

Haden Ashley on The 1619 Project

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What's at Stake?

If The 1619 Project holds up to scrutiny and validates itself as our national narrative, then the common perception of American history will drastically change. Events which are cherished by many Americans as symbols of our libertarian values will become marred by their association with slavery and oppression. Chief amongst these events is the American Revolution, which is commonly seen as a righteous fight for liberty and human equality against a tyrannical empire. In the 1619 Project however, the Revolution is seen as the colonists' fight to preserve slavery against their mother country's abolitionist goals. Therefore, the project doesn't put America's start date with the Declaration of Independence in 1776, but rather with the first enslaved Africans landing ashore in Virginia in 1619.

If the 1619 Project becomes our defining narrative, then our perception of our history and our pride associated with that history will be unrecognizable.

The Impact of Slavery

According to the SlaveVoyages Database, a site that catalogs and demonstrates the extent of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, 288,000 enslaved Africans disembarked in the 13 colonies – 118,000 in the north, and 170,000 in the south. Even when the importation of enslaved people was outlawed in 1807, the slave trade within America was still lucrative, with over 60,000 enslaved people being brought to the nation's largest slave market alone, New Orleans. These hundreds of thousands of people held in slavery had a major role to play in building our economy and infrastructure, even in places one might not expect. Rhode Island, despite being a small northern state, was a bustling hub for the American slave trade. According to SUNY Potsdam's Professor Thomas Baker, Rhode Island sailors participated in the trade of over 100,000 enslaved people, slave trading made Rhode Islander James D'Wolf the second-richest man in America, and the Ivy League's Brown University was built with the wealth of slave-owners. If one wants to say that America was founded on slavery, then the fact that a good part of our economy and some of our most prestigious buildings have their origin in the slave trade backs that claim very well.



Brown University today

Forgetting about American Indians

If The 1619 Project wants to be the definitive version of American history, then one serious oversight is its lack of representation of American Indians. Why should American history begin in 1619 with the first importation of slaves, when there were already millions of people here with their own histories? If The 1619 Project wants to be the central narrative of our national history, then it should have more focus on the people whose land this nation was built upon, especially because in the early colonial period, there were American Indians who were enslaved. This would seem to back The 1619 Project's claim of a slavery-focused history, but the project never mentions it, which is a consequential oversight.

“One [inaccuracy in our founding myths] is that history doesn't begin for Native people until Europeans arrive. People had been in the Americas for at least 12,000 years and according to some Native traditions, since the beginning of time. And having history start with the English is a way of dismissing all that”.

– David Silverman

Takeaways

From my perspective, the historical record gives no easy answer regarding the validity of The 1619 Project. But while it may not be a perfect representation of American history, it is certainly not without merit. It is one of the most vivid depictions of African-American history I've ever seen and rightfully brings to light many things about our nation's history that we tried to forget. Furthermore, by being so counter to how we usually think about our history, it makes us call into question everything we thought we knew about our past. It's a great starting point for investigating US history for yourself, to see what should stay in the history books and what needs to be changed.



Was 1776 Pro-Slavery?

The Declaration of Independence was the document that described why America revolted against Britain. At first, The 1619 Project's claim of a pro-slavery revolt seems untrue, as slavery's preservation is never raised in the declaration as a reason for rebellion, but looking at the context around the document begins to paint a different picture. There were people in close contact with the Continental Congress, like Abigail Adams, who urged Revolutionaries to condemn slavery, and Britain even took advantage of enslaved people's plight by offering them their freedom if they fought against the Rebels. This resistance would have been quelled if the Declaration of Independence had condemned slavery, but the people who wrote it ultimately refused to do so. While the Revolutionaries' support for the system might have not been as explicit as The 1619 Project makes it out to be, the founding fathers still ensured that their new nation, based on the idea that all men are created equal, would still hold a great portion of its population in slavery.



Colonel Tye, an enslaved person who fought for Britain in exchange for the promise of freedom

However, this inaction may have been due to slavery being a contentious issue at the time. If one were to create a union between a variety of different states, some with slavery deeply ingrained in their economy, it would be best to avoid talking about the issue of slavery when making the foundations for a “free” nation. Then again, this concession to slaveowners at the expense of human liberty and equality may fit right in with The 1619 Project.

“...Some notion like the original intent of the founders or the idea that oh let's see what they said about this and that'll tell us everything we need to know ... These guys are politicians they knew it was a hot potato ... They're not gonna say something straightforward they're going to spin [it]...”

– David Waldstreicher



Map of Pre-Colonial American Indian Peoples