

Historians Defend the Smithsonian Institution

Updated July 9, 2026—The Smithsonian Institution is a world-renowned institution with a commitment to scholarship and accuracy, and to telling the full history of the United States based on informed analysis of historical evidence. Yet on July 4, 2026, as the United States commemorated the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the White House Domestic Policy Council issued a report attacking the independence of our National Museum of American History.

Espousing a circumscribed definition of patriotism, the report severely limits whose experiences count as important to American history and demands the museum replace evidence-based history with a historically inaccurate, expressly celebratory narrative of American exceptionalism. Its anonymous authors overlook a central lesson of the nation's founding: the United States was forged by finding common purpose amid intense divisions, conflicts, and disagreements. The founders, and subsequent generations of Americans, embraced a patriotism that was capacious enough to encompass both pride in the nation's achievements and criticism of its shortcomings, challenging us to more fully embody as a nation those ideals set out in our founding documents. Only honest history can provide Americans with a full and complex understanding of the events that shaped—and continue to shape—us.

As the AHA did in August 2025, when the White House announced it would undertake a review of the exhibitions, materials, and practices of Smithsonian museums, and as it did in March 2025, when the White House issued an executive order on “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” the Association reiterates its strong support for an independent Smithsonian Institution—one that remains free from the ideological priorities of any presidential administration and one that belongs to all of the American people.

The AHA urges the administration and the American public to respect and value the integrity of the historians, curators, and other museum professionals who bring their expertise to the public through their research, exhibitions, programs, and educational materials.

Historians practice our craft with scholarly integrity according to established standards of evidence, historical inquiry, and professional practice. Political interference in professional museum work threatens the accuracy of historical interpretation and erodes public trust in one of our nation's most important institutions.

Updated August 15, 2025—On August 12, 2025, the [White House notified](#) the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution that the administration will undertake a review of exhibitions, materials, and practices at eight Smithsonian museums “to ensure alignment with the President’s directive to celebrate American exceptionalism, remove divisive or partisan narratives, and restore confidence in our shared cultural institutions.”

The AHA [reiterates its support](#) for an independent Smithsonian Institution that belongs to all the American people. At the request of the Board of Regents, the Smithsonian is already undertaking its own review in accordance with its commitment to scholarship, research, and informed analysis of historical evidence. The AHA

urges the administration and the American public to respect and value the expertise of the historians, curators, and other museum professionals who conduct the review and revision of historical content according to the professional standards of our discipline.

Historians practice our craft with integrity. Political interference into professional curatorial practices and museum and educational content places at risk the integrity and accuracy of historical interpretation and stands to erode public trust in our shared institutions.

Approved by AHA Council, March 31, 2025

The executive order “[Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History](#),” issued on March 27 by the White House, egregiously misrepresents the work of the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian is among the premier research institutions in the world, widely known for the integrity of its scholarship, which is careful and based on historical and scientific evidence. The Institution ardently pursues the purpose for which it was established more than 175 years ago: “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” The accusation in the White House [fact sheet](#) accompanying the executive order claims that Smithsonian museums are displaying “improper, divisive, or anti-American ideology.” This is simply untrue; it misrepresents the work of those museums and the public’s engagement with their collections and exhibits. It also completely misconstrues the nature of historical work.

Historians explore the past to understand how our nation has evolved. We draw on a wide range of sources, which helps us to understand history from different angles of vision. Our goal is neither criticism nor celebration; it is to understand—to increase our knowledge of—the past in ways that can help Americans to shape the future.

The stories that have shaped our past include not only elements that make us proud but also aspects that make us acutely aware of tragedies in our nation’s history. No person, no nation, is perfect, and we should all—as individuals and as nations—learn from our imperfections.

The Smithsonian’s museums collect and preserve the past of all Americans and encompass the entirety of our nation’s history. Visitors explore exhibitions and collections in which they can find themselves, their families, their communities, and their nation represented. They encounter both our achievements and the painful moments of our rich and complicated past.

Patriotic history celebrates our nation’s many great achievements. It also helps us grapple with the less grand and more painful parts of our history. Both are part of a shared past that is fundamentally American. We learn from the past to inform how we can best shape our future. By providing a history with the integrity necessary to enable all Americans to be all they can possibly be, the Smithsonian is fulfilling its duty to all of us.