

From the desk of:

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Sharing with you every month the good, the bad and the ugly side of public policy.

Before 1776, There Was 1619: The Intersectionality Between History and Public Policy

History, we have been told, is supposed to inform us of the past in order to help us predict the future. Thus, the logic goes: if we fail to learn from history, we risk repeating the mistakes of the past. Hence, by default, how and what we learn from history, is central to the formulation of public policy given that one of the primary responsibilities of policymakers is to make sure we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. The truth is, no matter how we slice or dice it, history is central to the public policy process. Indeed, it is almost impossible to formulate a good public policy devoid of historical understanding. For example, a great deal of our experience with institutional racism is rooted in public policies. However, many of those policies would not have seen the light of day, had the events of 1619 been chronicled in good faith, taught accurately and ubiquitously as they surely deserve. By now, there should be no doubt, (especially in high schools and post-secondary institutions across the nation), that the American history curriculum is an artificial construct that sets the presumed supremacy of one group (Caucasians) against the presumed inferiority of other groups (Communities of Color). So, stay with me for a minute and let us ruminate together on what, and especially how we teach our students about American history altogether keeping in our subconscious their implications for public policymaking.

A good place to start is by acknowledging that the most consequential thing that happened to America before 1776 was 1619. Of course, without 1619, there would still be a 1776, but definitely with a completely different outcome. For instance, is there any doubt that those Africans who landed in 1619 on the shores of Virginia together with their descendants built this nation with their sweat and blood? To be sure, they made possible an economy that would eventually become the envy of the entire world, not to mention that in the process they displaced Great Britain, the erstwhile most powerful country, to become the greatest nation on earth. Very few would disagree that America could have risen to the top especially as fast as she did without 1619 happening. So, I guess the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is why do we teach American history like it all started in 1776? Perhaps a better way to ask that question is why our curriculum is so scanty on 1619 as opposed to the thousands of volumes of pages we spew out regularly on 1776?

Make no mistake about it, given the way it is currently taught, American history perhaps more than any other discipline in the social sciences, has fostered a deliberate attempt to denigrate the contribution of African Americans to the economic development of this nation. According to Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Professor of History and a Senior Fellow at the Center, “the standards in our school system are tainted with a ‘master’ narrative that marginalizes race and the presence of non-Europeans on the American landscape.” Surely, the intentionality behind the relative isolation of African American history from bona fide American history is most obvious in the way it is translated into public policy.

Policies that engender and promote discrimination in healthcare, criminal justice system, housing, education, income equality, etc., would certainly have been harder to perpetuate, were Americans very familiar with how 1619 has considerably changed the economic trajectory of this country. I will tell you what is even more regrettable. Not too long ago, the New York Times published the nationally acclaimed Pulitzer Prize winning 1619 Project. Noting that racism is a systemic problem rooted in public policy rather than acts of individual shenanigans, the project aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of African Americans at the very center of our

national debate. However, when some school districts across the country signaled their intention to inculcate the project into their curriculum, all hell broke loose. Senator Tom Cotton, R-Arkansas introduced a bill barring the use of federal funds to teach the 1619 project in schools. Not to be outdone, the Senate Minority Leader, Mitch McConnell went even further by claiming that 1619 was not one of the most important points in American history and asked the Education Secretary, Miguel Cardona to remove it altogether from school curricula. Let us be clear about one thing: policymakers who bemoan the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in our children's classrooms also demonstrate in no unmistakable terms why the history of 1619 is so germane to public policy. For those who are not very conversant with the theory, CRT in layman's terms simply means that we cannot begin to understand the lingering effect of racism until we first address the historical roots of the problem. How complicated is that? All these examples demonstrate precisely why it is imperative that we ubiquitously teach about 1619 so we can educate among others, public policymakers who are entrusted with the delicate task of making these policies on our behalf. In my humble opinion, this is one of our best bets in preventing us from repeating and in some cases, exacerbating the mistakes of the past.

To say that there is light at the end of tunnel may be too optimistic. Nevertheless, if you have been paying close attention, that is where we may currently be heading right here in Virginia. Governor Northam recently established by Executive Order Thirty Nine, the Virginia Commission on African-American History Education, of which our very own Dr. Newby-Alexander is a member (<https://www.13newsnow.com/article/news/local/outreach/back-to-school/african-american-history-elective-coming-virginia-high-schools/291-3e8fb646-7d1c-4fd9-89d4-448c6f1e5fc4>). That commission just concluded its final report in which it recommended changes to teacher training, graduation requirements and school curriculum. The aim is to reform how African American history is taught in Virginia schools. While there is still such a long way to go, it is undoubtedly the right step in the right direction. I enjoy you to read the report of the commission and please do so without any bias or preconceived notion. If you can do that, then you too may conclude as I have done, that this piece of work needs to be replicated across the nation.



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I will like to close by revisiting the issue of reparations currently being debated in US Congress. In case you have not been watching, the House has just crossed a historic milestone by passing a bill that will establish a commission to look into the matter and make recommendations. That is the furthest we have ever gone in decades since the debate on reparations started. Of course, barring an act of miracle, this will probably not happen overnight. In other words, the legislative process would involve a prolonged debate not just in the halls of Congress, but most importantly, around our kitchen tables, classrooms, state legislatures, and who knows, maybe even in board rooms across the nation. That said, one thing is sure: I can guarantee that the eventual outcome would be truncated if the historical events of 1619 are not front and center in the debate that ensues. For this process to succeed, Blacks, Browns and especially Whites need to know about how much 1619 has contributed to shaping the political, social and economic trajectory of this nation. By the way, this has to be done not in an ephemeral manner, but comprehensively and consistently. After all, 1619 is as American history as apple pie. It also means that there has to be a concerted and inclusive effort to oppose and eventually eliminate the orchestrated silence and intentional distortion of the history that is currently prevalent in our classrooms and national discourse regarding the events of 1619. Without this, the outcome of the debate on reparations from a public policy perspective may be dead on arrival. Time is of the essence.

Next time, I will be talking to you about voter suppression, the role of the Senate and what it means for you as a person of color. Please stay tuned.