

**AHA Statement on the Recent “White House Conference on American History”**

*Approved by AHA Council, September 23, 2020*

On September 17, the White House announced, “In commemoration of Constitution Day, President Trump will travel to the National Archives to participate in a discussion on the liberal indoctrination of America’s youth through the 1619 Project, Critical Race Theory, and other misleading, radical ideologies with a diverse group of professors, historians, and scholars. The President will deliver remarks on his Administration’s efforts to promote a more balanced, accurate, and patriotic curricula in America’s schools.”

This hastily assembled “White House Conference on American History” took place in the Rotunda of the National Archives, although the National Archives and Records Administration had no role in organizing the program. The organizers of the event neither informed nor consulted associations of professional historians.

The American Historical Association addresses this “conference” and the president’s ill-informed observations about American history and history education reluctantly and with dismay. The event was clearly a campaign stunt, deploying the legitimating backdrop of the Rotunda, home of the nation’s founding documents, to draw distinctions between the two political parties on education policy, tie one party to civil disorder, and enable the president to explicitly attack his opponent. Like the president’s claim at Mount Rushmore two months ago that “our children are taught in school to hate their own country,” this political theater stokes culture wars that are meant to distract Americans from other, more pressing current issues. The AHA only reluctantly gives air to such distraction; we are not interested in inflating a brouhaha that is a mere sideshow to the many perils facing our nation at this moment.

Past generations of historians participated in promoting a mythical view of the United States. Missing from this conventional narrative were essential themes that we now recognize as central to a complete understanding of our nation’s past. As scholars, we locate and evaluate evidence, which we use to craft stories about the past that are inclusive and able to withstand critical scrutiny. In the process, we engage in lively and at times heated conversations with each other about the meaning of evidence and ways to interpret it. As teachers, we encourage our students to question conventional wisdom as well as their own assumptions, but always with an emphasis on evidence. It is not appropriate for us to censor ourselves or our students when it comes to discussing past events and developments. To purge history of its unsavory elements and full complexity would be a disservice to history as a discipline and the nation, and in the process would render a rich, fascinating story dull and uninspiring.

The AHA deplors 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.