

# Vox

## **The New York Times 1619 Project is reshaping the conversation on slavery. Conservatives hate it.**

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On Sunday, the New York Times Magazine published perhaps its most ambitious work on race and slavery to date. The 1619 Project, which marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of African slaves to Virginia, seeks to reframe the country's thinking about slavery and how intertwined the practice of slavery has been in shaping the nation.

“This project is, above all, an attempt to set the record straight. To finally, in this 400th year, tell the truth about who we are as a people and who we are as a nation,” New York Times Magazine reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones said during a launch event for the series. The project, which is also online, so far features over a dozen reported essays, photo essays, and poems by black writers, artists, scholars, with more to come.

Jones, whose work on race earned her the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, was driving force behind the 1619 Project. She added: “It is time to stop hiding from our sins and confront them. And then in confronting them, it is time to make them right.”

The series has largely earned praise from academics, journalists, and politicians alike. It has also been harshly criticized by some conservatives who have accused the writers of stoking racial division, pushing their leftist ideologies, and rewriting history through “a racial lens” — meaning through the point of view of black Americans.

But the writers behind the project say that disrupting long-accepted beliefs is the point. Those who choose not to re-examine the founding of our country are likely those who continue to benefit from it.

The 1619 Project, explained

The 1619 Project, as it appears online, is sprawling and interactive, exploring the ways slavery has impacted the America we know today.

The series came about during a New York Times Magazine editorial planning meeting in January, when Jones proposed dedicating an entire issue of the magazine to the thorough examination of slavery — and publishing it on the 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans to Virginia in 1619. Flanked by more than a dozen academics and historians, Jones and editors at the New York Times mapped out the project. And central to its execution was one condition — nearly all the writers had to be black.

Jones wasn't just telling the history of slavery and how its fingerprints can be found all over the nation. She was also telling the story of how black Americans survived the institution and the political apparatus constructed around slavery — and more to the point, how black Americans compelled the nation to move more toward an actual democracy than did its founders. That story, according to Jones, needed to be told mostly by black writers.

For example, Matthew Desmond writes about how slavery shaped modern capitalism and workplace management norms. Jamelle Bouie connects the early 19th century political efforts to preserve slavery to current conservative political movements like the Tea Party and its efforts to nullify federal authority. Kevin Kruse explains how the country's history of racism contributes to Atlanta traffic.

New York Times metro reporter Nikita Stewart pens an essay that embodies much of how the series seeks to reframe the narrative around slavery. Her piece "Why Can't We Teach Slavery Right in American Schools" exposes the ways in which children, and by extension all Americans, are misinformed about slavery.

For more than a century, American scholarship and the textbooks it produced focused on benevolent actors like abolitionists and the anecdotal episodes of people fleeing from slavery. Little was written in those texts about the brutality they were fleeing from, or that many of the Founding Fathers were themselves slave owners.

In particular, the language used around the relationship between the enslaved and enslavers has had a softening effect on the institution. Stewart mentions Thomas Jefferson's relationship with his slave Sally Hemmings, which has been described as being intimate when it was clearly a case of rape. This poor framing of slavery in textbooks, which Hasan Kwame Jeffries, chair of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Hard History advisory board, calls "educational malpractice," limits the ability of Americans to recognize the lasting effects slavery has on the population and the political structure of the country.

For its thorough reexamination, the series has drawn praise from political pundits, scholars, and even 2020 candidate Kamala Harris. The California senator tweeted: "The #1619Project is a powerful and necessary reckoning of our history. We cannot understand and address the problems of today without speaking truth about how we got here."

The project also represents a broader shift in how the story of race is gaining traction in newsrooms. Publications across the news media are giving more space in their pages, on their programming, and among their ranks to reporting on race.

Some conservatives are upset that black journalists are leading narratives on race and reexamining history

However, not everyone is pleased with media outlets making room for more race in their reporting.

On Monday, conservative commentator Eric Erickson wrote on his blog the Resurgent that the 1619 Project was a worthwhile endeavor, but one that failed when the New York Times put the project in the hands of opinion writers "who profit from stoking and fueling racial grievances." (Jones replied on Twitter that there was only one opinion writer in the entire project; she has not responded to Vox's request for comment.) It was a sentiment he tweeted the day before about

writers profiting from “seeing things through racial lenses and keeping racial tension aflame as much as Trump does.”

Former Rep. Newt Gingrich also attacked the 1619 Project on Twitter, tweeting that the New York Times Magazine series amounted to “brainwashing,” before taking his critiques to *Fox and Friends* Monday morning and called the project “a lie.”

The very premise of the series, to challenge America’s origin story, became a central talking point of the conservative critiques of the 1619 Project, as if to insert the perspectives of black Americans, ancestors of the enslaved, “delegitimized” history.

Ilya Shapiro, director of the Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, tweeted: “Writing about history is great, but a project intended to delegitimize mankind’s grandest experiment in human liberty & self-governance is divisive, yes. I know it’s unwoke of me to say so, but so be it. I’ll take reality, warts and all, over grievance-mongering.”

Similarly, Benjamin Weingarten, a contributor with the conservative publication the Federalist, tweeted: “Contrary to its stated goals, it appears the purpose of the 1619 Project is to delegitimize America, and further divide and demoralize its citizenry.”

Much of the conservative criticism was aimed at the New York Times for its focus on race, seeing it as part of a liberal agenda.

On Tuesday, Damon Linker wrote an op-ed for the Week called “The New York Times surrenders to the left on race,” in which he argued that by “reframing American history,” the Times has treated “history in a highly sensationalistic, reductionistic, and tendentious way, with the cumulative result resembling agitprop more than responsible journalism or scholarship. Putting aside any pretense toward nuance or complexity, the paper has surrendered to the sensibility of left-wing political activists.”

Conservatives also say that the Times’ incorporation of race in its coverage is a sign of a broader decline at the newspaper. It’s the type of criticism the institution often hears from President Donald Trump, who has referred to the newspaper as the “failing New York Times.”

Gingrich and Erickson point to a recent staff town hall meeting where executive editor Dean Baquet faced criticism for the newspaper’s reluctance to explicitly call comments by the president racist. In the meeting, Baquet said that there were times in which the newspaper’s coverage of Trump had been too harsh. He also referenced how the paper had to quickly pivot in its coverage of Russia-Trump collusion story when it became clear the Mueller investigation would not provide a smoking gun for impeachment.

A transcript of Baquet’s crisis-management meeting became its own smoking gun for conservatives over the past few days. During his *Fox and Friends* appearance, Gingrich closed his remarks by saying: “The New York Times’ editor, he basically said, look, we blew it on Russian collusion, didn’t work. Now we’re going to go to racism, that’s our new model. The next two years will be Trump and racism. This is a tragic decline of The New York Times into a propagandist paper worthy of Pravda or Izvestia in the Soviet Union.”

Erickson echoed these sentiments on his blog: “The inmates have taken over the asylum and those inmates are re-writing American history to make everything about race, racism, and slavery.”

Pushing back against the idea that writing about slavery through a “racial lens” is inherently bad, New York Times politics reporter Astead W. Herndon tweeted on Sunday that the conservative backlash proves that, historically, writing on slavery and race in America has suffered without such a lens. Even though “the narrative is often that black writers are somehow non-objective opinion activists for including race in political conversation,” he wrote, “deeply reported projects like 1619 are reminders that it’s the inverse — to ignore race — that is the non-journalistic, activist position.”

The reach and legacy of the 1619 Project is greater than conservative backlash

The 1619 Project represents a shift in race coverage as the country heads toward the 2020 election. The media faced blowback — including from reporters of color — for not talking enough about race in the 2016 election.

Tanzina Vega, who covered race for the New York Times and CNN before becoming the host of the Takeaway, for instance, penned a pointed critique at mainstream news outlets in 2017 about the disconnect between what journalists of color were seeing and what white reporters were seeing, what white audiences were consuming versus what black and brown audiences were reading. Vega said to address these issues newsrooms would have to diversify and do it quickly in order to “confront their roles in creating many of the racial narratives we understand today.”

Since then, a shift has slowly happened, as outlets are now framing more of the political debates in this country around the topic of race. The Associated Press, the New Republic, this publication, and other outlets have deployed more reporters to write about the intersection of race and politics in the upcoming election. And this has taken on even more importance with the recent actions of the president in calling for four women in Congress to go back to the “broken and crime infested places from which they came.” Those comments, and the ones Trump made during his 2016 campaign like claiming the Mexico sending its criminals, drug dealers, rapists to the United States, will again make race a central theme to the campaign — and an issue where black and brown reporters have been outspoken in demanding to play pivotal roles in shaping those narratives.

Baquet in his own comments at the all-staff town hall recognized this: “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.”

But as the 1619 Project sets out to prove, the need for race in reporting, academia, and historical record-keeping has always been necessary. Like the New York Times Magazine wrote in its introduction to the project, allowing black Americans to finally “tell our story truthfully” is invaluable to knowing where our country’s been and where it needs to go.