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## The 1776 Report and the Historical Establishment: A Review

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## The 1776 Report and the Historical Establishment: A Review

### Abstract

The Trump Administration's *1776 Final Report* was instantly condemned by nearly all professional historical organizations in the United States upon its public release. This review of the *1776 Final Report* seeks to understand why the historical establishment so quickly dismissed it as irrelevant and dangerous. It sheds light on the academic context behind the report, and comments on the state of the historical establishment in the United States. This article also gives an honest review of the final report from an historical perspective. This review demonstrates that the *1776 Report* was never intended as a comprehensive narrative of American history as many of its detractors have suggested, but as a brief "history of principles." It should be seen as a popular work of political theory in the tradition of West Coast Straussianism, and ultimately as a document defending normative political values.

### Keywords

1776 Report, History Education, Public History, Political History, Historical Pedagogy

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On the eve of the 2020 Presidential Election, President Trump signed an executive order creating the “Advisory 1776 Commission”, commonly referred to as the “1776 Commission.” This commission was tasked with the explicit goal of, “a restoration of American education grounded in the principles of our founding that are accurate, honest, unifying, inspiring, ennobling...” It was widely viewed as a reactionary measure against the *New York Times*’s widely influential 2019 *1619 Project*.<sup>1</sup> The *1619 Project*, since adopted in schools across the nation, was built on a distinct underlying framework of Critical Race Theory that directly accused the American political regime’s founding ideas, values, and documents as being systemically and institutionally racist. In direct contrast, the *1776 Report* was framed explicitly to counter the racial essentialist narrative of the *1619 Project*. The commission was created in response to the “series of polemics grounded in poor scholarship” and, “the recent attacks on our founding.”<sup>2</sup> Immediately, the commission became the next battle in the culture wars. Some in the media were swift to decry the commission as an affront to minority history and a whitewashing of American slavery.<sup>3</sup> When the final report was published in January 2021, the media response was equally as condemnatory. The *New York Times* accused the document of defending, “America’s founding on the basis of slavery...”<sup>4</sup> *Politico* published an op-ed signaling the

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<sup>1</sup> Executive Order 13958, FR Doc. 2020-24793, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/11/05/2020-24793/establishing-the-presidents-advisory-1776-commission>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Gaudiano, “Trump Creates 1776 Commission to Promote 'Patriotic Education'.” *POLITICO*, November 2, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/02/trump-1776-commission-education-433885>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Crowley, “Trump’s ‘1776 Report’ defends America’s founding on the basis of slavery and blasts progressivism.” *New York Times*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/01/18/us/inauguration-day-biden#trump-1776-commission-report>

general sentiment of the media conglomerates calling it “Trump’s 1776 Disaster.”<sup>5</sup>

Conservatives however widely praised the final report with one intellectual calling it a, “guiding light for future generations.”<sup>6</sup> The federal legacy of the *1776 Report* was short-lived. The newly-elected President Biden rescinded the original order and removed the final report from federal websites on his first day in office.<sup>7</sup> The framed narrative of “1776 vs. 1619” formed along predictable ideological and professional lines. The Heritage Foundation long embraced the 1776 approach,<sup>8</sup> while the Claremont Institute supported the final report.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the historical establishment, spearheaded by the American Historical Association (AHA) condemned it harshly.<sup>10</sup> A year later, a fair review from an honest historical perspective, which views the report on its own terms and understands its purpose and limitations, remains lacking. *1776 Report* was strictly a “history of principles,” and was not originally written as a scholarly work or as a comprehensive narrative of American history. It was a document of political thought for a popular audience. The report’s intended goal was a public reintroduction and popular interpretational summary of the fundamental political ideas and principles of the American regime.

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Bruce Smith, “How Biden Can Fix Trump’s 1776 Disaster.” *POLITICO*, January 22, 2021.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/22/biden-trump-1776-commission-461483>.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Sabo, “The 1776 Commission Report Reinvigorates the American Mind.” Real Clear Public Affairs, January 22, 2021.

[https://www.realclearpublicaffairs.com/articles/2021/01/21/the\\_1776\\_commission\\_report\\_reinvigorates\\_the\\_american\\_mind\\_657435.html](https://www.realclearpublicaffairs.com/articles/2021/01/21/the_1776_commission_report_reinvigorates_the_american_mind_657435.html)

<sup>7</sup> Craig Bruce Smith, “How Biden Can Fix Trump’s 1776 Disaster,” January 22, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Milikh, “1776, Not 1619.” Heritage Foundation: Commentary, October 31, 2019.

<https://www.heritage.org/american-founders/commentary/1776-not-1619>

<sup>9</sup> John Peterson, “The Audacity of the 1776 Report,” *The American Mind*, March 3, 2021.

<https://americanmind.org/salvo/the-audacity-of-the-1776-report/>

<sup>10</sup> “AHA Condemns Report of Advisory 1776 Commission,” American Historical Association [AHA], January 2021. [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-\(january-2021\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-(january-2021))

The context in which the *1776 Report* emerged and the state of the professional historical establishment is important to understand. Many of the questions which currently besiege the current historical establishment are the same ones that have taunted American historians for decades. What histories should be emphasized? What is the purpose of teaching American history? How should American history be taught? Most professional historians in the modern academy tell the stories on one of the following two topics: the narratives of marginalized groups in American history, or esoteric extraordinarily narrow topics. Gender and racial histories are in, and “old fashioned” and “conservative” intellectual and military histories are encouraged by the profession only insofar as they conform to the theme of marginalization. Likewise, broader-scaled narrative chronologies are uncommon, but hyperspecialized antiquarian topics are *in vogue*. The most common topic of professional historians? The hyperspecialized narrative on the history of a marginalized group. In theory, there is absolutely nothing inherently wrong with these historical approaches. Indeed, historians should look to write on all aspects of the past. In practice, such as in public and K-12 education, these approaches quickly fall apart.

Many historians blame the decline of the historical profession as a society-wide disinterest in history. This is not the case. History sells, and sells big. The popularity of great and triumphal arcs over broad chronologies by popular historians demonstrates this. The public is dissatisfied with both *how* professional historians tell their stories in arcane academic writing, and *what* stories are told. Among American historians, the dominance of critical methodologies, neo-progressive scholarship, and the overwhelming focus on the stories of marginalized groups, tend to demand a cynical and critical eye towards viewing the past. This cynicism and radical critical attitude often lead towards the now cliché Neo-Marxist *oppressor versus oppressed* power dialectic. This discourse pits the United States and its systems as a whole as a generally

oppressive force against certain groups. Contemporary professional historians often take a moralistic tone in their scholarship, assuming that their ideological apriorism and presentist interpretations are inherently and necessarily superior to those who actually lived in the past. There is a decreasing number of professional historians who seem to understand L.P. Hartley's adage that once guided the field: "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

The historical establishment is one of the most politically left-wing academic disciplines.<sup>11</sup> This too is key context in understanding the critical reaction to the *1776 Report*. According to one survey, over 90% of professional American historians identify as liberal. The modern academy and historical associations encourage the "scholar-activist," which in an academic setting is a progressive scholar who interprets the past not honestly, but polemically and usually intersectionally. The historical field as a whole self-selects which voices and arguments are heard by the peer-review process. Political opinions play an enormous role in how historians even consider their topics and methods. This forces much of the professional historical discourse to be built on underlying liberal and progressive presuppositions. Historians pride themselves on asking questions, but they are increasingly asking questions from only one political perspective. A group that contains individuals where 90% agree on one thing, easily leads to an echo-chamber effect. A quiet cognitive bias has certainly loomed over the historical establishment for decades, dictating which methods, subfields, and emphasizes to take. Ideological diversity in the historical academy? Historians often use the word "conservative" as an instant way to discredit alternative scholarship *prima facie*. (i.e. "...written at the "conservative" Hillsdale College or

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Stieb, "A Liberal's Case for Conservatives in History Departments." Gillian, May 26, 2018. <https://quillette.com/2018/05/26/liberals-case-conservatives-history-departments/?fbclid=IwAR13Zq5KdiLFoXoB8dOjf76RYUnTWb2F2awBm7rso8QIOyQFXmb1QnK0Lmk>

“right-wing” Liberty University.) No such alternative ideological demonym warning is ever given for scholarship produced by professors at UC Berkely or the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Few professional historians seem to be concerned about the ideological disconnect between the academy and the public. America is ideologically diverse, and ideally, the historical academy would reflect that. This would at least help aid a national conversation on the history education. Desperate for relevance, many professional historians tend to view themselves in a sacrosanct class of historical interpretation. However, it is important to remember that the professional historical establishment doesn’t own the past, nor do they have a monopoly on valid interpretations of the it. Fine historical scholarship has been produced by political scientists, economists, anthropologists, and literature scholars alike. Historical thinking has innumerable benefits no doubt, but the general trend towards academic elitism by the historical establishment is unhelpful towards a national historical conversation. This phenomenon is perhaps best demonstrated by some of the active “Twitterstorians” who often tweet to the effect of: “As a historian...*insert rationale*...you are wrong, and I am right. End of discussion.”

Professional historians as a group generally view ideas and events such as “patriotism” and the American founding through a cynical postmodern lens. Instead, these historical features serve as power dynamics sub and superstructures. Most of American history is viewed critically, cynically, and narrowly. There is little room for discussion of *the good* in the history establishment, much less a recognition of anything noble or inspiring that just might have happened. This is the approach towards the sweep of American history that the *1619 Project* takes. The problem then becomes how to frame the teaching of the American story. Is it a story of oppression? If it is, that makes teaching American history and civics extraordinarily difficult. Assuming the United States is inherently an oppressive force, why would the educational system

teach students how to participate in a system of oppression? Traditionally, the entire purpose of public education was to produce good and decent citizens. Is that still the goal of public education? If educators follow the general scholarly themes of the contemporary historical establishment, then critical approaches should always take precedence. Again, the teaching of marginalized histories and narrow fields should be taught, explored, and publicized. Slavery, xenophobia, gender, and religious oppression, all need to be seriously discussed. The comprehensive American history narrative should not casually evade the difficult, racist, and other oppressive aspects of honest and fair history. Ideally, these topics should be a catalyst for having a profound age-appropriate conversation on the consequences of ideas. However, teaching American history and civics should ideally include pedagogy of responsibility and gratitude, or *honest patriotism*. Patriotic civic education and honest history are not mutually exclusive.

It is self-contradictory that very standard by which many in the historical establishment condemn the “inherently racist” American political system, is by the standard of the American political system’s idea of rights, duties, and protections. The very failure of the American political regime to incorporate minority rights assumes that the rights and duties first enacted by the “inherently” racist system were both morally good and universal. In other words, the historical establishment constantly critiques an “inherently” racist system by the moral standards of that system. Is the American story the narrative of a people continually trying to live up to their noble political principles? Even critics of the *1776 Report* seem to agree with this statement. If so, the project of the *1776 Report* should be taken seriously at least on those terms.

In the *1776 Report*, the specific approach to understanding the American founding was guided by an intellectual movement in a political theory called “West Coast Straussianism”



(WCS).<sup>12</sup> WCS stems from the work of political theorist Leo Strauss, who believed that all regimes ought to be based upon a value system. Strauss believed the consequences without an inherent value system would inevitably lead a polity into chaos. His “natural rights” approach to political thought and emphasis on values, greatly influenced one of his most famous students, Harry V. Jaffa. Jaffa was convinced that the American founding was built on the Founder’s understanding of the classical Platonic idea of natural justice, and Aristotelian metaphysics. He believed that the teleology of the United States was found in the eternally true and permanent principles of the *Declaration of Independence*. The government for Jaffa existed to protect the natural rights of its citizens and was based upon the natural moral law and the intrinsic worth of the human person. To Jaffa, the *Constitution of the United States* was the formal cause of the nation and insinuated an understanding of human nature and moral reasoning. The American political regime then represented the highest form of Western Civilization; the joining of Athens and Jerusalem: a marriage of reason and revelation. The founding principles were radical but were based on Western ideas centuries in the making. For Jaffa, the entire arc of the American political story bent towards the integration of the principles of the Declaration with the protections of the Constitution.<sup>13</sup> WCS applied the ideas of Jaffa in a coherent intellectual school, where its geographical home was the Claremont Colleges and the Claremont Institute in southern California.<sup>14</sup> The contemporary academic hubs of WCS are found at Hillsdale College, Ashland University, and the Claremont Institute. Dr. Larry P. Arnn, president of Hillsdale College, one of Jaffa’s students, served as the Chair of the *1776 Commission*. The majority of the advisors on the

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua Tait, “The Origins of Trump’s Slapdash, Last-Second ‘1776 Report.” *The Bulwark*, January 22, 2021. <https://www.thebulwark.com/the-origins-of-trumps-slapdash-last-second-1776-report/0/>

<sup>13</sup> Contemporary Thinkers, “Harry V. Jaffa.” <https://contemporarythinkers.org/harry-jaffa/>; *Claremont Review of Books*, “Author: Harry V. Jaffa.” <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/author/harry-v-jaffa/>

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Tait, “The Origins of Trump’s Slapdash, Last-Second ‘1776 Report.” January 22, 2021.

*1776 Commission* were faculty at Hillsdale College, associated with Claremont Institute, or at the very least were sympathetic to WCS at other institutions.<sup>15</sup> The entire document is a fantastic summary of WCS theory for a popular audience, albeit one steeped more so in political theory than history.

The *1776 Report* was limited in its scope and purpose. The report was created as a popular political document explaining the political ideas of the American founding. It was never intended to be a comprehensive narrative of American history. The entire document is only 45-pages and was written in two months. Its purpose, both according to President Trump's original executive order and the document itself was to give a "history of those principles that is accurate, honest, unifying, inspiring, and ennobling."<sup>16</sup> The entire document's purpose was essentially to explain the principles of the American founding, such as natural rights, natural law, liberty, equality, and how those principles, "have shaped our country."<sup>17</sup> In that way, it was an interpretive history of political thought in the tradition of WCS. Nothing more, nothing less. The document's narrative takes a political theorist's approach to view ideas ahistorically, and frames the history of key founding-era political ideas through the last two centuries. Part IV examines the "challenges to America's Principles," and controversially included progressivism and race and identity politics as affronts to the American political regime.<sup>18</sup> In WCS theory, these ideas aren't controversial because they deny the universality and permanence of the principles of the American founding. The entire report was never originally intended as a scholarly work, as its detractors have suggested. According to itself, it was a popular reminder of American founding principles. The

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<sup>15</sup> "The President's Advisory 1776 Commission Final Report," January 22, 2021.

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/72/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 14-17.

*1776 Report* should be taken on its own merits, and honestly interpreted as such: a popular political theory document and “history of principles” in the tradition of WCS.

When the *1776 Final Report* was published, it was harshly lambasted by nearly all historical associations. The most prominent critique came from the American Historical Association (AHA), which openly called the report a, “patriotic indoctrination of American students,” and suggested it encouraged that, “ignorance of the past is a civic virtue.”<sup>19</sup> If one honestly reads the *1776 Report* and understands its scope, purpose, and theory, the AHA’s condemnation reads as purely indicative of the historical establishment’s partisan bias. Many of the claims the AHA makes about the document are unfair and unequally applied. The official condemnation claims that the report extols the founding fathers as “divine” figures and ignores the historiographical development of the past fifty years. First, nowhere in the document does the report suggest a hagiographic nature of the founders, but simply that they were individuals of exceptional political savvy and wisdom. Secondly, the “ignorance” the document has of the past fifty years of historiographical developments assumes that the report writers intended the document to be either a comprehensive historical work, or a scholarly work. Neither of those two options are correct. If the AHA suggested that the report ignored the last fifty years of scholarship because it did not align with the report’s political agenda, they should also note that it explicitly ignores nearly all historiography of the American founding. The document was neither scholarly nor purely historical, but a work of popular political theory. Political theory operates much differently than professional history, and “unit ideas” are frequently discussed outside of serious examination of social contexts. Another of the AHA’s criticisms was that the document ignored

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<sup>19</sup> “AHA Condemns Report of Advisory 1776 Commission.” AHA, January 2021. [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-\(january-2021\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission-(january-2021))

women, indigenous, and mentioning the Confederacy. This is a disingenuous critique as the document, according to itself, was not a complete story of America. Outside of a few statesmen and founders who are directly relevant in WCS, the entire document doesn't include histories at all: it traces the ideas as historical agents. Additionally, this critique isn't even accurate, as the document quotes Elizabeth Cady Stanton<sup>20</sup> and spends pages decrying the evil of slavery as an affront to founding ideas, mentions the ideology of the South during the Civil War<sup>21</sup>, and discusses moral historicism of slavery apologist John C. Calhoun.<sup>22</sup> The AHA made perhaps its most intellectually dishonest critique when it argued it condemned the report because it criticized progressive reforms and progressive era legislation. Are not academics allowed to disagree on the outcome of certain policies? The AHA felt the need to institutionally condemn an alternative historical interpretation because it didn't align with the AHA's preferred narrative of progressivism.

An honest point of criticism of the 1776 Report was that it did not have a single professional historian on the committee. There were several WCS-affiliated professional historians the committee could have selected, such as Wilfred McClay and Allen Guelzo, but neither was on the final committee. There should have been professional historians who helped to draft the final report, and it is genuinely concerning that no historian did. However, all the final committee members were professional academics who all held Ph.D.'s in either political science, government, or classics. Nevertheless, this credentialing condemnation by the AHA demonstrates its own double standard. The *1619 Project* was written by a journalist, with the help of other journalists, but received no official condemnations from the AHA. The AHA either

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<sup>20</sup> "1776 Commission Final Report," 8,10, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 1, 10, 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 12, 29.

was too incompetent to understand the scope and limits of the report, or it was ideologically set against the project. One of the main critics of the *1776 Report* was Joshua Tait, a history doctoral student in the history of conservatism at UNC-Chapel Hill. Tait makes several interesting and valid critiques in his piece. Nevertheless, one of his shortcomings was that rather than seriously consider the ideology of WCS, he dismissed it as “fundamentalist” and “Trumpian.” Tait, himself is of the political left, didn’t seriously consider the ideas and scholarly traditions behind the report.<sup>23</sup> Multiple mainstream media outlets’ articles demonstrated a gross misunderstanding of the document.<sup>24</sup> There was much to critique about the document, such as the lack of citations, weak historical arguments, the lack of historians on the committee, and even the lack of discussion of history outside of founding political ideas. That being said, it was concerning that nearly all professional historical associations instantly condemned the report. The AHA’s statement was simply the historical establishment’s reverse *imprimatur*.

Unfortunately, most in the discourse surrounding the *1776 Report* do not fairly view it in light of its own merits and limitations. In the wake of this misunderstanding, the American public was left with recourse to an unproductive civil dialogue. From an academic perspective, the *1776 Report* suffers from a lack of nuance, disciplinary diversity, historicity, and a dearth of citations. It was written far too quickly and was unquestionably a reactionary document to the *1619 Project*. That being said, the *1776 Report* viewed on its terms, with an understanding of its

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<sup>23</sup> Joshua Tait, “The Origins of Trump’s Slapdash, Last-Sconed ‘1776 Report.’” January 22, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Crowley, “Trump’s ‘1776 Report’ defends America’s founding on the basis of slavery and blasts progressivism.” New York Times, January 18, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/01/18/us/inauguration-day-biden#trump-1776-commission-report>; Derrick Clifton, “How the Trump Administration’s ‘1776 Report’ warps the history of racism and slavery.” NBC News, January 20, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/how-trump-administration-s-1776-report-warps-history-racism-slavery-n1254926>. ; Gillian Brockell, “‘A Hack Job,’ ‘Outright Lies,’ Trump Commission’s ‘1776 Report’ outrages historians,” The Washington Post, January 20, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/01/19/1776-report-historians-trump/>.

limitations and purpose, was really just a reintroduction of traditional American civic education. There really shouldn't be anything instantly condemnatory about that. If anything, the *1776 Report* dared to venture where the historical establishment dares to go: a narrative in favor of objective morality and universal truths. Radical historicism, a product of relativism and postmodern influences, remains rampant in the historical establishment. Most professional historians believe that everything is socially contingent and constructed. There is little respect in objective moral or normative intellectual values left in the profession. The *1776 Report* does not deny that the United States was founded in a social context, by a particular people, in a particular history; but it also argues that the nation's political system was founded on objective and universal moral principles.<sup>25</sup> The *1776 Report* dared to argue not only that there are eternally permanent truths about humanity, government, and nature, but that the United States' government perpetuated those principles. There is no question that American culture is on the precipice of irreconcilable division. Traditionally, the unifying culture of the American regime was found not in soil, blood, or creed, but on its founding ideas. America was once a nation of ideas. However flawed, the *1776 Report* attempted to recover a public understanding of the civic conscience that once guided the American mind.

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Sabo, "Despite Hostility from the Biden Administration, the report stands as a guiding light for future generations." *The American Mind*, January 22, 2021. <https://americanmind.org/author/mike-sabo/>

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