

FIRST AMENDMENT TELEVISION

FATV POSITION PAPER

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THE SUPPRESSION OF KNOWLEDGE

*John Henrik Clarke, Ivan Van Sertima,
and the Weaponization of Slow Information*

First Amendment Television | June 2026

I. A NOTE ON HOW TO USE THIS PAPER

This paper was written to accompany your own research. Before you read further, go to YouTube. Search for John Henrik Clarke. Search for Ivan Van Sertima. Find the long-form lectures and interviews, particularly the ones from the 1980s and 1990s. Listen to them in their own words.

This paper will tell you what they argued, why it was suppressed, and why it matters today. But no summary replaces hearing the men themselves. Use this paper as a map. Use YouTube as the territory.

II. WHO THEY WERE

John Henrik Clarke (1915–1998)

John Henrik Clarke was born in Union Springs, Alabama in 1915. He was largely self-educated — formal schooling was not available to him in the way it was available to others — but he became one of the most significant historians of African and African-American life in the twentieth century.

In 1969 he became the founding chairman of the Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College of the City University of New York, where he served as associate professor and later professor emeritus until his death in 1998. He also served as the Carter G. Woodson Distinguished Visiting Professor of African History at Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center. He founded the African Heritage Studies Association in 1968. He wrote and edited dozens of books and delivered hundreds of lectures over a career that spanned more than six decades.

His core argument, the one that runs through everything he wrote and said, was straightforward: African civilization is ancient, documented, and significant. It predates much of what we call Western civilization. And the deliberate erasure of that history — not its absence, its erasure — was itself a political act designed to justify the economic and social subordination of African

people.

Clarke did not argue this as grievance. He argued it as history. The distinction matters.

Ivan Van Sertima (1935–2009)

Ivan Van Sertima was born in Guyana in 1935. He was a linguist, anthropologist, and literary critic who taught at Rutgers University for decades. He died in 2009.

His most famous work, *They Came Before Columbus*, was published in 1976. In it, Van Sertima assembled archaeological, botanical, and anthropological evidence to argue that Africans made contact with the Americas long before Columbus arrived in 1492. Central to his argument were the Olmec colossal stone heads of Mexico and Central America, monumental sculptures bearing features he identified as distinctly African, carved by a civilization that preceded European contact by centuries.

The mainstream academic establishment resisted his thesis vigorously. Many archaeologists reject Van Sertima's conclusions regarding pre-Columbian African contact. This paper does not seek to resolve that debate. Rather, it examines the broader question Van Sertima raised: how do institutions determine which historical claims receive serious consideration, which get funded, and which get dismissed before they are fully examined? That question stands independent of whether every specific claim in his work is ultimately validated.

Whether Van Sertima's specific archaeological claims are accepted or disputed, his larger question remains unresolved and important: whose contributions to human history get documented, validated, and taught — and whose get dismissed, delayed, or buried?

III. WHAT THEY HAD IN COMMON

Clarke and Van Sertima were not the same thinker. Their methods differed. Their specific arguments differed. But they were engaged in the same fundamental project.

Both men were asking: who controls the narrative of human history? Who decides what counts as evidence? Who decides whose civilization is worth studying, and whose is a footnote or a myth? And what happens when those decisions consistently benefit the same group of people at the expense of the same other group?

***The suppression of knowledge is not always the burning of books.
More often it is the quiet, sustained decision of institutions to simply
not teach, not fund, not publish, and not validate.***

What Clarke and Van Sertima understood, and what mainstream academia was slow to acknowledge, is that the absence of a thing from the official record does not mean the thing did not exist. It may mean only that the people who controlled the record had a reason to leave it out.

This is extraction logic applied to history. The same pattern that stripped material wealth from communities stripped intellectual wealth from them as well. You cannot fully understand one without understanding the other.

IV. THE INFORMATION DELAY AND WHAT IT MEANS

They Came Before Columbus was published in 1976. *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, by Chancellor Williams, was published in 1971. John Henrik Clarke delivered some of his most important lectures in the 1970s and 1980s. These were not obscure publications printed in limited runs. They circulated. They were read. They were argued about in universities, in

limited runs. They circulated. They were read. They were argued about in universities, in community centers, in churches, in barbershops.

And yet most people — including many Black Americans with deep interest in their own history — did not encounter this work until decades later, if ever.

Why?

The answer is not a conspiracy. It is a structure. The channels through which knowledge travels — mainstream publishing, university curricula, newspaper coverage, library acquisition, public school adoption — are not neutral. They reflect the priorities and the blind spots and occasionally the active resistance of the institutions that control them.

A book that challenges the foundational mythology of Western civilization does not travel easily through institutions that have a stake in that mythology. It travels instead through alternative networks: independent bookstores, community organizations, word of mouth, lecture circuits, small publications. Those networks work. But they work slowly.

The same delay that kept Juneteenth out of the national conversation for a century. The same delay that kept the 1921 Tulsa massacre out of most history textbooks for eighty years. These are not separate phenomena. They are the same phenomenon operating across different subjects and different communities.

Information suppression and information delay are not always the same thing. But they produce the same result: people do not know what they do not know. And by the time the knowledge arrives, the urgency of the original moment has often passed.

V. THE FIRST AMENDMENT DIMENSION

Here is the question that most commentary on Clarke and Van Sertima does not ask directly: why does this matter as a First Amendment issue, and not just a historical one?

The First Amendment protects the press. It protects speech. It protects the right to publish, to broadcast, to distribute, to teach. But the protection of those rights means nothing if the infrastructure through which knowledge travels is controlled by institutions with an interest in slowing or stopping certain kinds of knowledge.

Clarke and Van Sertima were not censored in the legal sense. Their books were published. Their lectures were given. They were not arrested. But their work was systematically excluded from the channels that confer legitimacy and reach: the major publishers, the mainstream curricula, the funded research programs, the broadcast networks.

That exclusion is not a First Amendment violation in the constitutional sense. But it is a First Amendment problem in the civic sense — a failure of the press and publishing establishment to do what the First Amendment assumes they will do, which is to make important knowledge available to the people who need it.

This is where FATV's founding purpose connects directly to this history. First Amendment Television exists because the institutional press cannot be relied upon to tell every story that deserves to be told, or to tell it to every audience that deserves to hear it. The independence that FATV's structure protects is not independence for its own sake. It is independence in service of the stories that the institutional press has decided, for whatever reason, not to carry.

Clarke and Van Sertima spent their careers doing exactly that work. They were building infrastructure for knowledge that the institutional channels would not carry. The technology they had available was books and lectures and community networks. The technology has changed. The problem has not.

In fact, the digital era has introduced a new layer of complexity. Search engines, social media platforms, and recommendation algorithms now determine what millions of people see, in what

order, and how often. A piece of knowledge that survives institutional gatekeeping can still be buried by an algorithm that has no interest in its importance — only in its engagement metrics. Visibility is not the same as reach. Reach is not the same as understanding. The channels have multiplied. The filtering has not disappeared. It has simply moved upstream, into systems that most people cannot see and fewer still can influence.

VI. WHAT TO WATCH FOR ON YOUTUBE

When you watch Clarke and Van Sertima on YouTube, here are the things worth paying attention to specifically:

Clarke on the relationship between history and power. He argues that you cannot understand why African history was erased without understanding who benefited from the erasure. He is not making a simple accusation. He is making a structural argument. Listen for the structure.

Clarke on self-education. He was largely self-taught, and he is explicit about why that mattered — because the institutions that offered formal education were not going to teach him what he needed to know about his own history. He had to build the knowledge himself. That is a First Amendment story.

Van Sertima on evidence and methodology. He is precise about what he is claiming and what he is not claiming. He knows his thesis is contested. His response to that contestation is not to dismiss it but to engage it on evidentiary grounds. Watch how he handles the pushback. He is a model of how to argue a contested position under pressure.

Van Sertima on the Olmec heads. Look at the images while you listen to him describe them. You do not need to accept his conclusions to recognize that the question he is raising is legitimate. Who built them? When? What does their existence tell us about contact, migration, and civilization that the standard narrative does not account for?

Both men on institutional resistance. Pay attention to how they describe the reception of their work by mainstream academia. The pattern they describe — not refutation, but dismissal; not engagement, but exclusion — is the same pattern that keeps important stories off the air and out of classrooms today.

VII. THE FATV CONNECTION

The Enterprise — FATV's documentary series examining American extraction logic — is incomplete without this dimension. Extraction is not only economic. The same logic that stripped material wealth from communities stripped intellectual wealth from them. Van Sertima's central question is an extraction question: who gets credited for what, and who gets written out, and how does that erasure serve ongoing economic and political interests?

The Black Church series cannot be fully realized without engaging Clarke's framework. Clarke wrote extensively about the intersection of African spiritual traditions, identity, and institutional power. His analysis of how the Church functioned historically — as a site of resistance, as a site of community formation, as a site of political organization — is directly relevant to any serious treatment of the Black Church as an institution.

And the FATV Standards framework, the Tutman Standard, is itself an answer to the problem Clarke and Van Sertima identified. The problem was not only that certain stories went untold. It was that the institutions responsible for telling them could not be trusted to tell them accurately, completely, or at all. The Tutman Standard exists because standards matter, and because the absence of standards is how important things disappear from the record.

***The work Clarke and Van Sertima did illustrates the same challenge
FATV confronts today: how important information reaches the public***

VIII. CONCLUSION

John Henrik Clarke and Ivan Van Sertima spent their careers fighting the same battle that FATV was built to fight: the battle for accurate, complete, and honest information in the face of institutional resistance to that information.

Neither man was a radical in the sense of wanting to destroy institutions. Both were engaged in the deeply traditional work of scholarship: gathering evidence, making arguments, submitting those arguments to scrutiny, and insisting that the record be corrected where it was wrong.

What made their work threatening was not its methodology. It was its conclusions. The conclusions disrupted historical narratives that many academic, publishing, and educational institutions had long accepted. And so the work was delayed, dismissed, and excluded from the channels that confer legitimacy and reach.

That delay had consequences. People who needed that knowledge — who had a right to that knowledge — went without it for years and decades. Some went without it entirely.

That is the real cost of slow information. Not inconvenience. The cost is people making decisions about their history, their identity, and their world without the full record available to them.

The First Amendment exists in part to prevent exactly that. And First Amendment Television exists in part to do exactly what Clarke and Van Sertima did: put the record straight, and make sure it travels.

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