

# Alexandra Sveshnikova on The 1619 Project

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## What's at Stake

The debate over *The 1619 Project* is significant because of its broad claims about slavery's legacy on United States' history. The project has proven to be highly controversial and has generated a great deal of criticism. The project's attempt at reframing American history almost calls for a new American identity. Its most controversial claim is that the primary motivation for the Revolutionary War in 1776 was a desire to protect the institution of slavery. Also, claims are made that enslaved African Americans were the cause of United States' democracy and, that without it, the nation might not have a democracy at all. The project claims that enslaved African Americans were, for the most part, alone in their fight for freedom. This proves to be problematic in many ways. To begin with, other marginalized groups are not mentioned or recognized within *The 1619 Project*. If we reframe American history from an Afrocentric perspective, we risk losing sight of significant contributions that other marginalized groups had/have on the United States. *The 1619 Project*, while creating some good points, skips over many important aspects of American history. However, it does require readers to consider complicated dimensions associated with slavery at the nation's founding and allows one to make better sense of other points in history, including slavery's impact on United States' politics and institutions. When doing so, however, it is important to keep in mind the many people, groups, and events that have contributed to making America.

## Slavery and the Native Americans

While the enslavement of African Americans was certainly an integral part in the foundation of what was to become the United States, other marginalized groups also played important roles in the founding, namely the Native Americans. *The 1619 Project* suggests that African Americans are at the center of United States' history, ideals of freedom, and democracy, when there seems to be a lot more that goes into the story. While a large factor that contributed to the building of America was the exploitation of peoples, *The 1619 Project* lacks an intersectional analysis of the issue because colonizers in North America participated in the exploitation of many different minority groups, including Native Americans. The enslavement of indigenous peoples in the Americas was by no means an uncommon occurrence. In New England, they were enslaved as early as the 1630s, with numbers greatly escalating during King Phillip's War (1675-1676). King Phillip's War was fought between indigenous peoples of New England and the European colonists and their native allies. Linford D. Fisher's article, "Why shall we have peace to be made slaves': Indian Surrenders during and after King Phillip's War," discusses this situation in depth. According to Fisher, one element of King Phillip's War was the drastic increase in Native American enslavement. Natives were both enslaved locally and even traded to the Caribbean. The enslavement of indigenous peoples had been ongoing for a while, but King Phillip's War led to the enslavement of many natives, and it became a central point of the war. This example goes to show that the exploitation of marginalized groups was not limited to enslaved Africans. It is important to recognize the many groups that contributed to the founding of the United States, and this is something that *The 1619 Project* entirely disregards.

## Latinos in the United States

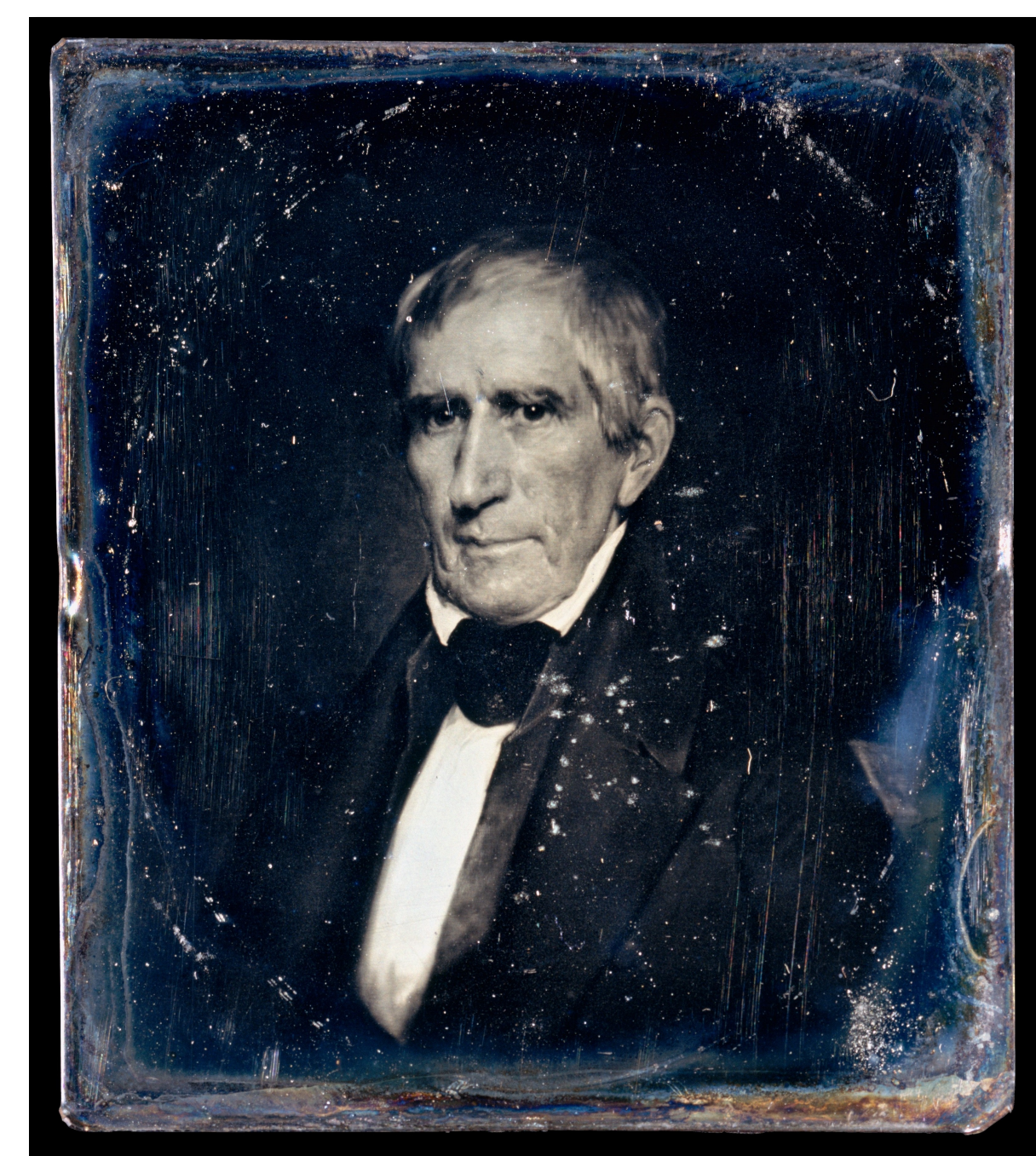
Another example of a marginalized group largely overlooked by *The 1619 Project* is Latinos. Not only did they contribute greatly to American national development, but their own history was shaped by colonialism and expansionism. An article produced by the National Park Service titled "Latinos and the Law," describes how Latino people had to fight for their citizenship and equal rights, much like African Americans. They, too, had to fight for justice. They had to fight for equal rights, to participate in democracy, and to vote. Additionally, they had to fight for land and resources. This is yet another minority group besides African Americans that had to fight for rights, freedom, and democracy. *The 1619 Project* makes the claim that African Americans shaped United States democracy and does not consider the other groups that had an impact on U.S. politics. Latinos' influence on American development is also ongoing. Another National Park Service publication, "The Latino Crucible: Its Origins in 19th-Century Wars, Revolutions, and Empire," explores the various wars and revolutions that the Latino people participated in to fight for land, as well as the impact that this had on American expansion. It also discusses the colonization that took place in certain Latin countries and how the United States fought to assume control over these places. This once again provides an example for another group of people who were targeted and oppressed. Places such as Puerto Rico are still under a kind of colonial control and are fighting for their freedom every day. They are still struggling to either break away or to gain the same rights as other U.S. citizens. This is something that *The 1619 Project* does not consider in its re-writing of American history.

"My own feeling toward the old master class of the South is well known. Though I have worn the yoke of bondage, and have no love for what are called the good times of slavery, there is in my heart no taint of malice toward ex-slaveholders. Many of them were not sinners above all the others, but were in some sense the slaves of the slave system, for slavery was a power in the State greater than the State itself."

- Frederick Douglass

## "The Irrepressible Conflict"

In 1858, New York State Senator, William Henry Seward, gave his "The Irrepressible Conflict" speech. In his speech, Seward, a Republican politician, argues that the slave system was "intolerable, unjust, and inhuman," and should be replaced with a free labor system. Seward said that slavery was taking away jobs from working men, and that in this way it was hurting the economy. This position contrasts with the claim of *The 1619 Project* that slavery boosted the U.S. economy and that the nation profited from slave labor's exploitation. Additionally, Seward said that "the slave system is one of constant danger, distrust, suspicion, and watchfulness." He argues that a slave system and a free labor system cannot coexist in the same place because they are entirely incompatible, and that eventually one will supersede the other within the United States. They have both existed in the United States in different states, Seward says, and, as the nation becomes larger and more unified, they cannot and will not continue to coexist. Seward is adamant that the free labor system is much better for the U.S. economy because it allows for more people to have jobs and bring themselves out of poverty. Contrary to what *The 1619 Project* states, this New York State Senator was arguing that slavery was hurting the economy and the country, and that it was immoral and unjust. One of Seward's most striking lines says that "This is a Constitution of Freedom. It is being converted to a Constitution of Slavery." Here, Seward is remarking that the United States was not built on the idea of slavery, but rather on the foundation of freedom.



"Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature – opposition to it is in his love of justice. These principles are an eternal antagonism; and when brought into collision so fiercely, as slavery extension brings them, shocks, and throes, and convulsions must ceaselessly follow. Repeal the Missouri Compromise – repeal all compromises – repeal the declaration of independence – repeal all past history, you still can not repeal human nature. It will still be the abundance of man's heart, that slavery extension is wrong; and out of the abundance of his heart, his mouth will continue to speak."

- Abraham Lincoln

## Takeaways

In conclusion, I believe that what *The 1619 Project* is attempting to do is an interesting first step, but slightly off target. Its attempt to reframe United States history by turning from a Eurocentric perspective is a positive approach, I think, but it is simply reframing history to an Afrocentric one instead of including all groups and all perspectives. While history is never completely objective, I think it is important to consider things from all sides, instead of focusing solely on one group. It is vitally important to consider slavery's implications on the development of the United States, but at our nation's history only through that lens can be harmful. Rather than taking *The 1619 Project* as an absolute truth, it can be used as a means for considering competing narratives of American history. This project allowed me to consider new perspectives and helped to explore how popular thought shapes the understanding of our history. While *The 1619 Project* remains controversial, it is important to examine such sources to gain a better understanding of how narratives shape our history.

