

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Who Killed America's Story?
What's Missing at the National Museum of American History

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The Declaration of Independence begins “When in the course of human events . . .”

History is primarily a chronology of events over time, a concept deriving from the Greek word for time, *chronos*. Especially important are those human events: the decisions and actions, for good and ill, of individuals, peoples, and nations. Great individuals—Winston Churchill called them the steppingstones of history—shape history by making decisions and taking actions intended to change its course. History tells the story of such human events, and, by telling of great feats and accomplishments, as well as tragic mistakes and failures, it illuminates the eternal verities of the human condition.

Historical knowledge is to a civilization what memory is to the individual person, and as memory shapes and orients a person’s self-understanding, so historical knowledge forms the collective consciousness of a people or nation. A realistic view of the past—taking seriously man’s decisions and actions to establish facts about past intention and responsibility—is an essential element of political history, and an important ingredient of good political judgment in the here and now is learning well the lessons of history in order to avoid the mistakes of the past.

The Smithsonian Institution was created by an act of Congress on August 10, 1846, to carry out the terms of the will of British scientist James Smithson (1765-1829), who bequeathed his entire estate to the United States “to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”

Smithsonian leadership argued in 1953 that a main reason for establishing what would become the National Museum of American History was to create “a stimulating permanent exposition that commemorates our heritage of freedom and highlights the basic elements of our way of life.” The Smithsonian Secretary at the time testified to Congress that the

museum would “instill in each citizen a deepened faith in our country’s destiny as champion of individual dignity and enterprise.”

At the museum’s opening the Director at the time noted that the new museum was intended “to awaken in citizen and foreigner alike a clear understanding of the inspiring story of the United States—its origins, struggles, development, traditions, strength.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson said that visitors should see for themselves “the ripe fruit of America’s historical harvest” and that the museum’s “iconic artifacts should be used to foster patriotism.”

In recent years, the National Museum of American History has become something contrary to its own public mission and statutory purpose. The report issued by the White House Domestic Policy Council, entitled *Saving America's Story*, describes something very different indeed.

The National Museum of American History still contains some of the most iconic artifacts of American history—the desk upon which Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, Washington’s uniform as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, and the great American flag that inspired the National Anthem, to mention a few of my personal favorites—and it still welcomes and educates millions of domestic and foreign visitors each year.

But the National Museum of American History is no longer the nation’s museum of American history.

The White House report describes and catalogues in great detail—over 160 pages and with 522 footnotes—the many controversial and objectionable displays and items at the museum. And the devil indeed is in the details, as the old saying goes. But as devastating and extensive as these details are, they are the supporting evidence of a larger transgression.

The real crime here, premeditated and followed through, is that America’s story—the well-established narrative of main characters and key events that has long been written about,

researched, taught about, and been at the center of American self-understanding throughout much of our national existence—has been so reframed, jettisoned, decentered, deconstructed, and “problematized” at the NMAH that it no longer exists in recognizable form.

America’s story has been replaced by an altogether new and controversial approach, one defined by abstract post-modern theories that see history as nothing more than an oppressive power struggle and so uses history as a tool in that struggle to encourage social change. That may be an interesting hypothetical discussion in the faculty lounge, but it shouldn’t be the rubric for a Smithsonian Museum. Based on that reorganization, the report concludes, rightly in my opinion, that the National Museum of American History “has become subject to institutional capture by a radical, activist ideology.”

That is the big picture, the one right in front of our eyes, the forest we shouldn’t miss for all the trees.

But don’t take my word for it. This institutional capture is well documented by the Domestic Policy Council report. And the smoking gun, as it were, is found in the many statements of museum leadership and in official museum guidance documents. The intent and strategy are explained with clarity and purpose. There was a plan, and it was implemented. The details we see throughout the museum today—the ones catalogued in the DPC report—are the fruits of the museums ideological redesign.

Let me highlight what I see as the key intellectual steps behind this takeover.

The objective of the current Director of the NMAH was clear from the beginning: “The nation was founded on the great paradox of a dynamic form of republican democracy based on the supremacy of white, landed men and the institution of chattel slavery. What then is our task? . . . At the National Museum of American History, we work to reframe the traditional celebratory narrative of U.S. history for visitors to our museum and digital spaces. Hosting and facilitating dynamic public programming and national reckonings is critical for us to help all Americans make sense of these tragically difficult times.”

The institutionalization of this purpose can be seen in the establishment of The Center for Restorative History. According to the Center's own explanatory document, restorative history draws "on the principles of restorative justice [and] addresses the needs of historically harmed communities by examining the past to understand the root causes of historical harms." Harmed communities focus on "black, indigenous, and other people of color," as well as "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more," and the root cause of these harms is "systemic oppression."

Restorative History "encourages systemic change within an organization" and understands itself as a "systemic intervention" for the purpose of "transforming the national historical narrative, restructuring institutional priorities, and privileging knowledge production in the communities that have been silenced or overlooked by museums and other educational institutions." And systemic change at the NMAH was "an important intervention, as the museum is an institution that has perpetuated harm through its histories of collecting and display."

The NMAH Strategic Plan 2020-2030 reflects this new approach. The new goal of the Museum is to be the most accessible, inclusive, relevant, and sustainable public history museum in the nation. More to the point, the mission of the National Museum of American History has changed. The mission in the previous Strategic Plan was to "explore the infinite richness and complexity of American history" and "help people understand the past in order to make sense of the present and shape a more humane future." Here is the new mission: "Empowering people to create a more just and compassionate future by exploring, preserving, and sharing the complexity of our past." "The infinite richness" of American history is dropped to leave only "complexity" while "American history" is replaced by "our past." Rather than presenting American history to understand the past, the objective is now empowerment, using the complexities of history to encourage social change.

How the Strategic Plan is to be implemented is presented in the NMAH Interpretive Plan. That report explains that the focus on "the complexity of our past" creates an opportunity

for a new collective community: “We share the complexity of the past for a purpose: our statement looks to the future and envisions empowerment, justice, and compassion.” By focusing on “cross-cultural encounters, revolutions and resistances, turning points and points that failed to turn” the Museum will create new experiences so that visitors “will recognize themselves as change-makers and connect to each other as a public. They will be empowered to pursue a ‘just and compassionate future.’”

There are numerous examples of ideological purpose throughout the National Museum of American History. The larger “systemic intervention” at the NMAH to reframe American history overall is reflected especially in two key exhibits at the Museum that address America’s beginnings.

“American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith” deconstructs and reinterprets the American idea to mean resistance to persistent racial hierarchies and systemic flaws through petition and protest. “Many Voices, One Nation” reframes “our past” to be cross-cultural encounters of ethnic, sexual and racial identity groups seeking restorative justice.

The two exhibits together reframe the American narrative. The key figures of early American history are set aside, and the key events are decontextualized to avoid the presentation of a coherent or chronological story by which those individuals and events are central. This decentering avoids “the traditional celebratory narrative of U.S. history” and deconstructs American history through critical analysis of the past, and then the reconceptualization of history as social encounters and restorative action defines and empowers a new public identity “to create a more just and compassionate future.”

This is not a history based on established facts and known reality. Indeed, it is not history at all. This is ideology, a systematic framework for interpreting society and instigating an agenda for change.

That is not the purpose of the National Museum of American History. This is not the mission of the Smithsonian. This is not Congress’ legislative intent in either case. And it is not what taxpayers should be subsidizing.

A national museum of American history should tell the American national story.

That story should be a basic, consensus view that is not be ideological or politicized but presents the facts of history—what actually happened—as accurately as possible with minimal present-day bias, as the DPC report notes.

It should tell the story, warts and all, so that the museum visitor understands the basic chronological narrative and sees how the nation got to where it is today. It should not remove anything, however lamentable, that is integral to that history. Nothing should be erased or whitewashed.

But this is not a debate over emphasis or nuance.

What is problematic is the complete removal of the explanatory narrative and the historical context of those questions. Worse is when that narrative and context is intentionally removed to focus attention on claims of oppression in order to “problematize” the nation’s story—not to teach but to activate, not to expand knowledge but to encourage a political response.

The National Museum of American History should tell the story of a nation and of a people driven to overcome injustice and live up to its heritage—a story of imperfection but also overwhelming accomplishment, of tragedies but also great triumphs, of hardship but also heroism.

It should tell the stories of great Americans from the past who have contributed their genius and their lives to build and preserve this nation. Such stories strengthen the bond that a vast and diverse people can point to as that which makes us one community, fostered by civil political conversation and a shared and grateful memory. And it shouldn’t hide the noble parts of our history, of a people overcoming its past, correcting flaws, making a more perfect union, pursuing its intentions and living up to its principles.

A healthy attachment to this country is neither blind to its flaws nor fanatical in believing that America is the source of all good. Nevertheless, each generation should be equipped with a knowledge of America’s founding principles, a reverence for their liberties, and a

profound love of their country. That patriotism must be embraced freely and be strong and unsentimental enough to coexist with the elements of criticism, dissent, disappointment, and opposition. But it is love all the same, and without the deep foundation it supplies, our republic will perish.

A museum focused on claims of systemic oppression teaches national self-loathing. A museum that embraces America's exceptional principles and teaches America's powerful history—it's "glory tale of liberating strife," as the patriotic hymn goes—is worthy of a great country, worthy of congressional funding, and worthy to shaping the minds and hearts of America's citizens, now and in the future.

Thank you.

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