

Trump vandals seize the Smithsonian Institution

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In a March 27 Executive Order (EO), “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” Donald Trump targeted major federally funded museums and cultural institutions—the Smithsonian Institution in particular—for their “concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation’s history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth.”

The EO refers to the various strands of identity politics that influence many, if not most cultural institutions in the US, both private and public. The EO asserts that “our Nation’s unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness is reconstructed as inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed.”

There is a left-wing and a right-wing critique of identity politics. For Trump and company, “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) and associated trends amount to low-hanging fruit. In the name of an attack on the upper middle class race and gender obsession, which is widely hated, the Trump plan is to glorify the American profit system, deny its social contradictions and conceal the bloody history of slavery, racism and genocidal attacks on indigenous people.

As we have argued,

Trump is campaigning for a patriotic, national art, one that pays tribute to the greatness of American capitalism and its supposed achievements. Such an art is dishonest and insincere by definition, and, in fact, no art at all. It is intended to help create an American version of the Nazi “*Volksgemeinschaft*,” or “people’s” or “national community,” a mythological creation designed to cover over the class struggle and misdirect the population into chauvinist and nationalist channels. Art is to be oriented toward the “triumphant,” “monumental” and militaristic, toward the exclusion of other peoples and toward national insularity.

There is no question but that the Smithsonian museums have been influenced by ideology that seeks to degrade or downplay the role of the class struggle in history and instead elevate

issues of personal identity. This is a false and backward conception that has done real damage to the understanding of American history in particular. The *New York Times*’ discredited 1619 Project is a prime example.

But such notions are not the real target of Trump’s Executive Order, which is part of a far-reaching effort to change the entire intellectual climate to enable the oligarchy to impose a fascist-police state dictatorship.

The March 27 executive order declares that it is the policy of the Trump administration to “remind Americans of our extraordinary heritage, consistent progress toward becoming a more perfect Union, and unmatched record of advancing liberty, prosperity, and human flourishing.” There is no such “consistent progress.” On the contrary, the era of social reformism in America came to end, coinciding with the unraveling of its postwar economic position, more than half a century ago. The presence of the fascistic billionaire Trump in the White House, an ignorant gangster and pathological liar, is one of the strongest refutations of the claims of an “unmatched record of advancing liberty, prosperity, and human flourishing.”

The EO promises to “restore the Smithsonian Institution to its rightful place as a symbol of inspiration and American greatness—igniting the imagination of young minds, honoring the richness of American history and innovation, and instilling pride in the hearts of all Americans.” This is claptrap. Everything progressive in US history speaks vehemently against its present political and economic set-up. Far from being a source of “pride,” the capitalist two-party system, for example, is a national disgrace and perpetual degradation.

The EO instructs Vice President JD Vance and others “to effectuate the policies of this order through his role on the Smithsonian Board of Regents with respect to the Smithsonian Institution and its museums, education and research centers, and the National Zoo, including by seeking to remove improper ideology from such properties, and [to] recommend to the President any additional actions necessary to fully effectuate such policies.”

Such an agenda in the hands of the thug Vance amounts to a threat and a provocation. The EO serves two essential purposes:

- To lyingly identify the Trump administration with the goals

of the American Revolution, particularly the struggle for democracy and equality.

- To smear the major state-funded museums and arts institutions as nothing but hotbeds of racist and revisionist conceptions about American history in order to all the better destroy the genuine historical and scientific contributions they make.

In the first case, the Trump administration needs do little more to demonstrate its deep hostility to the democratic principles of the American Revolution than by its present policy of hunting down and incarcerating student protesters exercising their right to free speech. Every thinking person in the US and around the world can see through the Trump administration's supposed defense of the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" as a shabby and desperate lie.

The arrest and disappearance of Columbia University graduate student Mahmoud Khalil in New York and of Tufts student Rumeysa Ozturk in Somerville, Massachusetts (only a few miles from the site of the first major battles of the American Revolutionary War in 1775), the forcing of Cornell graduate student Momodou Taal out of the country and the persecution that caused Columbia undergraduate Yunseo Chung to go into hiding from the ICE-Gestapo—all for exercising their democratic right to free speech—have demonstrated that the Trump White House is seeking to establish a dictatorship without constitutional protections for anyone on the territory of the US.

The Smithsonian Institution, which is, in effect, the national museum of the United States, according to Wikipedia, "has historical holdings of over 157 million items, 21 museums, 21 libraries, 14 education and research centers, a zoo, and historical and architectural landmarks, mostly located in Washington, D.C. Additional facilities are located in Maryland, New York, and Virginia. More than 200 institutions and museums in 47 states, Puerto Rico, and Panama are Smithsonian Affiliates. Institution publications include Smithsonian and Air & Space magazines."

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington D. C. alone has "collections contain over 146 million specimens of plants, animals, fossils, minerals, rocks, meteorites, human remains, and human cultural artifacts, the largest natural history collection in the world." (Wikipedia)

The Smithsonian includes the National Portrait Gallery whose current exhibitions include "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon: James Baldwin and the Voices of Queer Resistance." We do not know the merit of this exhibition, but there is always something to be learned from novelist and essayist Baldwin, a central cultural figure in the 1960s and a man who towers intellectually and morally over anyone in the Trump-Musk cesspool. Alongside this the Gallery is also exhibiting daguerreotypes from its collection, as well as portraits of

Abraham Lincoln.

There is much more to destroy. The American Art Museum also holds permanent collections of contemporary art, exhibits of crafts and American folk and self-taught art, as well as the important exhibition "Lessons of the Hour" (2019) by artist and filmmaker Sir Isaac Julien. This image installation, which "interweaves period reenactments across five screens to create a vivid picture of 19th-century activist, writer, orator and philosopher Frederick Douglass," speaks to the role of one of the leaders of America's second revolution, the Civil War of 1861-65.

In other words, the Smithsonian is a vast scientific, historical and cultural enterprise and it is the Trump administration's goal not to cleanse it of identity politics, but to eviscerate the creative contributions of art and science and, especially, the democratic-revolutionary content in American history.

Trump is using the campaign against race and gender politics as a club with which to assault the scientific and cultural progress since the Enlightenment in every corner of American society. It is a process that the WWS has termed *Gleichschaltung*—"synchronization" or "falling into line"—after the Nazis' attempts to stultify thought and culture in the aftermath of Hitler's seizure of power in 1933.

Gleichschaltung includes the repression of dissent, particularly opposition to war and genocide, on the university campuses, the mass layoffs and crippling of scientific research in the Health and Human Services Department, the destruction of the Department of Education and attempts to impose the reactionary 1776 Commission curriculum on K-12 public schools.

The attack on the Smithsonian also clarifies the motivation for the defunding of the Institute for Museum and Library Service by executive order March 14, a lifeline in grants and other funding to libraries and museums across the United States. These are different fronts in the cultural counter-revolution currently under way.



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