

“A preposterous and one-dimensional reading of the American past”

Oxford historian Richard Carwardine on the New York Times’ 1619 Project

By Tom Mackaman
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Richard Carwardine, professor emeritus at Oxford University, is the author of the Lincoln-award winning biography Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power, as well as author and editor of other numerous books and articles on antebellum and Civil War-era American history.

Q. Let me begin by asking you your reaction to the 1619 Project’s lead essay, by Nikole Hannah-Jones, upon reading it.

A. As well as the essay I have read your interviews with James McPherson and James Oakes. I share their sense that, putting it politely, this is a tendentious and partial reading of American history.

I understand where this Project is coming from, politically and culturally. Of course, the economic well-being of the United States and the colonies that preceded it was constructed for over two-and-a-half centuries on the labor and sufferings of slaves; of course, like all entrenched wielders of power, the white political elite resisted efforts to yield up its privileges. But the idea that the 1619 Project’s lead essay is a rounded history of America—with relations between the races so stark and unyielding—I find quite shocking. I am troubled that this is designed to make its way into classrooms as *the* true story of the United States, because, as I say, it is so partial. It is also wrong in some fundamentals.

I’m all for recovering and celebrating the history of those whose voices have been historically muted and I certainly understand the concern of historians in recent times, black and white, that the black contribution to the United States has not been fully recognized. But the idea that the central, fundamental story of the United States is one of white racism and that black protest and rejection of white superiority has been the essential, indispensable driving force for change—which I take to be the central message of that lead essay—seems to me to be a preposterous and one-dimensional reading of the American past.

Q. I agree with everything you’ve said. There was a long period in American historiography in which the contributions of African-Americans were written out, and what prevailed was a basically false presentation in which the problems of slavery were obscured. But it seems the 1619 Project has simply put a minus sign where that earlier historiography, the Dunning School and so on, put a plus.

A. Yes. As an undergraduate at Oxford in the 1960s I was aware of work that brought a fresh and deeper understanding of African-American history. This was an era of breakthrough studies on slavery and anti-slavery, and “history from below” more widely, a development which chimed with so much of the best British radical and Marxist historiography. That was a stimulating time to be studying American history. As you say, African-American historiography has been transformed since then. I am pleased, but not surprised, that some African-American historians are stepping forward to challenge the narrative that appeared in the *New York Times*.

Q. Let me ask you about the treatment of Abraham Lincoln. Nikole

Hannah-Jones homes in on two episodes: the meeting on colonization with leading African-Americans in 1862, and the well-known quote from the Lincoln-Stephen Douglas debates in which Lincoln disavows social equality for blacks. Could you comment on these two episodes, their presentation by the *New York Times*, or situate them in the evolution of Lincoln’s thinking as regards race and slavery?

A. There is indeed an evolution, but first I’ll make two broad points. One is that context is all. Illinois was in 1858 one of the most race-conscious states of the Union. Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that white hostility towards blacks was strongest in the northwestern states. The black laws of Illinois were amongst the fiercest in the country. Lincoln knew that he could not be elected if he were seen as a racial egalitarian. I’m not suggesting he *was* a racial egalitarian, but we should take into account the political context that prompted his clearly defensive statements, at Ottawa and Charleston, that he was not seeking black political and social equality. Those statements of his are very few in number, grudging, and at times, I think, even satirical—as when he says that blacks are not “equal... in color.”

When Lincoln addressed the issue of slavery in his speeches from 1854 to 1860, he was on strong ground: slavery was widely disliked and the prospect of its spread was unwelcome to his political audience. But on the issue of race the Republicans were vulnerable. Their call for an ultimate end to slavery had to explain the consequence for black-white relations, and that of course made Lincoln extremely vulnerable to Stephen Douglas’s racism, and his assault on Lincoln as the “lover of the black”—though he would have used a worse epithet, wouldn’t he? So, in reality, Lincoln could only win an election in 1858 by making some concessions to the prevailing racial antipathies of whites. These two statements have understandably, and reasonably, attracted attention. They demonstrate that Lincoln, to secure a Republican victory that would advance the antislavery cause, fell short both of what blacks aspired to and of what the small minority of white racial egalitarians endorsed.

It seems to me that what’s really striking, however, is what Lincoln positively demands for blacks at this time. He embraces them within the Declaration of Independence’s proposition that all men are created equal. By “all men” he means regardless of color, and that’s where he gets into a tussle with Douglas. Douglas insisted the Declaration of Independence was never intended to apply to black people, and of course, Lincoln is emphatic that it does. So for me it’s what Lincoln *claims* for black people that is striking, and not what he says he will deny them.

With the August 1862 episode, again context is important. It’s a very striking meeting and it’s not Lincoln’s finest hour. Both Nicolay and Hay, his secretaries, said that they thought that Lincoln was at his most emotionally on edge and mentally fraught in the summer of 1862 when the Peninsular campaign had ended in failure, when he had determined on

the Emancipation Proclamation but was waiting for a military victory to bring it forward, and when there was increasing clamor for emancipation. Both secretaries said that they had never known Lincoln as nervy as he was then.

The point I'm making here is that at that time Lincoln was under even greater human strain than ever. He knew he was on the brink of taking the most dramatic, even revolutionary, action of any president. He's nervous. He can't see what all the consequences will be, but he knows the consequences of *not* issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. It will leave the Confederacy with the whip hand.

That startling episode of Lincoln's discussions with the five African-Americans—the first blacks invited into the White House as equals—should be placed in this context. Buffeted from all sides during one of the Union's lowest points of the war, Lincoln lost the good humor that commonly lubricated his meetings with visitors. His message to them about the causes of the war, and the advantages of colonization and racial separation, has to be seen also in the context of the daunting prospective challenge of embracing four million former slaves fully into the American polity.

Q. Could you discuss the origins of the colonization idea?

A. Promoting the migration of American free blacks to colonies in Africa took institutional form in the American Colonization Society in 1816. In the main its early supporters were white benevolent paternalists who couldn't see a positive future for blacks in the United States because of the depth of white prejudice, but part of its appeal was to slaveowners who saw the advantage of ending the troublesome presence of free blacks in United States. In time, it alienated pure abolitionists, who thought it a bromide, and slave-masters, who deemed it the thin end of an antislavery wedge; it won the support of a few black radicals, including Henry Highland Garnet, but most black leaders strongly opposed it.

Lincoln was one of the many who before the war supported voluntary colonization as a means towards gradual emancipation. During 1861 and 1862 his advocacy of colonization continued at the same time that he pressed schemes of compensated emancipation and, in September 1862, issued his preliminary emancipation proclamation. However, the final Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863 was silent on the issue, suggesting that Lincoln had been using it, at least in part, to quell the fears of whites. There is evidence that he continued to consider voluntary colonization as just one amongst a cluster of strategies to effect a route into viable post-emancipation, post-war world of racial adjustment.

So that would be my way of looking at those two episodes, of 1858 and 1862. And then I would add that those are only two of the episodes that bear on the matter. I could choose other episodes which give a very different perspective.

Q. Could you elaborate on that?

A. Where in Nikole Hannah-Jones's reading of Lincoln, and in her wider perspective, is the voice of the greatest of all African-Americans, Frederick Douglass? He doesn't appear. Douglass was not uncritical of Lincoln: he famously said that the black race were only Lincoln's stepchildren. But he also came to extol Lincoln, too, as a white man who put him at his ease, treating him as an equal, with no thought of the "color of our skins," and showing he could conceive of a society in which blacks and whites lived together in a degree of harmony, that racial relationships in the US America were not irredeemably fixed by its 17th and 18th century past.

Douglass was absolutely stunned when Lincoln suggested in the summer of 1864 that he, Douglass, should organize a band of scouts to penetrate beyond Union lines into the rebel states to spread the news of emancipation among the slaves and encourage their flight. Lincoln proposed this when he thought he would lose the 1864 election and wanted to get as many slaves as possible into the Union lines before then.

Q. I had forgotten about that episode.

A. It's there in David Blight's magnificent book on Frederick Douglass. There are many other examples of Lincoln's positive views of blacks. You could take his letter to James Conkling in September 1863. Lincoln was invited by Conkling, a Springfield colleague who asked him to go to Illinois to campaign for the fall elections. Lincoln felt he had to stay in Washington, but he wrote a letter for Conkling to read to the Springfield audience, which he knew would comprise those who condemned him for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, sanctioning the use of black troops, and creating an interracial Army. He wanted this letter read to Illinois voters, but it was designed for a wider audience. Lincoln was very specific about how it should be delivered, telling Conkling to read it very slowly and clearly. He was outraged when the text was leaked beforehand. The letter is in part a paean to the bravery of the black soldiers. I consider it his greatest public letter, a powerful statement of how much he admires those African-Americans who have sacrificially taken up arms for the Union.

I'd like to return to what you said about the evolution of Lincoln's thinking on race. In Indiana and then in Illinois the vast majority of African-Americans that he encountered were uneducated and in menial jobs; they provided the basis for the black stereotypes of the tall tales and ludicrous stories of the time. But once Lincoln reached Washington he found an aspirational black middle class, and in Frederick Douglass he met someone whom he considered his intellectual equal. Add to this the tens and then hundreds of thousands of black sailors and soldiers fighting on behalf of the Union, and it's no wonder that by April 1865 he was now prepared to advocate for blacks the political benefits of citizenship, including voting rights. These he wanted to extend only to a minority of black Americans—the educated and those in arms—but still this was a step towards the integration of blacks in a multiracial America.

It's not too much to say that Lincoln was a civil rights martyr. John Wilkes Booth shot him soon after hearing him propose, in what would be his final speech, full citizenship—with voting rights—for very educated blacks and those who had fought for the Union. Booth declared, "That means nigger citizenship. Now, by God! I'll put him through."

Q. It's a powerful point.

A. My concern with the 1619 Project is not that it highlights the often-cited Lincoln remarks of 1858 and the White House meeting of August 1862. They are part of the overall story. They are real and are not to Lincoln's credit. But they are thoroughly un-contexted, historically deaf, and blind to a broader reality. Which of us would want to be judged on the basis of two snapshots in our lives? If the essence of Lincoln is captured in these episodes, then why does Frederick Douglass, arguably the preeminent African-American of all time, come to admire Lincoln as a great man and leader? Through his successive encounters with Lincoln, Douglass developed a growing respect and admiration for a president who sought to live up to a progressive reading of the principles of the Declaration of Independence—one, by the way, that is very much at odds with the reading of that document in the 1619 lead essay.

Q. I'm glad you've raised Frederick Douglass. I think there's been, from some quarters, this sort of knee-jerk reaction to any criticism of the 1619 Project, and some of this has been playing out on Twitter, where one person said, "You're trying to silence black voices." But one of the ironies is that there are very few historical black voices in the entire 1619 Project. As you say, Douglass isn't there. Neither is Martin Luther King, whose name appears only in a photo caption. To say nothing of wage labor, or any attempt to present the African-American experience as having to do with masses of actually existing people. Instead, the focus is on white racism as this sort of supra-historical force.

A. You're exactly right.

Q. Let me ask one more question about Lincoln. Can you explain how you see Lincoln emerging in his own time. He's not just an individual. He's a product of a time and a place.

A. Lincoln's age was the optimum time to extol, as he himself did, the American free labor system. Lincoln embodied the social fluidity and market expansion of his era, characterized by the widening of life-chances as individuals—particularly if white and male—freed themselves from hierarchies of deference and ascribed status. Rising from a humble, hard-scrabble farming background to professional respectability and the White House, Lincoln was the quintessential self-made man, honoring self-control, self-improvement and industriousness. His personal experiences in the aspirational village of New Salem and the growing state capital of Springfield led him to believe that, at least in the white society of the free states, barriers to success were more likely to be personal than structural. In other words, he saw himself as a beneficiary of the opportunities that the American republic, which he deemed unique in world history, offered to its inhabitants—and, by emancipatory example, to the rest of the globe.

Q. And in such a society of social fluidity, then slavery becomes very conspicuous.

A. Indeed, absolutely. Lincoln's hostility to slavery I judge has less to do with any emotional empathy with the slave and rather more with his profound sense of the injustice of denying to the slaves the product of their labor. "By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread," was a biblical text he often invoked in his speeches during the 1850s. So slavery is at odds with the morality, with the ethical principles, of free labor.

Lincoln, of course, doesn't live to see the changes in capitalist society and the advance of corporate America after the Civil War. His career and beliefs are shaped by the broadening economic opportunities of antebellum westward expansion, by the technical developments that go along with the transportation revolution. His career also runs in parallel with the emergence of mass democratic politics. Although women and most blacks were excluded, universal white male suffrage produced the first representative mass democracy in human history. Lincoln grows to his majority in that system. And he's not only one of its beneficiaries, but one of its authors, its inventors, one of its facilitators. He has a profound faith in democracy, in the capacity of informed individuals to consider rationally where their best interests, and those of their community, lie. He encourages and manages this system and its overturning of an older, deferential politics. Lincoln, then, has experience of a society where it is possible to rise above the social status of your birth and to hold the same rights in politics and citizenship as any other man. That's why Marx and others so admired Lincoln, why Lincoln was the darling of overseas socialists, democrats, and radicals—particularly, those in Europe who had fought and lost in the revolutions of 1848.

Q. An element of the presentation of American history by the 1619 Project that has a sort of deceptive plausibility, is this idea that it is only a litany of white racism for black Americans, and part of that is the undeniable fact that Reconstruction fails, and is ultimately supplanted by Jim Crow segregation. In that connection, I wanted to ask you about Lincoln's conception of freedom for the freed slaves—and perhaps it was echoed in other figures from his time, for example Frederick Douglass. And that was that if you freed the slaves, turning 4 million people out from slavery, freedom would now present them with the possibilities that have been available to the society more broadly. And it seems to me that they were not able to fully comprehend the social problem that would emerge, that their overriding focus was on the political questions of reunification.

A. The question of what Lincoln would have done if he had lived, in terms, say, of extending the principles and purposes of the Homestead Act to the freedmen, is unknowable. "Forty acres and a mule" was something that a very few politicians spoke of; classical economics didn't push in that direction.

I think Lincoln clearly understood that freedom was not compromised by the intervention of a significant federal government. He understood

that the federal government could do things that other forces in American society couldn't do. That it was the biggest potential economic player: hence the tariff, the call for credit facilities, internal improvements. So freedom did not mean freedom from government. It meant freedom through government—the enhancing of opportunity through the government's taking on a role which no one else could. His understanding of freedom included access to a good education. His own limited education had not been a barrier, in the end, to his achievement. But it certainly was *despite* his lack of education, not because of it, that he got to be where he ended up. So education and opportunity in a growing economy was central to his understanding of freedom. Freedom to carve out your own economic and social destiny.

Had he lived he would have had to confront the question, to what extent, in order to create a genuinely level starting point, do you have to give land to the freedmen? He certainly hadn't got to that position when he died. But Lincoln's presidency is marked by his capacity to adapt. He becomes a practical emancipationist during the war. He had always hated slavery, but he never expected to be in a position to apply those principles. So, since he saw government as an agent of citizens' freedom, as a protector of their well-being, would he have come to see that land distribution was a central part of protecting those four million freedmen? We don't know.

Q. One of American history's fascinating counterfactuals. I think that a problem with the historiography on Reconstruction is that the great drama of American history before the Civil War through the Civil War draws the focus to the South. But I think it tends to overlook the fact that the Civil War birthed a new society also in the North, and that the world that produced Lincoln and Douglass and Thaddeus Stevens is in its last days.

A centerpiece of your scholarship has been the role of religion in the antebellum. Could you discuss this work?

A. The drive towards immediate emancipation among the abolitionists of the early 19th century, and particularly during the 1820s and 1830s, owes much to evangelical Protestant fervor. I should say, as an aside in the light of Hannah-Jones' 1619 essay, that, although there were a number of important and brave black abolitionists, taken as a whole the abolitionist movement of the 1820s and 1830s was largely white—as it unavoidably had to be, given black numbers, status and resources—in its membership, its sources of funding, and its agencies of agitation and propaganda.

These white reformers were moved by a powerful sense of the equal humanity of blacks, by the idea of a single Creation, and by the doctrine of disinterested benevolence, the outworking of faith through charitable action. Hence, for example, the setting up of Oberlin College, radical and biracial. This urgent thrust towards immediate emancipation surely poses a problem for those who see racial hostility as the ineradicable DNA of white America. So, too, do the targets of the anti-abolitionist mobs in the 1830s. White advocates of emancipation and abolition were prepared to court martyrdom: this was the fate of Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois. The 1619 approach reads such biracial progressivism out of the country's history.

My interest in religion developed through studying slavery and anti-slavery. My first book dealt with transatlantic religion in the nineteenth century, and in particular the considerable impact of American revivalists in British churches, especially those of nonconformist traditions. Oberlin's Charles Finney, for example, the premier revivalist of his day, made two trips to Britain and his lectures circulated widely; they were even translated into Welsh. The Atlantic acted less to divide than to act as a religious bridge and market.

As a graduate student at Berkeley, I met Bill Gienapp; we became lifelong friends. Bill, drawing on the lessons of his study of the early Republican Party, urged me to carry my interest in popular religion into the political sphere. This was the genesis of my book *Evangelicals and*

Politics in Antebellum America. I'm not a religious determinist, over by Peafson and they wanted a longer study. I was happy with that!

Q. Are you working on any new research?

My current project is a study of the diverse American religious nationalisms before and during the Civil War. Religion was not, of course, the only element in shaping the identities on which American nationalism was constructed in the young republic: economic interest, race, ethnicity and social class played vital roles, too. Religion, however, gave moral energy and conviction to the various ways in which Americans defined themselves individually and collectively. The United States' unique separation of church and state, the religious pluralism of the new nation and the decentralised political framework of 1787 left the country's disparate religious traditions and communities free to champion competing and conflicting routes to national righteousness. As a dynamic but divided cultural force, American religion functioned both to advance and inhibit national integration, playing a critical role in the United States' evolution from the fragile republic of 1776 to the Union fractured by civil war. That conflict took on the character of a holy war, with North and South defining their nationality in religious terms. Both sides characterized the conflict as a providential struggle and mobilized support on that basis. Confederates strove to prevent the "perversion of our holy religion"; Unionists declared that they contended against "pro-slavery atheism." The triumph of a Yankee Protestant understanding of national righteousness in 1865 would prove neither complete nor unquestioned: Confederate religious nationalism survived and even flourished after Appomattox.

One of the many attractive aspects of David Blight's book on Frederick Douglass is its focus on Douglass as a "prophet of freedom." There is a prevailing providentialism amongst Americans of this era: a strong sense that they are operating under God, that God intervenes in human history, and that one has to read the times in the light of God's Word. It goes some way to understanding the sources of the sacrificial imperative that I've mentioned.

Q. Could you explain Lincoln's attitude on religion?

A. Lincoln had much the same troubled attitude toward the evangelicals as Jefferson. He was unimpressed by Peter Cartwright's Methodistic revivalism, as well as his Democratic politics.

Q. I'm thinking of the Second Inaugural, which is a wonderful speech, in which he refers to both the North and the South praying to the same God. And maybe this is one of these moments where Lincoln is being ironic?

A. Mark Noll rightly says that the most profound theological statement of the Civil War was when Lincoln noted that both sides pray to the same God, that God cannot be on the side of both—and then reflects that "it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party." This is what he writes in a private document, "Memorandum on the Divine Will," dating from 1863 or 1864. It's significant that he now sees the Almighty as a God who mysteriously intervenes in human history, as opposed to the distant creator God, the God of reason, that he himself invoked as a young man. That was the God of Tom Paine, the clockmaker God who sets the universe in motion and then retreats, leaving the machinery to run itself.

Q. An autobiographical question. What inspired your interest as a young man, I believe from Wales, in the American sectional crisis, the Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln—an interest that has become an entire career?

A. You'll not be surprised that I've often been asked that!

I grew up in a mining valley in southeast Wales. Coal mining is inevitably part of the family's past. My great-grandmother was a first cousin of the mother of John L. Lewis, the Welsh-American miners' leader. His grave is just a stone's throw from Lincoln's tomb in Springfield. My father, son of a miner, was a high school history teacher. I enjoyed history above all other subjects in my pre-university years, but I didn't meet US history until my final year as an Oxford undergraduate in 1967–68. Don Fehrenbacher was, that year, the visiting Harmsworth Professor. Alongside Oxford's amateur, but gifted, Americanists, he taught the course "Slavery and Secession," which Allan Nevins had designed when he had been the Harmsworth Professor some years earlier.

That was a life-changing experience. It drew me into that complex of moral, economic and political issues through a mountain of compelling primary sources, including Lincoln's speeches, and a rich historiography, including some of the great books on American history, not least Fehrenbacher's *Prelude to Greatness*, Kenneth Stampp's *Peculiar Institution*, David Potter's *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, and James Randall's multi-volume life of Lincoln. I was hooked. When I got a permanent post at the University of Sheffield in 1971, to teach US History 1776–1877, I devised courses on the opposition to slavery and on the coming of the Civil War, so Lincoln was a salient figure in my teaching. My research interests, however, as I've explained, lay in evangelical Protestantism and the intersection of religion and politics in antebellum America. I had no plan to become a Lincolnian until I was asked by the publisher Longman to write a short analytical study of Lincoln, his politics and his use of power. That was in 1987, but I didn't start work on the book until the mid-1990s. By then Longman had been

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