



Conservatives' Freakout Over The 1619 Project Reveals Their Fear of America's Actual Past

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I was deep into middle age before I discovered that everything I thought I knew about George Washington's teeth was balderdash. As a child I had picked up the piquant lore that Washington had wooden teeth, a historical tidbit strange enough to lodge itself in my mind. But a few years ago, I came across the fact that Washington's dentures were made out of ivory and human teeth. And who supplied those teeth? This is subject to some historical debate, but we do have an accounting book recording Washington's household paying for teeth from enslaved persons. These were purchased teeth from purchased persons, a not uncommon if gruesome practice in Washington's lifetime. The reasonable conclusion is that when the first American president flashed his choppers, he was showing off a smile that once belonged in an enslaved individual's mouth. Or, if Washington didn't wear the teeth of the enslaved himself, someone in his family almost certainly did.

American history is like that, once you start studying it in a serious way. Slavery and its heirs, Jim Crow segregation and racism, are to be found in every nook and cranny of the American experience. The tidal force of slavery and racism pushed along not just epic events like the Civil War or the struggle for civil rights but were felt in more hidden places, in the architecture of the White House that was built by enslaved people, in the endowments of venerable universities that received their seed money from the slave trade, and perhaps in the very teeth of the man still worshipped as the father of his country.

America as we know it has its origins in settler colonialism, a house built on a foundation of two great crimes, the ethnic cleansing of natives and the transatlantic slave trade. These were the building blocks of the racial hierarchy that still oppresses the nation.

Over the weekend, *The New York Times* launched a series called the 1619 Project, to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans into the Jamestown colony, an event that was foundational not just for black America but the country as a whole.

As *Times* editor Mara Gay wrote, "In the days and weeks to come, we will publish essays demonstrating that nearly everything that has made America exceptional grew out of slavery."

These words, and the first batch of essays, provoked many prominent right-wingers to go berserk. Newt Gingrich could barely contain his rage on Twitter as he quoted Gay. "This is simply a LIE," Gingrich barked. "Pravda was never more dishonest than this effort to write a 'left history.'" Ilya Shapiro of the Cato Institute tweeted in a like manner, "Writing about history

is great, but a project intended to delegitimize mankind's grandest experiment in human liberty & self-governance is divisive, yes." *Daily Signal* contributor Jarrett Stepman wrote that the goal of the series is "to delegitimize American ideas and place race and slavery at the heart of literally everything this country is about (including things like healthcare). Racism and slavery were there at the time of the founding, but they aren't what the country was founded on."

This collective meltdown is puzzling. Anyone who takes the trouble to sit down and read the essays in the 1619 Project will be struck by the fact that they are very sober, thoroughly grounded in the most recent mainstream scholarship, and also surprisingly and fiercely patriotic. By placing the black experience at the center of the American story, the series doesn't debunk the nation's ideals of freedom, showing them to be pure claptrap. Rather, focusing on the struggles of those who were denied freedom dramatizes the story of how those ideals came to acquire a measure of reality.

The beautiful opening essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones makes clear that the 1619 Project is offering a redemption tale: "The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie," Hannah-Jones writes.

Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves—black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

One would have to be either willfully obtuse or committed to denying the reality of the black American experience to see this as a story that delegitimizes America. It is quite obviously the tale of how America was made to live up to its promise.

Nor is there anything particularly leftist or radical about this story. In fact, it is easy to imagine a critique of the 1619 Project from a variety of radical positions such as internationalism, black nationalism, and Marxism. The horizon of the 1619 Project is steadfastly and narrowly national, so it gives short shrift to the fact that the slave trade was international, that slavery was practiced in the Americas before 1619, that many other settler-colonial nations have created racial hierarchies similar to the United States, and that the United States itself provided the template for many of these other nations (notably apartheid-era South Africa).

But whatever radical critiques can be made of the 1619 Project, it remains true that the conservative meltdown is deeply shameful. It's also a betrayal of basic conservative principles. There's no reason why the lessons from the history of slavery and racism should be partisan.

Conservatives, of all people, should be aware of the power of the past in shaping contemporary reality and of the need to make a reckoning with history. Edmund Burke gave the essence of the conservative creed in his famous polemic against the French Revolution, where he spoke of society as "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."

If we take Burke's words to heart, then the stories told in the 1619 Project are deeply relevant to the present. We're in partnership with the past, including those in the past who were immeasurably wronged, and part of our debt to them is paid by remembering their stories. It's a strange conservatism that wants to wave away history.

Fortunately, not all on the right are so quick to bury their heads, ostrich-fashion, in the sand. Two libertarians at the Cato Institute, Jonathan Blanks and Matthew Feeney, both wrote thoughtful posts that grappled with the lessons of the series.

The most profound soul-searching on the right came from Philip Klein, executive editor of *The Washington Examiner*. While critical of a few parts of the series, he acknowledged its power and importance. More intriguingly, he notes the tension between the history recorded and his own preferred politics of limited government. "On one level, to this day, any arguments about states' rights are inevitably tainted by their association with arguments made in support of Southerners who perpetuated slavery and then an elaborate system of racial oppression," Klein writes.

Klein's words are welcome, but they perhaps also point to why figures like Newt Gingrich prefer knee-jerk condemnation to engagement with the arguments in The 1619 Project. It could simply be that any candid acceptance of the true history of America would force conservatives to acknowledge the flaws and failures of some of their most cherished ideas.