

## Exploring the Idea of America

### Lesson Overview:

“The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been born on the backs of black resistance...Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.” —Nikole Hannah-Jones

The 1619 Project, inaugurated with a special issue of The New York Times Magazine, challenges us to reframe U.S. history by marking the year when the first enslaved Africans arrived on Virginia soil as its foundational date.

Award-winning investigative journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones provides an expansive essay on why “black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true ‘founding fathers.’” Her essay chronicles a history of policies enacted to profit from and disenfranchise black Americans, and the fight not only to claim black liberation, but also to make liberation possible for all Americans.

### Warm Up:

The signing of the [Declaration of Independence in 1776](#) is often presented as the foundational event of U.S. history. Referring to the text of the Declaration of Independence, answer the following questions together in your groups:

What are the values stated in the Declaration of Independence?	
In what ways can you see those values working in contemporary U.S. society?	
In what ways can you see them failing in contemporary U.S. society?	

**American Institutions**

Unit by U.S. History Teachers in Chicago Public Schools, part of the 2021 cohort of *The 1619 Project* Education Network

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How has the interpretation of those values changed over time? Who is responsible for creating those changes?	
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### Introductory Reading and Reflection:

- Read [the excerpt from “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones](#) to identify her central thesis.

<b><u>Hannah-Jones thesis is:</u></b>	
The evidence from the text that would support this is (2-3 pieces of evidence):	

- Then, answer the following sets of questions.

### Connecting to Content

What do you know about slavery, and where does that information come from?	
What do you know about the contributions of black Americans to U.S. society, and where does that information come from?	
What are the ramifications of slavery in contemporary U.S. life?	
How does the origin story of the U.S. change if we mark the beginning of U.S. history in 1619 instead of 1776?	
What is national memory? How do we create it? How can we change it?	

Reading the full length “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones

In Nikole Hannah-Jones’ essay, she writes, “[T]he year 1619 is as foundational to the American story as 1776...black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true ‘founding fathers.’”

Use this table to track evidence she provides for this claim by citing examples of racial oppression (on the left) and examples of black resistance (on the right). You can add more rows if you see fit.

How have U.S. laws, policies, and practices oppressed black Americans since the year 1619?	How have black Americans fought back against oppression and worked to build a better society for all?

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**Reflection Questions:**

1. What examples of hypocrisy in the founding of the U.S. does Hannah-Jones supply? What evidence can you see for how “some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy”?	
2. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were all signed into law during Reconstruction. What examples of persisting racial inequalities in the years following Reconstruction does Hannah-Jones mention? What institutions and ideologies made this possible?	
3. What are some examples of progress pushed forward by black Americans during Reconstruction that Hannah-Jones discusses? How have these efforts benefited all Americans?	
4. Consider the title of this essay: “The Idea of America.” What other possible titles can you imagine for this essay? Why do you think Hannah-Jones ultimately chose this title?	