

- Mark your confusion.
- Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)
- Write a 250+ word response to the article.

(If you are a teacher or student who would like to modify this Google Doc, go to File > Make a Copy. I cannot and do not respond to Share requests -- my apologies!)

The Debate Over the 1619 Project

By *The Week* staff, November 7, 2020

The reframing of U.S. history around slavery and racism continues to draw ferocious opposition. Here's everything you need to know:

What is the 1619 Project?

It was a New York Times Magazine special issue last year marking the 400th anniversary of American slavery, in which the Times proposed regarding 1619 as "our nation's birth year." In August of that year about 20 slaves from present-day Angola were sold in chains to British colonists in Jamestown, Virginia. The establishment of slavery in the British colonies, the Times argued, was as formative to U.S. history as the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The new nation was more "slavocracy" than democracy, staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote in a Pulitzer Prize-winning opening essay, arguing that the founding ideals of equality and liberty were "a lie." Other articles in the 1619 Project traced the influence of slavery on modern-day diets, politics, criminal justice, health care, capitalism — even traffic patterns in Atlanta. The issue spawned podcasts and upcoming Oprah Winfrey-backed films and TV shows, and hundreds of thousands of copies were sent to libraries and schools. It quickly became a new front in the culture war: In June, protesters spray-painted "1619" across a toppled statue of George Washington, while President Trump and Fox News frequently deride the project as an attack on America itself.

What are the most controversial claims?

The Times argued that progress toward racial equality is stunted because "anti-Black racism runs in the very DNA of this country." Hannah-Jones wrote that an American "racial caste system" was put in place before the nation's founding, and that "one of the primary reasons" colonists declared independence from Britain was "because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery." White men like Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the Declaration with a Black slave waiting on him, were empowered to break from the British Empire because of "dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery," she wrote. Black Americans, she said, have been largely alone in fighting for their freedoms, and their struggle for equality makes them "this nation's true Founding Fathers." These assertions ignited a debate that is still raging a year later.

Why so much controversy?

The 1619 Project argues that the systemic racism that is slavery's legacy remains deeply rooted in every American institution and is still an ever-present factor in the lives of Black Americans. The pessimism in that view has been assailed by critics such as City University of New York historian James Oakes. If racism is in the country's DNA, Oakes asked, "What can you do? Alter your DNA?" Critics particularly focused on Hannah-Jones' claim that colonials rebelled partly out of fear England would outlaw slavery, noting that the abolitionist movement did not gain strength in England until a decade later — and that it was actually inspired by anti-slavery arguments in the U.S. Princeton historian Sean Wilentz demanded several factual corrections, contending that the Framers left the word "slavery" out of the Constitution not to erase the humanity of slaves, as Hannah-Jones argued, but because they didn't want to "validate slavery in national law."

Who else attacked the Times?

Many historians and scholars were critical of some of its claims, with conservatives rejecting its premise that slavery and racial oppression should be central themes in U.S. history. One highly visible attack came from inside the Times, with conservative columnist Bret Stephens writing last month that the project was "simplistic" and "has failed" to defend its most controversial assertions. Slavery was hardly unique to America, he said, noting that slave traders from Europe and other continents sold human beings, and that the odious practice was found throughout the Western Hemisphere. Though the Founders were flawed,

Stephens said, what made this country exceptional was not slavery, but America's revolutionary founding principle that "all men are created equal" and its 250 years of struggling to realize its ideals. The 1619 Project has become a rallying cry on the Right, with President Trump invoking it at the National Archives Museum in September, calling it an example of how "the Left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies." This summer, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) proposed a bill to bar federal funds from districts that incorporate the project into their history curriculum, saying it's meant to "indoctrinate our kids to hate America."

Does the Times defend its story?

Yes, although the Times tweaked the text online. The paper issued a "clarification" stating that only "some of" the colonists revolted from Britain in order to protect slavery. Hannah-Jones apologized for saying it was a primary motivation for the revolution, saying, "I'm absolutely tortured by it." The paper also removed a phrase describing 1619 as the date of "our true founding." But the Times by no means disowns its work. Publisher A.G. Sulzberger said the project's deep exploration of the lasting impact of slavery and racism is "a journalistic triumph that changed the way millions of Americans understand our country." Jake Silverstein, editor-in-chief of The New York Times Magazine, says ongoing updates — and the debate the project has inspired — are a virtue, not a failure. "Revision and clarification," he said, "are important parts of historical inquiry."

The 1619 Project in the schools

The Pulitzer Center partnered with the Times to distribute teaching materials based on the 1619 Project, and more than 4,500 classrooms in all 50 states, from kindergarten to college, have crafted lessons using those resources. School systems in Buffalo; Chicago; Washington, D.C.; Wilmington, Delaware; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina incorporated the project more broadly into their history curriculum. In many districts, discussions of the role of slavery and racism in American history were previously very limited. In 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center surveyed 1,700 social-studies teachers nationwide, and 60 percent of them said their textbooks failed to adequately cover slavery. The SPLC survey showed, for example, that about 92 percent of high school students didn't even know that slavery was the main cause of the Civil War. "American students are typically taught that slavery came and went, that it's a relic of our past," said Mark Schulte, the Pulitzer Center's Education Director. "The 1619 Project shows its pernicious repercussions." Project editor Silverstein said it was never intended "to replace all of U.S. history. It's being used as supplementary material."

Response option(s):

- After reading the article, what is one main idea that you find most remarkable (meaning, "most worthy of a remark" -- so it can be interesting, concerning, confusing, alarming, offensive, etc)? What is it that you find so remarkable? Explain.
- After reading the article, what additional questions do you have? Research these on your own and write about what you find.
- Summarize any point made in the article and respond.