

A Divisive, Historically Dubious Curriculum

Teachers should reject the 1619 Project.

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In 1858, Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln debated the nature of America’s soul. Douglas argued that the Founders believed that the claim in the Declaration of Independence—“all men are created equal”—applied only to whites. They were indifferent to the perpetuation of slavery, he said. Lincoln argued that the Founders foresaw an end to slavery, that the words in the Declaration meant what they said, and that no one before Douglas had ever suggested otherwise.

After a bloody civil war and a decades-long civil rights struggle were fought to vindicate Lincoln’s position, the New York Times and the Pulitzer Center are urging teachers, with the 1619 Project and attendant K-12 curriculum, to take Douglas’s side of the argument. In her lead essay announcing the project, Nikole Hannah-Jones argues, per Douglas, that the “white men who drafted those words [in the Declaration] did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst.” Hannah-Jones’s essay has come under withering attack from eminent historians such as Gordon Wood and James McPherson for its historical distortions. But the 1619 Project’s curriculum does more than encourage teachers to ignore key elements of the historical record; it asks students to blot them out.

One recommended “activity to extend student engagement” asks teachers to lead students in transforming historical documents through “erasure poetry,” which, the curriculum explains, “can be a way of reclaiming and reshaping historical documents; they can lay bare the real purpose of the document or transform it into something wholly new. How will you highlight inequity—or envision liberation—through your erasure poem?” Students could, the guide suggests, erase parts of the Declaration in order to make it fit Hannah-Jones’s essay or amend the Thirteenth Amendment to make it harmonize with an essay arguing that “mass incarceration and excessive punishment is the legacy of slavery.”

Historians, journalists, and politicians frequently accuse one another of twisting history to advance political agendas—and the accused parties always deny the charge. By contrast, the 1619 Project’s curriculum openly encourages such historical revisionism. Its “reading guide” aims to ensure that students don’t miss core partisan talking points. Jamelle Bouie’s “Undemocratic Democracy,” for example, an essay that draws a line from John Calhoun’s nullification philosophy to Eric Cantor’s hardball budget-negotiation tactics, asks: “How do nineteenth-century U.S. political movements aimed at maintaining the right to enslave people manifest in contemporary political parties?” Students must not miss the point that everything that Republican politicians do, even if “the goals may be color blind,” is “clearly downstream of a style of extreme political combat that came to fruition in defense of human bondage.”

For the essay “Capitalism: In Order to Understand the Brutality of American Capitalism, You Have to Start on the Plantation,” the reading guide asks: “What current financial systems reflect practices developed to support industries built on the work of enslaved people?” One answer, suggested in the key terms, is home mortgages—because slaves were once used as collateral. Another acceptable answer is the collateralized debt obligation, a complex structured-finance product developed in the 1980s—because slave-traders had securitized assets and debts (though, the author admits, they were not the first in history to do so).

If, as Hannah-Jones argues, the Founders did not believe that the central claim of the Declaration applied to blacks and that in “the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word,” then we should view notions of limited, constitutional government with suspicion. Stephen Douglas made this argument, though with different political ends. Douglas’s most effective refuter is Frederick Douglass, the former slave who once believed that the Constitution was a “most cunningly-devised and wicked compact.” After study and reflection, however, Douglass concluded, in “The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?”, that it was fundamentally antislavery and that “the intentions of the framers of the Constitution were good, not bad.”

Today, Douglass has admirers on the left and right. His high regard for America’s Founding Fathers and documents, coupled with his unmatched descriptions of the horrors of slavery and fierce denunciations of America’s moral failures, provide the grounds for a tempered patriotism and an appreciation of the progress our country has made toward fulfilling our Founding ideals. Yet the 1619 Project quotes Douglass only once—and even then, in the context of a paragraph attacking Kanye West, asking whether West’s “blackness is an act . . . under white control?”

To understand their country, students should read America’s Founding documents and the works of great figures like Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, and grapple with history’s circumstantial and moral complexities—not “reframe” history to make it fit partisan purposes.

They should be taught about the moral abomination of American slavery—but not that “slavery is our country’s very origin,” or that its legacy is baked into all our social institutions, allegations that cannot stand up to any fair-minded examination of American history. The themes and messages of the 1619 Project are not only historically dubious; they will also lead to deeper

civic alienation. Conscientious teachers should file the 1619 curriculum where it belongs: in the waste bin.