

New York Times discredits itself by going along with rewriting facts of 1619 Project

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Something strange is going on with The New York Times and its 1619 Project.

By now, you've probably heard of the 1619 Project. It began as a special issue of the Times' Sunday magazine to mark the 400th anniversary of African slaves being brought to the Jamestown colonies. But it's become a multiplatform, multimedia moveable feast with saturation coverage and promotion. Oprah Winfrey is going to develop it for film and television. It's being incorporated into curricula from grade schools to universities through the Pulitzer Center. Not surprisingly, it won a Pulitzer Prize (the center and the prize are unrelated). Or rather, the lead author and director of the project, Nikole Hannah-Jones, won in the commentary category.

It was a huge cultural event for journalism and a huge journalistic event in the culture. Critics and fans alike agree that it was agenda-setting in unprecedented ways.

Which is why it is so odd that Hannah-Jones and the Times are quietly taking back the project's most controversial claim: that 1619, not 1776, was America's "true founding."

Here's what appears to be going on.

President [Trump recently attacked](#) the 1619 Project as representative of the left-wing, anti-American bias he says is taught in our schools. Hannah-Jones took exception, suggesting that right-wingers were distorting the project. She said on CNN recently that the 1619 Project “does not argue that 1776 was not the founding of the country, but what it does argue for is that we have largely treated slavery as an asterisk to the American story.”

The problem, as Becket Adams of the Washington Examiner (among others) has demonstrated, is that this is simply a lie (and that bit about slavery being treated as an asterisk has been true for decades). Hannah-Jones has said repeatedly that 1619 was the true founding of America.

The original magazine package, in both the print and online versions, said: “The 1619 Project is a major initiative from The New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.”

Hannah-Jones has used the phrase “true founding” and variations of it many times, particularly on Twitter. But intriguingly, she recently deleted her entire Twitter history. That’s fine; people do that all the time. And besides, there is ample record of her saying it elsewhere. She has even used a graphic on her Twitter feed and in presentations showing “July 4, 1776,” crossed out and “Aug. 20, 1619,” drawn in.

More disturbing is the fact that the Times, with no explanation or clarification, has [retroactively edited](#) its own Pulitzer-winning work. The “true founding” language is now gone.

In journalism, going back and substantially “fixing” your copy without alerting readers to what you have changed and why is a huge no-no.

But this is much, much worse.

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The primary reason the 1619 Project sparked so much controversy was this central thesis — that America “began” with slavery (as the Times put it in splashy TV ads).

Sure, there were other reasons to debate the project. It got major historical facts and interpretations grossly wrong, as many progressive historians noted: The Revolutionary War wasn't fought to defend slavery; 1619 wasn't the first year African slaves came to our shores; and 1619 wasn't particularly significant beyond being a tidy 400 years prior to the publication date; cotton farming wasn't nearly as central to American industrialization as Marxists and other historians (including Marx himself) have long tried to argue in the so-called “King Cotton” thesis.

But it was the assertion that America was so defined by slavery that 1619 eclipsed 1776 that grabbed everyone's attention. After all, if the thesis was that slavery was not only really bad, it was more significant than some claim, who would argue with that? Indeed, that's been the conventional take for decades now.

The really controversial take would be to argue that slavery, while evil and unjustifiable, doesn't play the central role in our national life or history that some people claim. But the Times would never publish such a thing, and the Pulitzer Committee would never honor that.

The Times owes the country a serious explanation for why it is bowdlerizing its own work. If it isn't doing so out of a partisan desire to deny Trump and his fans a talking point, it should make that clear. Because the silence doesn't leave room for any other interpretation.