

# Trump issues threats against Smithsonian exhibitions and art works

Douglas Lyons, Tom Mackaman  
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President Donald Trump has launched an aggressive campaign against the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., accusing the world's largest historical museum, education, and research complex of promoting "anti-American ideology."

On August 19, in a post on his Truth Social platform, Trump outlined his far-right vision of American history and signaled his intentions to subject the Smithsonian to the same ideological scrutiny already imposed on higher education and the arts. Trump wrote,

The Smithsonian is OUT OF CONTROL, where everything discussed is how horrible our Country is, how bad Slavery was, how unaccomplished the downtrodden have been — nothing about Success, nothing about Brightness, nothing about the Future. I have instructed my attorneys to go through the Museums, and start the exact same process that has been done with Colleges and Universities where tremendous progress has been made.

Trump followed these remarks with an executive order mandating the Smithsonian to revise its museum content to "showcase a more positive portrayal of the nation," beginning with an internal review of eight major Smithsonian museums. The White House letter demanded museums provide documentation regarding exhibition texts and curatorial choices, allegedly aiming to remove narratives deemed "divisive or partisan."

In addition to demanding a more positive portrayal of slavery, the move targets depictions of the history of labor, immigration, science and human sexuality.

The Smithsonian, a globally renowned and free-entry institution comprising 21 museums and a zoo, spans American history, art, science and more, drawing visitors from around the world. Its budget is heavily reliant on the federal government, with about 62 percent sourced from Congress, and the remainder coming from corporate donors, memberships, and commercial revenue. Last year, the Smithsonian received \$1.09 billion from Congress, a decrease from the prior year. Vice-President J.D. Vance sits on the museum's board.

Under Trump's directive, museums and cultural organizations must adhere to a ruling-class narrative of American greatness, patriotism and prestige or risk devastating funding cuts. In late March, Trump signed an Executive Order titled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," demanding sweeping changes within 120 days and threatening to revoke federal funds from museums that refuse to comply. The result, if the funding spigot is turned off, would be

massive layoffs and potential closure for many museums. Priceless public collections could be lost to private buyers.

Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III responded to Trump's attacks by proclaiming the institution's independence and non-partisanship in a memo to staff, stating, "As always, our work will be shaped by the best scholarship, free of partisanship, to help the American public better understand our nation's history, challenges and triumphs." Bunch said that the Smithsonian's mission is to "bring history, science, education, research and the arts to all Americans," vowing that the museums will "continue to showcase world-class exhibits, collections and objects, rooted in expertise and accuracy," despite growing political pressure from the White House to alter or censor content.

Historians have condemned Trump's moves. Pulitzer Prize-winner Douglas Brinkley commented, "It's the epitome of dumbness to criticize the Smithsonian for dealing with the reality of slavery in America. It's what led to our Civil War and is a defining aspect of our national history." Clarissa Myrick-Harris of Morehouse College stated, "It appears we are moving towards a narrative that attempts to deny the existence of slavery or the reality of Jim Crow laws, segregation, and racial violence against Black communities."

Sarah Weicksel, executive director of the American Historical Association, warned, "Such political meddling risks imposing a singular and erroneous perspective of American history onto the Smithsonian, jeopardizing the authenticity and precision of historical interpretation," and further cautioned that these actions "undermine our collective history and pose a threat to the public's confidence in shared institutions." And the American Alliance of Museums, representing 35,000 museum professionals, issued a statement opposing the "increasing threats of censorship facing US museums," stating that these pressures "can create a chilling effect throughout the entire museum landscape"

The most jarring aspect of Trump's social media broadside against the Smithsonian was its denunciation of the museum for emphasizing "how bad Slavery was." The implication is that Trump sees slavery as having had its "good" or even benevolent sides, an argument pioneered by the old Southern slave oligarchy itself.

Slavery in the United States and the British North American colonies remains an indelible crime of the emerging global capitalist system, lasting from the early 1600s until its destruction in 1865 by the Civil War. During this period, millions of people of African descent endured unpaid forced labor, brutal violence and the enforced separation of families—husbands from wives, children from parents. They were bought and sold as the commodities they produced—cotton, tobacco, and sugar.

Furthermore, in obscuring that slavery was indeed horrific, Trump's attack on the Smithsonian must also obscure the meaning of the titanic struggle to destroy it. The position that slavery was not, after all, so "bad" makes history incomprehensible. Why was there an abolitionist movement? How is the career and political evolution of Abraham Lincoln to be explained? Why did some 400,000 Union soldiers fight and die in the Civil War?

This is not a one-off. The Trump administration has aggressively reversed previous efforts to remove Confederate symbols and honors from US military installations. In June, President Trump announced that the Army would restore the original names of seven bases—including Fort Bragg, Fort Hood, Fort Benning, Fort Gordon, Fort Polk, Fort Rucker and Fort A.P. Hill—that had been renamed during the Biden administration to dissociate them from Confederate leaders. While officials insisted some bases would technically now honor non-Confederate personnel with similar names, Trump made clear in a speech at Fort Bragg that the changes were a deliberate return to tradition: "We won a lot of battles out of those forts. It's no time to change. And I'm superstitious, you know? I like to keep it going, right?"

At West Point, a large portrait of General Robert E. Lee, depicting him in Confederate uniform with a slave leading his horse, was removed by prior order but has now been reinstated under Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, with White House approval. The Army has confirmed that the academy is also preparing to restore related monuments, stating, "Under this administration, we honor our history and learn from it—we don't erase it." The flagrant, provocative rehabilitation of Confederate symbols whitewashes the memory of those who fought to preserve slavery and signals that the Army is prepared to cultivate racism in its ranks just as it readies neo-imperialist wars in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

It is notable as well that Trump's social media post motivating his executive order singled out the Smithsonian for its exhibitions that consider the history of "the downtrodden" in America. This points to his administration's broader aim to blot out any discussion of the exploitation of labor in American history. Works highlighting the history of the working class and the experiences of immigrants—a group Trump frequently scapegoats for broader economic and social issues—are targeted for censorship.

Trump's campaign also appeals to anti-transgender and anti-science sentiments, mobilizing support from the bigoted religious right and far-right militias.

Among the specific works in question is Rigoberto González's 2020 painting "Refugees Crossing the Border Wall into South Texas," which was a finalist for the National Portrait Gallery in 2022. In an NPR interview, González defended the painting as a challenge to anti-immigrant sentiment: "I'm glad that it got a response from a presidency that is very clearly going anti-immigration." Another targeted work, Kat Rodriguez's papier-mâché Statue of Liberty holding a tomato (not a torch), commemorates a march by immigrant farmworkers in Florida for better working conditions. It is currently on display at the National Museum of American History.

The attack on science is evident in criticism of a National Portrait Gallery commission: Hugo Crosthwaite's 2022 animated portrait series depicting Dr. Anthony Fauci's roles in the HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 crises. Fauci, though he himself in fact oversaw the original demobilization of public health measures against COVID, remains a frequent target of Republican attacks, especially from anti-vaccine fanatics and figures like Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the

obscurantist Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Trump's order is already resulting in de facto censorship. Fears of provoking the president reportedly shaped internal discussions at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery about whether to remove Amy Sherald's painting *Trans Forming Liberty*, which depicts a black transgender Statue of Liberty. As the museum considered either dropping the artwork or replacing it with contextual video material, Sherald withdrew her anticipated exhibition, citing the threat of censorship and the integrity of her work.

The fierce debate over American historical memory has been shaped in recent years by the *New York Times*' high-profile 1619 Project, launched in 2019. This wide-ranging multimedia effort, with educational materials disseminated to schools, argues that the United States' true founding was marked not by the Declaration of Independence in 1776, but by the arrival of enslaved Africans in Virginia in 1619. The Project contends that both the American Revolution and Civil War must be primarily understood as struggles rooted in the defense of slavery and "anti-black racism." The 1619 Project was itself a racist myth.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, the fascistic right-wing would seize on the opportunity presented to it. Trump quickly launched his own far-right counterattack with the 1776 Report, released in January 2021. This shallow tract of patriotic myths and moral tales glorifies family, "law and order," God, guns and unrestrained nationalism. Trump has since sought to bring institutions like the Smithsonian to heel, along the lines of Nazi efforts at cultural "synchronization," threatening financial punishment or harsher measures if they do not conform to his reactionary rewriting of the past.

In preparation for the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, Trump is orchestrating a counterrevolution against history. His assault on the Smithsonian is only the opening skirmish. Mirroring his interventions against the Kennedy Arts Center and Ivy League and other major universities, as well as his administration's attacks on science, Trump is determined to control speech and thought, including artistic expression and public history.

The logic of these actions points toward a presidential dictatorship that crushes dissent and justifies policies favoring war, genocide, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights by rewriting history to fit a nationalist mythos, denying US imperialism's crimes and undermining constitutional protections.



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