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Gordon S. Wood

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“We all want justice, but not at the expense of truth”

Historian Gordon Wood responds to the New York Times’ defense of the 1619 Project

Historian Gordon Wood, author of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize winning book The Radicalism of the American Revolution and the 1970 Bancroft Prize winning The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787, was one of five signatories to write a letter to the editor of the New York Times asking the paper to correct “factual errors” in the 1619 Project which evinced “a displacement of historical understanding by ideology.” Professor Wood is the leading historian of the American Revolution.



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The other signatories were historians Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, Sean Wilentz and James Oakes. The Times responded on December 20 in a letter by editor-in-chief

of The New York Times Magazine Jake Silverstein and refused to make any corrections. Wood then wrote the following response.

* * *

21 Dec. 2019

Dear Mr. Silverstein,

I have read your response to our letter concerning the 1619 Project. I have no quarrel with the idea behind the project. Demonstrating the importance of slavery in the history of our country is essential and commendable. But that necessary and worthy goal will be seriously harmed if the facts in the project turn out to be wrong and the interpretations of events are deemed to be perverse and distorted. In the long run the Project will lose its credibility, standing, and persuasiveness with the nation as a whole. I fear that it will eventually hurt the cause rather than help it. We all want justice, but not at the expense of truth.

I have spent my career studying the American Revolution and cannot accept the view that “one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery.” I don’t know of any colonist who said that they wanted independence in order to preserve their slaves. No colonist expressed alarm that the mother country was out to abolish slavery in 1776. If southerners were concerned about losing their slaves, why didn’t they make efforts to ally with the slaveholding planters in the British West Indies? Perhaps some southern slaveholders were alarmed by news of the Somerset decision, but we don’t have any evidence of that. Besides, that decision was not known in the colonies until the fall of 1772 and by that date the colonists were well along in their drive to independence. Remember, it all started in 1765 with the Stamp Act. The same is true of Dunmore’s proclamation of 1775. It may have tipped the scales for some hesitant Virginia planters, but by then the revolutionary movement was already well along in Virginia.

There is no evidence in 1776 of a rising movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, as the 1619 Project erroneously asserts, nor is there any evidence the British government was eager to do so. But even if either were the case, ending the Atlantic slave trade would have been welcomed by the Virginia planters, who already had more slaves than they needed. Indeed, the Virginians in the years following independence took the lead in moving to abolish the despicable international slave trade.

How could slavery be worth preserving for someone like John Adams, who hated slavery and owned no slaves? If anyone in the Continental Congress was responsible for the Declaration of Independence, it was Adams. And much of our countrymen now know that from seeing the film of the musical “1776.” Ignoring his and other northerners’ roles in the decision for independence can only undermine the credibility of your project with the general public. Far from preserving slavery the North saw the Revolution as an opportunity to abolish the institution. The first anti-slave movements in the history of the world, supported by whites as well as blacks, took place in the northern states in the years immediately following 1776.

I could go on with many more objections, some of which I mentioned in my interview with the World Socialist Web Site. But for now this may be enough to justify some correction and modification of the project. Again, let me emphasize my wholehearted support of the goal of the project to demonstrate accurately and truthfully to all Americans the importance of slavery in our history.

If you are willing to publish this letter, you may.

Sincerely,

24 December 2019