’s observation that she launched her crusade from a position of “ultimate cultural privilege,” Hannah-Jones calls Guelzo—of course—a racist.

The packaging is undoubtedly prettier, but the assault on America—and on the excellence and dignity of our political principles—is as sustained and unqualified as ever. The immense sacrifices of the Union soldiers, in lives or limbs, count for nothing in this volume: the boys in blue, too, were incorrigible racists, and anyway the slaves basically freed themselves. Similarly, banning the slave trade in 1808—as allowed or even encouraged by the federal Constitution of 1787—was no great achievement. In fact, it may have been motivated by a racist desire to keep the black population from overwhelming the white population in key states of the Deep South.

A foundational conceit of this book is that Americans are denied access to the most fundamental truths about American history and the racial oppression that animates it. Hannah-Jones wants us to believe that unless her work is in every elementary school and coffee shop, Americans will never learn about the horrors of slavery, which endure to this day. But her account of what American students learn in school is unrecognizable to me. Non-stop attention to slavery, Jim Crow, and the secular religion of race- and gender-based “diversity” has been the norm in American schools for a very long time now. On the whole, students come away with little sense that there are elements of the American experience *not* tainted by racism.

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In her preface, Hannah-Jones expresses her dismay that graduating high school students cannot, when polled, name many essential facts about slavery and the causes of the Civil War. But as any experienced teacher these days will attest, students can tell you little or nothing about almost *any* major historical or political phenomenon. My students do not know that Communist regimes killed nearly 100 million human beings in the 20th century and unleashed a persecution of religion unprecedented in human history. The humorist Ben Stein once wrote amusingly about an intern of his from UCLA, a major university and not the worst of the lot, who was outraged when she discovered that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. Stein had to reassure her that we had fought and won a war in response to the attack.

Another of Hannah-Jones’s major objectives is to recharacterize Abraham Lincoln, “the Great Emancipator,” as an irredeemable racist. She lifts select quotations almost wholly out of context to portray him as a fraud who had nothing but contempt for black people. Her preface focuses on just one meeting with black leaders in 1862, during which the president entertained the question of sending freed blacks to colonies outside the United States. The reader would not know that Lincoln talked about anything else but colonization, or that he quickly abandoned the idea and fought instead for “a new birth of freedom” on the American continent.

This kind of lazy polemic is nothing new. Contemporary ideologues also labor to “cancel” Lincoln for his supposed racism, as, for example, when he told Illinois farmers that though it was grievously wrong to enslave a black woman, they did not have to marry one. A more measured student of politics and history, attentive to the arts of civic and moral prudence, might discern the underlying anti-racist intent at work here. With his distinction between enslavement and marriage, Lincoln was pressing his countrymen to recognize the true nature of equality: again and again he stressed that black men and women, however any Southerner might feel about them personally, were children of God. They were thus endowed with the natural right to keep what they earned “by the sweat of their brow.” Hannah-Jones dismisses all this, as well as anything else that might do credit to Lincoln’s name. The

Emancipation Proclamation, the arming of free blacks to fight courageously for Union and liberty, and Lincoln's last major address in 1865 calling for the gradual extension of suffrage for freed blacks in Louisiana are either brushed over in passing or ignored completely.

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This character assassination is expertly refuted in Mary Grabar's *Debunking the 1619 Project: Exposing the Plan to Divide America*. Dr. Grabar is a former English instructor at Emory University who previously exposed the falsehood of another anti-American historian in *Debunking Howard Zinn* (2019). Her newest book provides the most comprehensive critique of the 1619 Project to date. The best chapter, "Taking Down Abraham Lincoln," lays out Lincoln's true positions regarding Union and liberty, racism and slavery. For Lincoln, slavery was loathsome because it said to the slave: "*You work and toil and earn bread, and I'll eat it.*" This, the rail-splitter could never abide. Grabar appreciates that as a statesman Lincoln had to negotiate with "free soil" Northerners who really were racist *and* anti-slavery. Through the art of prudence, he needed to renew the American people's fidelity to their highest moral and civic principles.

Hannah-Jones also remakes Frederick Douglass in her own image, characterizing him as an unremittingly bitter critic of Lincoln. But Grabar shows that this, too, is false. Douglass called Lincoln his friend, recognizing that the president had treated him with great respect. He acknowledged that Lincoln "loathed slavery," though prudence held him back from eradicating it as swiftly and unilaterally as Douglass would have liked. Douglass shared Lincoln's conviction that the Constitution of 1787 was a "GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT, one that in its core principles and its refusal to mention or validate 'the hateful thing' that was slavery, sustained the cause of freedom." As Grabar points out, Douglass was "filled with grief" upon learning of Lincoln's assassination.

But one would learn nothing about these truly decisive facts if one depended upon either the first or the more recent iteration of the 1619 Project. The contributors to the Project quote extremely selectively from Douglass's famous speech on July 5, 1852 ("What to the Slave is the Fourth of July"). That speech contains stern and justified condemnation of slavery's moral evil, but also admiration for the courage and genius of America's founders. To omit the second part of the speech from any account of Douglass's views is dishonesty of the first order. As Grabar suggests, students need to study all parts of Douglass's speech, as well as the deep thought underlying Lincoln's principled and passionate opposition to chattel slavery. There is more to Lincoln than a single meeting with black leaders in 1862. But Hannah-Jones prefers to denounce rather than to understand.

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The rest of the essays in the collection (18 in all) are no better. Penn Law Professor Dorothy Roberts simply takes for granted that Jefferson fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings, ignoring persistent reasons for doubt. She describes abortion on demand, which has ravaged black communities, as a requirement of anti-racism (along with a whole slew of counterproductive statist policies). Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond, for his part, identifies slavery with capitalism. He tells us that a truly anti-racist America must also be a socialist one. But are there no similarities between the paternalism of the slave plantation and the despotism of many state-socialist systems? Our neo-Marxist ideologues refuse to differentiate free labor and free economic initiatives from the system of cruel racial domination that informed economic arrangements under slavery. In doing so, they willfully ignore the incompatibility of slavery with the sustained economic development that is the hallmark of a genuine market economy.

Capitalism helped *end* slavery, not create it. As Milton Friedman demonstrated in *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), a businessman who refuses to do business with a black family is letting racial prejudice impede him from conducting profitable trade in a humane and civilized way. The Baron de Montesquieu had already made this point in Book XX of *The Spirit of the Laws*, the first of two books dedicated to discussing the humanizing and liberating effects of free commerce. Such commerce cures destructive prejudices every day. In a famous passage near the end of *Democracy in America*, volume 1, Alexis de Tocqueville contrasted the hustle and bustle of men at work in the free state of Ohio with the “half-deserted fields” and sluggish lethargy in the slave state of Kentucky. A political order that actively promotes free commercial arrangements is in principle antithetical to race-based chattel slavery. We have known this truth for nearly four centuries, although our academic Marxists will deny it in spite of the abundant evidence. Today, Nigerians, Ghanaians, many Caribbean blacks, Indians from the Indian subcontinent, Asians, and Jews economically *outperform* white Americans—making it hard to sustain the argument that we live in a neo-apartheid state.

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*New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie, contributing a chapter on “Politics,” gives a reasonably accurate account of Senator John C. Calhoun’s despicable views on slavery as a “positive good” and blacks as “ignorant, degraded, and vicious.” Yet he cannot see that both Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant adamantly opposed such un-American and un-Christian views. That is why they fought a long, bloody Civil War to its successful conclusion: to ensure that the Confederate States of America, committed to some version of Calhoun’s position, could not indefinitely perpetuate itself. Bouie is keen to show that Calhoun’s view somehow survives in the person of Donald Trump, whom he associates with the most vicious and demagogic racism. He does not seem to think he needs evidence for this claim, or for his assertion that commonsense voter regulations are part of a broader scheme to oppress and disenfranchise black Americans.

Evidence, in general, is in short supply in these essays—one contributor simply assumes that Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan only fretted over the state of fatherless black families as a backhanded means of blaming black mothers for the problems in the black community. Over and over again, ideologically charged accusations substitute for reasoned discussion. University of Pennsylvania Professor Anthea Butler writes under the heading of “Church,” but the only Gospel she can esteem is that of Marxism and “Black Liberation theology.” Celebrity demagogue Ibram X. Kendi (né Henry Rogers) refuses to acknowledge that any real “progress” has been made in American society regarding race and racism since 1865. But is anything more racist than to suggest that white people have oppression built into their civic DNA? Indeed, the entire volume suggests that blacks, too, are essentially powerless to overcome a racism that is coextensive with America itself.

Another important new book provides a much-needed corrective to this bleak, falsified picture. In *1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project*, former Boston University anthropology professor Peter W. Wood shows that the regime of chattel slavery took many decades or more to solidify after 1619 in Virginia and the rest of the South. Thus 1619 was not even the true founding of American slavery, let alone of America. Moreover, Wood shows the historical ubiquity of slavery itself: millions of Europeans were captured by Muslims in North Africa over several centuries; the Islamic slave trade was even more extensive and brutal than the Atlantic one; and conditions for slaves in Brazil were far deadlier than those in North America.

Using this context and perspective, Wood puts paid to one of the 1619 Project’s most woefully irresponsible rhetorical tropes: its repeated comparisons between slavery in America and death camps in Nazi Germany. In the summer months, Wood points out, most slaves worked five and a half days a week. Some slaves became skilled artisans, a few even won their freedom, and a small number became wealthy. Some freed blacks owned slaves themselves. Wood stresses that chattel slavery was always a moral and civic abomination. But to point out that slave plantations in the United States did not resemble Nazi extermination camps is not to make an apology for slavery. It is simply to insist on historical honesty.

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Such honesty is at a disadvantage in our current climate. Near the end of his book, Wood wisely notes that teenagers “are by nature inclined to see hypocrisy everywhere in the adult world.” The 1619 Project feeds this propensity by “giving full scope to a cynical reading of the American past,” and, I might add, the American present. Such cynicism ignores the countless exemplars of “self-restraint, self-sacrifice, and commitment to the common good,” in Wood’s words, that have made the United States a morally estimable country, if an imperfect one. No study of 1619 is complete without 1620, the Puritan efforts to establish liberty under God, and—even more importantly—1776, 1787, 1863, and all they represent. If, concludes Wood, the young are taught the terrible falsehood that “racism is and always was

the dominant ideology,” then the American experiment will hang by the thinnest thread, and we will have no Lincolns to save it. Let us return to the “better angels of our nature,” who teach salutary self-criticism and civic renewal, not self-loathing and despair.

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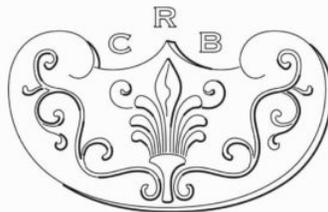


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