

Excerpted from: The 1619 Chronicles: Journalism does better when it writes the first rough draft of history, not the last word on it.

Bret Stephens  
By Bret Stephens  
NYT Opinion Columnist  
Oct. 9, 2020

If there's one word admirers and critics alike can agree on when it comes to *The New York Times's* award-winning 1619 Project, it's ambition. Ambition to reframe America's conversation about race. Ambition to reframe our understanding of history. Ambition to move from news pages to classrooms. Ambition to move from scholarly debate to national consciousness.

But ambition can be double-edged. Journalists are, most often, in the business of writing the first rough draft of history, not trying to have the last word on it. As fresh concerns make clear, on these points — and for all of its virtues, buzz, spinoffs and a Pulitzer Prize — the 1619 Project has failed.

In his introductory essay to the project, New York Times Magazine editor, Jake Silverstein, argues that America's "defining contradictions" were born in August 1619, when a ship carrying 20 to 30 enslaved Africans arrived in Point Comfort, in the English colony of Virginia. The title page of Hannah-Jones's essay for the project insists that "our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written."

What was surprising was that in 1776 a politically formidable "defining contradiction" — "that all men are created equal" — came into existence through the Declaration of Independence. As Abraham Lincoln wrote in 1859, that foundational document would forever serve as a "rebuke and stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression." It's why, at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery, Lincoln would date the country's founding to "four score and seven years ago."

As for the notion that the Declaration's principles were "false" in 1776, ideals aren't false merely because they are unrealized, much less because many of the men who championed them, and the nation they created, hypocritically failed to live up to them. Most of us, at any given point in time, are falling short of some ideal we nonetheless hold to be true or good.

The world is complex. So are people and their motives. The job of journalism is to take account of that complexity, not simplify it out of existence through the adoption of some ideological orthodoxy. This mistake goes far to explain the 1619 Project's subsequent scholarly and journalistic entanglements. It should have been enough to make strong yet nuanced claims about the role of slavery and racism in American history. Instead, it issued categorical and totalizing assertions that are difficult to defend on close examination.

James McPherson, a past president of the American Historical Association, was withering [in his criticism]: “Almost from the outset,” McPherson told the World Socialist Web Site, “I was disturbed by what seemed like a very unbalanced, one-sided account, which lacked context and perspective.” In particular, McPherson objected to Hannah-Jones’s suggestion that the struggle against slavery and racism and for civil rights and democracy was, if not exclusively then mostly, a Black one.

McPherson demurs: “From the Quakers in the 18th century, on through the abolitionists in the antebellum, to the Radical Republicans in the Civil War and Reconstruction, to the N.A.A.C.P., which was an interracial organization founded in 1909, down through the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, there have been a lot of whites who have fought against slavery and racial discrimination, and against racism,” he said. “And that’s what’s missing from this perspective.”

None of this should have come as a surprise: The 1619 Project is a thesis in search of evidence, not the other way around.

The larger problem is that The Times’s editors, however much background reading they might have done, are not in a position to adjudicate historical disputes. That should have been an additional reason for the 1619 Project to seek input from, and include contributions by, an intellectually diverse range of scholarly voices. Yet not only does the project choose a side, it also brooks no doubt.

Almost inevitably, what began as a scholarly quarrel became a political one. Sure enough, last month Trump suggested he would cut off federal funding to any public school using it in its curriculum.

Beyond these political disputes is a metaphysical question that matters. What is a founding? Why have generations of Americans considered 1776 our birth date — as opposed to 1781, when we won our independence militarily at Yorktown; or 1783, when we won it diplomatically through the Treaty of Paris; or 1788, when our system of government came into existence with the ratification of the Constitution?

The answer is that, unlike other dates, 1776 uniquely marries letter and spirit, politics and principle: The declaration that something new is born, combined with the expression of an ideal that — because we continue to believe in it even as we struggle to live up to it — binds us to the date.

Contrary to what the 1619 Project claims, 1776 isn’t just our nation’s “official” founding. It is our symbolic one, too. The metaphor of 1776 is more powerful than that of 1619 because what makes America most itself isn’t four centuries of racist subjugation. It’s 244 years of effort by Americans — sometimes halting, but often heroic — to live up to our greatest ideal. That’s a struggle that has been waged by people of every race and creed. And it’s an ideal that continues to inspire millions of people at home and abroad.

Questions:

1. Explain how Stephens argues ambition can be a double-edged sword when it comes to writing about history.
2. What does Stephens see as America's defining contradiction as opposed to what *Times*' editor Jack Silverstein says it is?
3. What was Abraham Lincoln's position on the phrase "all men are created equal?"
4. Why does Stephens contend the principles of the Declaration are not "false" or a "lie" (as Hannah-Jones contends in the "Idea of America") merely because the men who wrote them failed to live up to them?
5. What is historian James McPherson's criticism of the 1619 Project?
6. Stephens argues that the editors of the 1619 Project failed to consult a diverse range of historians for the project and took sides in the historical dispute. What is the problem this allegation could create if shown to be accurate? Why might the *Times* have decided to paint a one-sided version of the history surrounding slavery?
7. Why does Stephens consider 1776 the actual founding of America as opposed to 1619?
8. What does Stephens mean when he writes the year 1776 is the nation's "symbolic" founding as well as its "official" founding?
9. In your opinion, were the values contained within the Declaration a "lie" when written? Explain your answer in paragraph form, using facts or arguments from this editorial, the "Idea of America," or other material you've read on the topic.