From: Bergman, Jay (History) <bergmanj@ccsu.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, January 27, 2021 11:38 AM
To: Sullivan III, Daniel P. <sullivand@putnam.k12.ct.us>
Subject: The 1619 Project and the Teaching of American History

Daniel P. Sullivan III
Superintendent of Schools
Putnam School District
126 Church Street
Putnam, CT 06260

Dear Superintendent Sullivan:

I urge you in the strongest terms not to adopt the New York Times' "1619 Project," announced to great fanfare last year, as the basis for teaching American history in the Putnam School District. Regrettably, many school districts across the country have already done so. But others, including the fifteen largest school districts in Washington state -- Seattle, Spokane, and Tacoma -- serving nearly 400,000 students, have refused.

The project presents America's history as driven, nearly exclusively, by white racism: The Founding Fathers engineered the colonies' separation from Britain and their declaration of independence solely to preserve the institution of slavery, which the British were intent on abolishing. America's subsequent Industrial Revolution, based as it was on capitalism and a free market economy, did nothing to ameliorate the institution; indeed, slavery was the reason capitalism emerged in the first place, and its pernicious effects continued well beyond its abolition after the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln -- who of course freed the slaves -- was actually a bigot and a racist. More broadly, literally nothing of any prominence and lasting value in America's contemporary economy has been achieved without the enslavement of black Africans beginning in 1619 -- and the government policies from which Americans benefit today were carried out for the purpose of perpetuating "white supremacy"; one example cited in the project, the Interstate Highway System established in the 1950s by the Eisenhower Administration, was designed expressly for the purpose of destroying black neighborhoods. And today we consume excessive amounts of sugar in our diet because the enslavement of blacks caused it to be plentiful.

All of this, and nearly everything else in the 1619 Project, is entirely false, mostly false, or misleading. If you do not take my word for it -- and you should not, since my area of expertise is Russian, not American history -- what follows are just a few of the critiques of the project offered by some of the most eminent American historians in the United States today, most of whom are politically liberal and were highly critical of the Trump Administration.

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If the criticisms by these distinguished American historians do not convince you of the intellectual bankruptcy of the 1619 Project, a larger and more comprehensive demolition is Peter Wood's recent book, 1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project (New York, 2020) [https://urldefense.com/v3/__https://nam10.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https*3A*2F*2Fwww.amazon.com*2F1620-True-Beginning-American-Republic*2Fdp*2F1641771240*2Fref*3Dsr_1_1*3Fdchild*3D1*26keywords*3Dpeter*2Bwood*2B1620*26qid*3D1607546527*26s*3Dbooks*26sr*3D1-1&data=04*7C01*7Cbergmanj*40ccsu.edu*7Cf53cf71781c649221cd208d8b8bc482f*7C2329c570b5804223803b427d800e81b6*7C0*7C0*7C637462466089767759*7CUnknown*7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0*3D*7C1000&sdata=4nlPZUSGjMhSsYJs8wdWFVg7loH9spiknYWTLcO48xE*3D&reserved=0__;JSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUl!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!53leFeR3gt773N-fQTBaFv8MdpZ4Z9i_Na01rZI0iobPj5wgGMZR99L6YM5Fu0Bq41Y$].

An insight I can provide as a historian of Europe is that, because slaves on farms can grow the food they need to live, slavery historically has been overwhelmingly a rural and agrarian institution. By contrast, workers in factories, which are usually in cities, cannot grow their own food. Paid nothing, they will starve. For that reason, they must be paid, and as industrialization proceeds, whatever political influence slaveholders have inevitably diminishes. In addition, the machinery industries produce, such as tractors, is more efficient than human labor, free or unfree, and for that reason often replaces it. In short, far from perpetuating slavery, as the 1619 Project contends, industrialization -- like that which America experienced in the 19th century -- renders it obsolete.

You should also know that the principal executor of the project, Nikole Hannah-Jones, is an anti-white bigot -- words I do not take lightly or apply promiscuously -- who claims, with a straight face, that whites today are descendants of "savages" and "barbaric devils," and that Christopher Columbus is morally indistinguishable from Hitler:

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Revealingly, Hannah-Jones' response to criticisms like those I have cited has been to deny that the project was a work of history and was never intended as such. Writing under the pseudonym Ida Bae Wells, she admitted in a tweet last year that "[the 1619 Project] is a work of journalism [that] has always been as much about the present as it is [about] the past."

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Perhaps the most libelous aspect of the project is its conclusion that America today remains irredeemably racist in its institutions, its society, and its national culture -- which means that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, best exemplified in Martin Luther King's magnificent speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, was a failure. Not even the 600,000 Americans -- most of them white -- who died in the Civil War should be singled out for praise and thanked posthumously for their sacrifice because the cause they fought for was not the elimination of slavery, nor even the preservation of the union, but rather the perpetuation of "white privilege."

Hannah-Jones is not shy in declaring that the ultimate objective of the project is reparations for blacks, in which whites not responsible for slavery or Jim Crow transfer some of their hard-earned money to blacks who did not suffer personally from either of these stains on our history. The project is thus a form of extortion, a means of preying on unwarranted white guilt for what are nefarious and self-serving purposes.

Another abhorrent aspect of the project is that what inspired its adoption in school districts around the country since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis is the conviction -- which has become the conventional wisdom -- that the police are racist, and kill black people not because they are guilty of crimes but because of their race. This is empirically false. It has no basis in reality and slanders literally thousands of decent police officers. In fact, law enforcement in America is not marred by any generic or "institutional" or "systemic" anti-black racism. Statistics provided by Peter Kirsanow, a member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, make this clear:

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It is worth pointing out that according to a data base established by the Washington Post -- which is hardly a right-wing or "pro-Trump" publication -- in 2019 the total number of unarmed blacks killed by police in the entire United States was 15. Bear in mind that there are 42 million blacks in America today and that there were 686,665 police officers in the entire country in 2018; the total number of yearly police interactions with civilians of all races and ethnicities runs into the millions.

Finally, the whole notion that white racism is somehow embedded in contemporary American society is absurd. In virtually every major institution in America today blacks are the beneficiaries of preferences, misleadingly and euphemistically called "affirmative action" to conceal the fact that they are inherently discriminatory and unfair, and in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Why would the white racists who supposedly are in charge in our country today put in place preferences benefitting people they consider racially inferior? Either these white racists are inordinately stupid or they are not really racists. The latter, both empirically and logically, is the truth.

I am grateful for your attention and consideration. The matter I am raising here is of critical importance. That American students today are taught about the virtues and the triumphs and the achievements of our country, as well as its failings and inadequacies, is essential in the creation of future generations of citizens capable of making informed and reasonable judgments about their political leaders and the policies they pursue.

In sum, I hope you see to it that the 1619 Project in no way informs the teaching of American history in the Putnam School District.

Sincerely,

Jay Bergman
Professor of History
Central Connecticut State University
New Britain CT 06050 &
Member, Board of Directors
National Association of Scholars