

GUEST ESSAY

Trump Is Bending History to His Will. He Will Fail.

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On July 4, the White House Domestic Policy Council issued a long-awaited and lengthy report, “Saving America’s Story: How Ideological Capture at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History Erases Our Heritage,” a frontal assault on the work of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in particular and on the entire Smithsonian Institution. The report asserts that the museum’s leadership has “traded settled truths and basic history for political activism and division.” It condemns the museum for engaging in “anti-white activism,” supporting “illegal aliens” and embracing transgender people.

Historians employ time-honored methods in the use of evidence but, by instinct and training, never accept determined “settled truths.” The Trump White House and its history police want us all to live in their chosen bubble, immune from

instability or perceived disorder in their take on American greatness. They have a right to their bubble as individual citizens, but to impose it on the rest of us as policy egregiously breaks the public trust.

The report is not a document about history; it is the product of a racial and political ideology in search of a history that no longer bears scrutiny. People often joke about how Trumpism would like to return us to some version of the 1950s, when America supposedly was “great.” In this report, the administration has done just that. The report would prefer that nothing had ever happened since the ’50s to mar the White House’s polished, superficial, puerile version of America’s past.

As Smithsonian leadership lobbied for a national history museum in 1953, they cast a vision of a place that “commemorates our heritage of freedom and highlights the basic elements of our way of life.” In 1955, Leonard Carmichael, then the secretary of the Smithsonian, followed suit, saying the museum would be the “nation’s unique history book of objects” and “instill in each citizen a deepened faith in our country’s destiny as champion of individual dignity and enterprise.”

At its dedication, President Lyndon Johnson, on the verge of signing the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, wanted a museum that would kindle patriotism, but he set a slightly different tone by depicting a museum that shows, borrowing the words of William Faulkner, “the agony and the sweat of the human spirit.” All these founding words and sentiments, understandably, breathed the rhetoric of Cold War triumphalism.

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The report offers no context for what might have invoked such expressions: the Soviet achievement of the hydrogen bomb, Sputnik, the Korean War, the Cuban missile crisis, the March on Washington and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Had the Domestic Policy Council consulted trained historians, they might

have provided such contexts. The report's criticism of the use of concepts like "whiteness" in staff training, or its disdain for "land acknowledgments," is actually a point of agreement with many academic historians.

A handful of years after the opening of the museum, there were almost 40,000 nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union. This frightening standoff between superpowers not only fomented McCarthyism in America, with its suppression of free speech, but according to a historian of that era, Ellen Schrecker, a "more conservative ... jingoistic political culture" and a "polarizing habit of mind" across the nation.

Triumphalist history, which is exactly what the Trump White House demands, cannot tolerate nuance, ambiguity, complexity. These elements of real history — dare we say truths about human experience — always spoil the party and the military flyovers. President Trump and his supporters have instincts for history, but far too little knowledge.

The journalist and editor Tom Engelhardt, in his book "The End of Victory Culture," showed how in the 1950s and '60s, across popular culture, "triumphalism was in the American grain." With children's toys, cartoons and popular magazines, and especially at the movies, "the pleasures of victory culture" were "an act of faith." All of us who grew up in this overweening Cold War culture of the 1950s, including and especially Mr. Trump, remember this well, with wildly different lessons.

Some of us went on and learned some real history. One of us now employs the epithet "communist" against his opponents as if the electorate will comprehend the term with 1950s-style fear. To those on the MAGA right these sentiments are not antiquated logic; they are a way to invent the enemies necessary to fuel hatred of all vestiges of liberalism. Here we see the apocalyptic theology of Trumpism. History is one important weapon among many in their catechism.

But the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History serves America today. The assault by the Trump administration on the Smithsonian and especially its secretary, Lonnie Bunch, the first African American ever to hold that position, is well over a year old. It began in a Trump executive order, "Restoring Truth and

Sanity to American History,” issued on March 27, 2025. That order declared war on the Smithsonian explicitly, as well on the entire history profession. This month’s report ignores so many exhibits over recent years that reflect the revolutions in social history, the explosion of American pluralism, as well as the current ones for America’s 250th. The report states, *ad hominem*, that the American history museum tells only a story of “regret, tragedy, and shame.”

No one needs a graduate degree to smell the toxic culture war politics that will hopefully repel most Americans from this attack on institutions that they love. It is from a sense of tragedy, as well as survival, both honed from the real past, that genuine hope is born. Americans who will never live in a gated community have always understood this.

In America we argue about ideology, often fiercely, and against the idea that there is an official “proper” version of the American story, other than the eternal creeds of the Declaration of Independence. The current attack on the Smithsonian is nothing less than a hyper-ideological group attacking a nonideological institution for not being ideological enough by its definition.

When lies by smiling propagandists become official truths advanced by those who control government budgets, democratic culture dies. It is time, before it is too late, for Congress and the people to stand up to this attack on how we are to know and interpret our history. Defend the Smithsonian or lose it.

If we do not hold the line, our young may be among the tourists walking through the ruins someday of those great edifices that once housed and exhibited both our treasures and our hopes.

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