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1619 or 1776?

SAVE AMERICA BY SAVING U.S. HISTORY

by Theodor Rebarber is CEO of AAT, a new 501(c)3 nonprofit organization dedicated to providing comprehensive, honest and balanced U.S. history curriculum materials that support teachers and encourage healthy patriotism and civil discourse, and is the author of *The Common Core Debacle*.

Remarks at the White House Conference on American History

Washington D.C., Sept. 17, 2020

I am deeply honored to be here and participate at this White House Conference on U.S. history in the presence of our Founding Documents. Today is Constitution Day. It is also Citizenship Day, on which we honor all those who have attained American citizenship. Therefore, I will take a moment to acknowledge and thank two brave subjects of the East Bloc Communist regime of Romania — my parents — who left all that they knew to take their two young sons, myself and my brother at the age of 6, and legally emigrated to the United States. We all eventually became grateful, naturalized United States citizens. Immigrants who come to America from such places do not take this remarkable country for granted. We know it has flaws — every country does. Yet we appreciate America and love it for its freedom, opportunity and rule of law, its never-ending efforts to address problems and injustices, and the traditions and fundamental human decency of its people that make it all possible.

The history we teach our children

cannot solve all of our problems, nor should we expect it to. But it can provide a factual foundation for discussing current challenges and seeking solutions, while educating a new generation about America's remarkable heritage and what brings us together as one people. Unfortunately, all too often, that is not the type of history we are providing our students.

Others on this panel are discussing the deeply divisive misrepresentations of the 1619 Project, whose author has suggested that accuracy was not her priority, and of Howard Zinn's textbook *A People's History of the United States*. Instead, I will address materials used in schools which have not formally adopted 1619 or Zinn's textbook, often assuming that more mainstream instructional materials are safe and not prone to such problems.

In high school U.S. history, the most widely perceived "gold standard" is the College Board's Advanced Placement U.S. History course. Though it is college-level, it often influences even non-AP U.S. history courses at the high school and even middle school levels. The APUSH course framework presents a distorted picture of U.S. history that is in some ways more dangerous due to its subtle-

ty than the 1619 initiative. The casual reviewer is unlikely to notice what is NOT present, or patterns that only become clear when one analyzes the document as a whole.

For example, the main APUSH course framework (Fall 2020) refers to property 5 times, of which 4 are



in the negative context of restricting the right to vote based on property requirements. The only reference to legal protections for property rights, a more positive context, refers to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 — a relatively obscure reference to most people — which addressed the admission of new states. Nothing is included on Constitutional protections for fundamental property rights, such as the prohibition on government taking a person's property without just com-

(Continued on page 2)

pensation (Takings Clause) or protections for inventions or other intellectual property (Patent and Copyright Clause). Stepping back and considering our current social context, if property is presented mostly as an example of historical injustice, what does this indicate to students about the need to respect the private property of others? It is a fairly safe assumption that those who we've seen looting, destroying and burning in 2020 have certainly not been convinced — more likely, never even been exposed — to the notion that such rights can protect the property of the weak from the depredations of the powerful. In fact, such rights can stand as bulwark against the injustice of “might makes right.”



In the case of religion, with few exceptions, the references in the APUSH framework are vague formulations about “divergent” views or “new” beliefs. While the Bible and Judaism are not mentioned at all, the few specific references to Christianity or Christians are mostly negative. For example, desire to spread the Christian faith is identified as a motivation for the conquest of the New World. Similarly, Christian efforts to convert native peoples are placed in the context of colonizing and exploiting native populations and Africans. But no mention is made of Christianity’s history as a driving motivation behind the Abolitionist Movement to end slavery, in support of charitable social activity, or as the backbone of the civil rights

movement to end Jim Crow.

There is also no mention in the framework of the common use of Biblical quotations and beliefs in political pamphlets during the American Revolutionary period. In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine quotes extensively from the Hebrew Scriptures to argue against monarchical government. First, he compares the pastoral virtue of the lives of the Patriarchs with the troubled tenures of many Israelite kings. He follows by discussing the prophet Samuel’s bitter disappointment when the Israelites requested a king to rule over them so that they might be more like neighboring nations, which he considered a rejection of God’s sovereignty. Paine’s reliance on Scripture indicates the potential of Biblical faith to inspire Americans to seek a free and just form of government.

In the APUSH framework, the Constitutional Convention is framed through the lens (“thematic focus”) of an event fostered by “social and political groups”. While that was certainly a critical element, it leaves out the impact of brilliant individual Founders — great men who could sometimes rise above merely representing the interests of different factions. For example, George Washington presiding over the Convention was not seen at the time merely as a delegate from the state of Virginia, but as a deeply respected leader with a vision of greater national unity. Multiple topics were debated at the Convention that were incorporated into the final document, yet the only substantive historical developments specified in the framework as required course content are compromises over the representation of slave states in Congress and the role of the federal government in regulating slavery and the slave trade. The entire topic of the Constitution itself is covered in half of a page. The required course content is captured by

a single-sentence description of the historical developments represented by the Constitution. Other topics receive more extensive and specific coverage than the Constitution.

AAT, a nonprofit organization, is committed to developing instructional materials for American history at the high school level that are accurate and tell the whole story. That includes addressing America’s faults, including the blight of slavery and its repercussions, but also its remarkable accomplishments. We have partnered with nationally-recognized historian Wilfred McClay, who has authored an absolutely outstanding, readable and overall positive U.S. history textbook — *Land of Hope* — that we believe is the best available. We will work with him, along with several other excellent historians and educators we’ve identified, to develop instructional units that provide teachers with detailed instructional support on assignments, assessments, handling diverse student skill levels and everything else they might need. The units will include a strong emphasis on students engaging with core original documents, including the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, to develop a basic mastery. Students will learn to analyze, discuss, and write short and longer historical analyses and papers.

We believe that many parents, educators, and other interested citizens share our concern about the quality of much of history education and want something better. Our curriculum has the potential to be adopted in many schools across the nation. Even where it is not adopted, it will put pressure on publishers to offer a more complete American history. We appreciate the limited grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that allows us to begin writing a curriculum. We invite you to learn more about our work to complete a full curriculum at www.aateducation.org



GOING BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED FROM

by Charles Love, a Scholar with Woodson Center - 1776 Unites - www.1776unites.com,
www.woodsoncenter.org

I generally assume positive intent, but that approach is being pushed to its limits by the advancement of the *New York Times'* 1619 Project in schools. I cannot understand the goal of a growing number of school districts — those charged with administering curricula to thousands of schools — agreeing to use the 1619 Project as part of their history lessons. Its founder, Nikole Hannah-Jones, has acknowledged that it is not a work of history, but rather, “of memory.” She doesn’t say whose memory she tapped for the project and, as is the case with most people, memories can suffer from the Mandela effect over time. Therefore, it is unwise to use memories that are hundreds of years old as the basis for a history lesson.

For example, when they want you to believe that the Revolutionary War was fought because the British intended to abolish slavery, rather than fighting to gain freedom from a monarchy that suppressed colonists’ rights, they simply say this and many accept it as fact. We are expected to ignore the fact that slavery was not abolished in the United Kingdom until 1833, nearly six decades after the Declaration of Independence. This is what is dangerous about the 1619 Project: In its effort to prove the narrative that the black existence in America is inextricably tied to slavery, the project’s essayists and its proponents twist truths, omit facts, and change definitions.

Fortunately, there is a better way to approach this.

I grew up in Gary, Indiana, a city with a notoriously bad reputation —

segregated in the 1950s, high in crime in the 1990s, and now poster child for economic devastation in America’s rust belt. When I was in my early 20s, I worked for a caterer in downtown Chicago. My co-workers were also young black men. They were all from Chicago, mostly from the South Side. I vividly remember them reacting to my being from Gary by saying, “Wow, and you’ve never been shot?” In the



early 1990s Gary had been dubbed the “murder capital of the country.”

When I look back on my childhood, I recall key moments that drastically changed how I viewed the world. I started school in the mid-1970s. Most of the white families had moved away after the election of Richard Hatcher, the city’s first black mayor. I was born at the beginning of the now infamous “white flight.”

The remaining residents of Gary were an even mix of working class and poor families; my family was barely on the working-class side. This was not much different from majority-black communities in America today. What we benefited from at that time was an enriched education. During my years in public schools, most of my teachers were black and, although most were women, we did

have several male teachers, a surprisingly high percentage by today’s standard.

Since most of the white teachers were holdovers who did not succumb to the rush to leave the city, they skewed older. Conversely, most of the black teachers were in their 20s and early 30s when I began school. This meant that many of them were in high school or college at the height of the civil rights movement. What they instilled in me and my peers is what is lacking in the 1619 Project: context and logic.

These students of the movement wanted to empower the children they taught. Like most people today, we knew about slavery, Jim Crow laws, and Martin Luther King; however, our teachers gave us a richer understanding of our history. We were taught about Hiram Revels, a minister who became the first black senator; King adviser and activist Bayard Rustin; and labor leader A. Philip Randolph. I remember having flash cards that featured inventor Garrett Morgan, explorer Matthew Henson, and surgeon Daniel Hale Williams.

We were taught about the ugliness of white supremacy, but not allowed to use it to generalize whites, so that we would not become like the racists we opposed. When taught about slaves who took immeasurable risks, such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, we also learned about white abolitionists John Rankin and John Brown, educator Samuel Gridley Howe and his wife, writer Julia Ward Howe, and the Radical Republicans, whites who put their reputations, prominence and, in some cases,

(Continued on page 4)

their lives on the line to end slavery.

This method of teaching was appropriate and complete, but not a highlight of my formative education. My teachers' primary focus was to give us the skills and knowledge necessary to compete and be successful, regardless of our race or our circumstances. All students — especially black students — would benefit from this method, but the 1619 Project is simply not designed to help students succeed.

At the start, the *New York Times* states that the goal of the project is “to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.” Although the project rightly describes slavery, the realities are far worse — no words could properly “delineate the atrocious debasement of human nature” as Benjamin Franklin once said. The 1619 Project’s lack of context leaves an exaggerated imprint on slavery on the arc of history in America.

Additionally, the illogical conclusion the essayists draw from the history of racism is equally damaging. The conclusion the project paints for its readers is that our country was founded on slavery, whites fought to keep it and, when slavery ended, they spent 150 years trying to maintain strength through systemic oppression of blacks. In addition to this, the “consequences of slavery” determined by the 1619 Project can be summed up as every problem ever experienced by blacks in America.

It is easy to find evidence and examples to prove the harsh racism the project describes; there are too many from which to choose. The problem lies with the assumption that racism is endemic to white America. It is irrational to conclude that all, or even most, whites supported slavery. The project lists 1619 as the start of slavery —

and thereby, the country — but fails to mention the efforts to end slavery that also began in the 17th century. Talk of ending slavery was so common by the country’s founding, that Thomas Jefferson and other Founders assumed it would end in their lifetimes.

Arguing that slavery is the only measure to use to gauge the country, even in the 1860s, would be akin to saying the 20 states that had no slaves were not part of America, or erasing whites who fought against slavery from the history books because they don’t fit the narrative. Blacks reached a level of achievement in the early 20th century that can be described only as amazing, based on where they were 50 years earlier. Many of them owned businesses, graduated from colleges and universities, and amassed incredible wealth. How, then, does the 1619 Project contend that slavery is still the prevailing issue in the black condition today?

The 1619 Project would be more credible if it had anything positive to say about America. Instead, it takes the “throw it all out approach.” The Founders, capitalism, “law and order” — all are racist, according to this thinking. Even things such as traffic jams and opposition to universal health care can be traced to slavery. The project goes on like this, focusing solely on negativity without offering any solutions. Many whites read these essays and are drawn to the logical conclusion that most blacks in America lead bleak, sad lives.

This is not only incorrect, but an unhealthy way to view blacks.

Yet that is what the 1619 Project does. With no context, it tells whites, deliberately or not, that they have wronged blacks just by being born; they must embrace their guilt and renounce their “privilege.” Conversely, it tells otherwise happy blacks that they should be angry for being forced

to live a sad life they did not realize they were living. Once this toxic message, which is based on critical race theory, is allowed in schools, we inevitably will have a generation of angry blacks and depressed whites. Yet the push to make this part of a new standard in the teaching of American history to vulnerable youths is gaining momentum. Critical race theory teaches that all situations and outcomes are the result of a racial power struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors. It allows for no individual agency.

This warped teaching is being done without involving parents or discussing the merits of the project. Most blacks over the age of 40 can remember their parents’ talk on racism. It commonly involved an acknowledgment of racism, followed by a demand that we must “work twice as hard” to achieve. Their method gives cover to those who don’t achieve or those who choose not to try.

I suggest we take a different approach than the critical race theory approach of the 1619 Project; instead, let’s take the one my teachers took when I was a child. We learned an accurate account of American history, without negative inferences or making slavery the primary focus of our education. If schools adopt critical race theory, they will sadly rob students of the opportunity to receive an education that prepares them for the future and makes them proud to be American. 

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