

Leah Grego: Perspectives on The 1619 Project

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What's at Stake

In considering what's at stake for The 1619 Project a reparation and amelioration of perceived discrimination and social and political outcomes emerges as a key issue. By refusing to teach The 1619 Project in schools we contribute negatively to our nation's promises of equal rights for all in the pursuit of happiness. Largely because of its take on slavery, the project has experienced the heat of controversy. Former President Donald Trump, who wanted to ban The 1619 Project, called it "toxic propaganda, ideological poison, that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, will destroy our country." But the idea that The 1619 Project undermines American patriotism is an absurd and ignorant viewpoint for people who do not want to acknowledge the past. The project challenges the traditional narrative of American history, which often downplays or ignores the centrality of slavery and racism in this country's past. By offering a more comprehensive view on history, The 1619 Project hopes to spark a more honest and constructive conversation about race and inequality in the United States.

A Constitution of Slavery

In 1858, New Yorker William Henry Seward delivered his speech "The Irrepressible Conflict" to describe the republican outlook where he claimed that the so-called "Constitution of Freedom" was being converted into a "Constitution of Slavery." The Declaration of Independence placed the value on human lives based on their races by claiming that everyone had the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Seward argues, in this speech, that the system of slavery is intolerable, unjust and inhumane, and holds constant danger and distrust. He also argued that the Civil War was an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces: sooner or later the United States had to become either entirely a slaveholding nation or entirely a free-labor nation. This example ultimately sustains the argument of The 1619 Project's arguments by not only agreeing that the Declaration of Independence made false claims and was written in a way that supported and extended slavery; it also maintained the idea that black people were subhuman, which allowed white Americans to support the system of slavery and the Constitution protected the "property."

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit Of Happiness

Abigail Adams, wife of the second US President, advocated for women's rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. She longed for independence and struggled with expectations imposed on her by her sex. Unlike most men running the new nation, "she believed all people, both sexes, should be granted equal rights" ("Abigail Adams"). The words of the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal," really translated to *all white men*. This situation ultimately sustains Hannah-Jones's argument that this nation was built on what she calls "an ideal and a lie;" that a blatant disregard of human rights formed the basis of this nation. Not all people were given the same opportunities. The preponderance of evidence shows that, in the founding era, "all men" were in no way given equal rights.

"I would rather let individuals and communities decide what they think what they want from history."

– David Waldstreicher

The New York Times Magazine
The 1619 Project

"The nature of being a human being now you can seek to have people understand what happened in the past and especially how it relates to the present."

–Leslie Harris

What Should We Teach in Schools?

Claire Bugos's article "The Myths of the Thanksgiving Story and the Lasting Damage They Imbue," from the *Smithsonian Magazine*, describes historical inaccuracies commonly taught students regarding Thanksgiving. Although we are taught in elementary school that local Native Americans welcomed the pioneering Pilgrims with a celebratory feast, this is far from the case. In truth, the Pilgrim-Indian alliance that represents the holiday revolved around massacres, disease and Native American tribal politics. The history of the people continues to be misrepresented. Bugos's arguments sustain the ideas of The 1619 Project by showing how not educating students properly about American History opens a door for future problems. The SPLC survey showed, for example, that about 92 percent of high school students didn't even know that slavery was the American Civil War's main cause. Obviously, there is a disconnect in terms of what is being taught in US history, a situation that might be improved by teaching The 1619 Project and expanding on its ideas.

Takeaways

Considering The 1619 Project deepened my understanding of the slave system and the extent of power it had over early American history. The 1619 Project is an ambitious and important effort to re-examine the history of the United States and to spark a more productive conversation about race and inequality. Few projects do a better job of introducing the horrors of slavery and anti-Black racism and few reach such a wide audience. Even though the project may have been controversial and did not get every detail correct, it leads readers to rethink their understandings of race and racism. It motivated me, particularly, to expand my knowledge of topics relating to The 1619 Project. I believe everyone could learn something from doing so.