

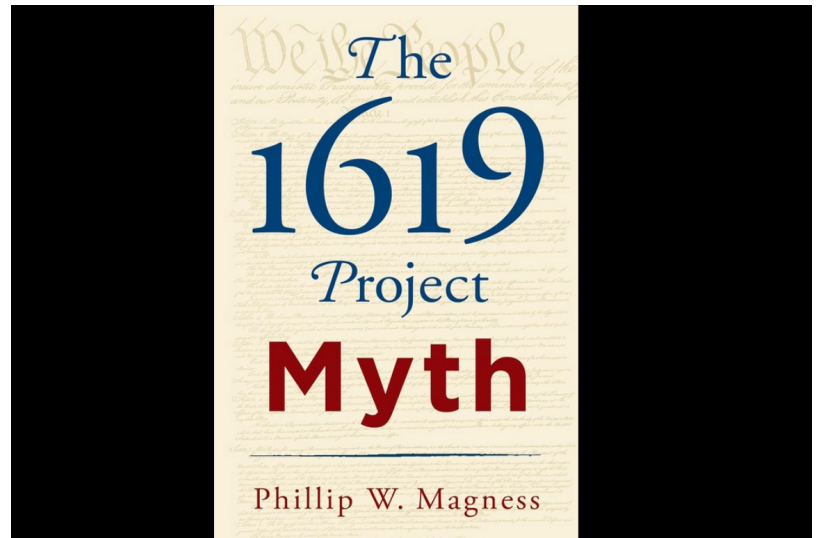


Written by [Steve Byas](#) on September 26, 2025

The 1619 Project: Mostly Marxist Myth

The 1619 Project Myth, by Phillip Magness, Oakland, California: Independent Institute, 2025, 166 pages, hardcover.

In 2019, *The New York Times* published a long-form journalism project called “The 1619 Project.” Largely the work of Nikole Hannah-Jones, The 1619 Project made many controversial assertions, among which was that the actual founding of the United States was not 1776, but rather 1619, because that was the year the first African slaves arrived at Jamestown. Hannah-Jones and her associates argued that this was the true founding year for America because the United States was built upon the backs of black slaves.



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In his book [The 1619 Project Myth](#), author Phillip Magness, an economic historian and senior fellow with the Independent Institute, exposes The 1619 Project for what it is — a Marxist myth of America’s founding.

Capitalist Myth

Magness notes that The 1619 Project exhibits a strong anti-capitalist bias, and misrepresents what capitalism actually is. The Project asserts that slavery was based on capitalism. Furthermore, as is typical of those on the Left, the Project considers governmental subsidies of big business as “capitalism.”

The Project’s authors contend that there is a direct progression from the plantations to the modern economy, offering as “evidence” the fact that the planters kept double-entry records and “capitalists” do the same thing today. They even claim that modern Excel spreadsheets evolved from plantation-era bookkeeping. Magness dispels this myth, noting that “double entry” accounting was used in northern Italy in the late Middle Ages. Even accountants in the old Soviet Union used spreadsheets with double-entry accounting.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith specifically condemned some of the very practices The 1619 Project compilers call “capitalism.” As Magness explained, “Composed as a retort to the prevailing mercantilist economic theories of his day, Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was also a far-reaching assault upon industrial protectionism in the name of national wealth, upon public-private enterprises undertaken through the privileged arrangements of law and government access, upon militaristic imperialism and colonialism, and upon slavery itself.”

In fact, among the most intense of defenders of slavery in the pre-Civil War South was George Fitzhugh, who also railed against the free-market views of Adam Smith and Frederic Bastiat, calling it a “false philosophy.” He advocated building up commerce “by legislation,” and casting the works of these men



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and others such as Jean Baptiste-Say “into the fire.”

Independence Myth

Not content with smearing free-market economics as responsible for slavery, The 1619 Project also asserted that American War for Independence was mainly instigated to preserve the institution of slavery. The “evidence” for this assertion was that the Royal governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, had issued a proclamation in late 1775 offering emancipation to slaves in that colony who would join the Loyalist militia and help put down the “rebellion.”

Magness destroys this thesis, however, with several facts. First of all, few historians agree with the contention that the American Revolution was fought to preserve slavery. Predictably, Hannah-Jones dismisses those who dare disagree with the core beliefs of The 1619 Project as “white historians.”

Secondly, Lord Dunmore was a slaveowner himself, with a particularly brutal reputation, and he did not free his own slaves. Furthermore, Dunmore exempted the slaves of Loyalist slave owners from his emancipation proclamation. Clearly, Dunmore’s edict was a *reaction* to the Revolution, not a *cause* of the Revolution. As Magness explained, the road to American independence began in Massachusetts in 1761 — more than a decade before the “embattled farmers stood and fired the shot heard ‘round the world” — with James Otis, *an abolitionist*, railing against “taxation without representation.”

The Virginia House of Burgesses adopted a resolution in 1774 — before the Dunmore Proclamation — of fasting in support of Boston (which was suffering under the so-called Intolerable Acts imposed by Parliament after the Boston Tea Party). George Washington and George Mason both advocated the Fairfax Resolves, listing colonial grievances against the British government, *before* the Dunmore Proclamation. Among the grievances was opposition to the slave trade.

Marxist Money Grab

What is the motivation for this pro-Marxist, anti-American package of lies? Not surprisingly, Hannah-Jones and other proponents of The 1619 Project want money — and lots of it. They call for “reparations” to the tune of \$13 trillion, which is more than one-half of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP).

One pro-1619 Project “economist,” William Darity, has assured detractors that tax increases would not be necessary, saying that the government could simply print the money. One estimate of this monetary inflation’s effect on the Consumer Price Index would be an estimated 240-percent increase in prices. This would, of course, lead to all sorts of economic problems.

Furthermore, who exactly would receive these “reparations” is not made clear. After all, few black Americans today are of pure African blood. Would those of mixed race be required to take money out of one pocket and put it into another? Or would anyone with any African ancestry at all be given reparations?

No wonder Magness dismisses this whole idea as “tooth fairy economics.”

Lincoln and Slavery

Magness demonstrates his fairness, however, by agreeing with one of the assertions found in The 1619 Project, which was that Abraham Lincoln continued to support deportation of black Americans up to the time of his assassination in April, 1865. To do this, he had to take issue with some who have tried to argue that Lincoln only supported the idea of sending former slaves to Africa, Haiti, or some place outside of the United States because of politics, and that he really was opposed to removing former



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slaves from the country.

To be sure, Lincoln was a long-time opponent of slavery, but he was also an early supporter of the idea of deporting blacks out of the country to “colonize” Africa or the Caribbean. Even after his Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln was in diplomatic talks with other countries, hoping to remove most, if not all, of American blacks from the United States.

Magness cites evidence that Lincoln feared the effect of the sudden emancipation of former slaves in the post-Civil War South. He was troubled that their presence could lead to terrorist activity against them in the South (which, of course, did happen). Lincoln’s secretary of state, William Seward, did not agree with the colonization scheme, however, and dragged his feet in obeying the president’s order to transmit a signed colonization agreement to the British legation in D.C.

When John Wilkes Booth murdered Lincoln at Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C., on April 14, 1865, another conspirator attempted to murder Seward. During Seward’s time of recovery from knife wounds, he told a visitor, recalling his close relationship with the late president: “Only once did we disagree in sentiment.... His colonization scheme.”

Magness explained why pointing out this agreement, in this instance, with the authors of The 1619 Project. “As we grapple with the substantive historical defects of the 1619 Project — and there are many — it is important to do so from a position of rigorous adherence to historical evidence.”

The Real 1619

In that same spirit, I would point out that Magness neglected to note that the first black Africans who came to Virginia in 1619 were not made slaves in Virginia. These Africans were brought to Jamestown in the summer of 1619 by two pirate ships, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*. These pirates had captured a Portuguese vessel, taking 50 men and women off the ship. The “cargo” had been purchased by the Portuguese from a tribal chief in what is now Angola.

The problem in getting rid of these pirated slaves — which is what they had been in Africa — was complicated by the fact that there were no laws governing actual slavery in the colony, and there would not be for nearly a half-century more. But there were laws governing indentured servanthood. Two leaders of the Virginia Colony traded some supplies for the slaves, and made them indentured servants.

Historian Edmund Morgan, writing in *American Slavery, American Freedom*, asserted that the legal status of these first blacks in Virginia was no different from that of the white servants (which admittedly was not great). Seven years was the legal limit to the amount of time that an indentured servant could be held by a planter, and the indentured servant was granted 50 acres of land upon release. Historical information is sketchy, but some apparently received their 50 acres at the end of the “indenture.”

This event in 1619 is historically noteworthy, but it hardly qualifies for the beginning of America.

All in all, Phillip Magness has written a solid antidote to the Marxist disease known as The 1619 Project.



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