

AHA Urges Retraction of Executive Order Prohibiting the Inclusion of “Divisive Concepts” in Employee Training Sessions

Approved by AHA Council, October 2020

The [executive order](#) issued by the White House on September 22, 2020, prohibits the inclusion of “divisive concepts” in employee training sessions carried out within the federal government and by federal contractors and grantees. Its stated purpose is “to promote economy and efficiency in Federal contracting, to promote unity in the Federal workforce, and to combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating.”

That last clause is so fraught with ambiguity—so open to interpretation from a wide variety of perspectives—that it ought to be unenforceable. But the problems run deeper as well.

The American Historical Association certainly appreciates economy and efficiency in federal programming. “Unity in the Federal workforce” is also a laudable goal, as long as it is achieved through the hard work required to create and sustain community among the very diverse group of individuals who constitute that work force, many of whom are historians. We also oppose stereotyping and scapegoating of any kind. Historians are especially aware of what has happened in the United States and elsewhere when demagogues have promoted stereotypes of marginalized groups as a strategy to gain and wield political power. The results have often been ugly: genocide, protection of systems of human enslavement, exclusion of immigrants seeking opportunities, lynching (and not only of African Americans, but also of Jews, Chinese Americans, Mexican Americans, and others), and discrimination in education, housing, and beyond. Scapegoating has a similarly long and painful history, including blaming immigrants and internal migrants for outbreaks of deadly disease and crime waves, real and imagined.

This historical record justifies, indeed demands, that Americans—no more and no less than residents of other nations—learn how and why divisions among groups exist. The AHA has made its position clear in a [recent statement](#):

The AHA deplores the use of history and history education at all grade levels and other contexts to divide the American people, rather than use our discipline to heal the divisions that are central to our heritage. Healing those divisions requires an understanding of history and an appreciation for the persistent struggles of Americans to hold the nation accountable for falling short of its lofty ideals. To learn from our history we must confront it, understand it in all its messy complexity, and take responsibility as much for our failures as our accomplishments.

It makes no sense, practically, intellectually, or ethically (or even from the standpoint of efficiency) to prohibit conversations that aim to heal division by understanding division. Like everything else, division has a history, both in the United States and across the world. Denying this history cannot erase it.

Rather than banning “divisive concepts” from any educational venue—whether a classroom, a museum, a national park, or a workplace training session—historians seek to draw public attention to these concepts so that they can be discussed, debated, and ultimately challenged. Unity is not achieved by pushing division under the rug; it can be won even in the face of difference.

The AHA calls upon the administration to retract this executive order. It is neither necessary nor useful.