

Testimony of Alan Spears
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For the oversight hearing “All in for America250: Public-Private Partnerships
Supporting America’s Semiquincentennial on our Public Lands.”

Room 1324 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, DC, February 10, 2026

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Huffman and Members of the Committee, I am Alan Spears, Senior Director for Cultural Resources in the Government Affairs Department of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading national, independent voice for protecting and enhancing America’s National Park System for present and future generations. We appreciate the opportunity to testify at this hearing, which is well-timed as our country speeds towards commemoration of the 250th anniversary of America’s independence from Great Britain.

On July 4, 2026, NPCA will join with millions of Americans and others from around the globe to mark the anniversary of America’s independence from Great Britain. That one event has had a profound impact on the course of human history and deserves robust commemoration.

As the leading group promoting the protection of America’s national parks and people who manage some of the most significant cultural, historic, and natural resources on the American landscape, it has been NPCA’s express desire to see the National Park Service (NPS) play a central role in this commemoration. By virtue of the sites the agency manages and the stories the Park Service interprets, manages, and preserves, they are one of this nation’s leading story tellers and thus perfectly positioned to help lead the way to a commemoration of America’s 250th anniversary that would inspire people for generations to come.

Unfortunately, the agency has been undermined by staff reductions and ongoing efforts to soften or sanitize the interpretation national parks provide to accommodate an agenda, not a scientific, historic, or bureaucratic ideal. The adverse impacts of staffing reductions through “efficiencies”, mass layoffs, buyouts, and a federal hiring freeze, have reduced the NPS permanent workforce by 25 percent (nearly 4,000 positions) over just one year and weakened the agency’s ability to interpret, manage, and preserve our national narrative. This would constitute a grave challenge to ability of the agency to meet its mission of historic preservation under any circumstance. That such drastic reductions in staff have happened during the run up to the commemoration of a major milestone in this nation’s history makes those losses more perceptible and tragic.

Growing up in Washington, DC, during the 1970s, my parents took full advantage of nearby national parks such as Antietam, Gettysburg, and Harpers Ferry, as places where they could take their only child on trips that would be inexpensive, educational, and fun. NPCA has consistently advocated for park budgets and policies that will ensure that generations of young people will, like me, be able to be inspired by participating in battlefield walks led

by an NPS ranger through the Wheatfield and across Seminary Ridge. For it was at these places that the interpretive prowess wielded by a uniform ranger brought history to life.

What we have seen over the course of 2025 and appear likely to see again this year, are additional reductions in force (RIFs) that further reduce the ranks of NPS' professional staff. And although national parks might still be able to put a ranger in front of a visitors center to lead a walk or present an interpretive lecture, the job loses already suffered by the agency mean that ranger will not have the backup of the museum collections specialists, historians, archivists, ethnographers, and other personnel who conduct the research, gather, assess, and package the information that can take an NPS tour from good to great.

The reductions and firings from 2025, also eliminated critical cultural and historic landscape managers and reduced the number of technicians with the training to care for historic structures, furnishings, and museum collection pieces. In the name of bureaucratic efficiency, the Park Service was forced to reduce staff with cultural resource management experience, further degrading the agency's ability to care for the objects and landscapes in their care at the very moment we need those experts most.

As we approach the 250th anniversary of America's independence NPCA asks that Congress take steps to restore those 4,000 vacant NPS staffing positions to enable the agency to fulfill its preservation and conservation mandate and help lead the nation towards a truly superlative 250th anniversary commemoration.

Our national parks must now also contend with the pressure to soften, sanitize, and erase the history they interpret and preserve. While many Americans regard parks as large, natural landscapes, places such as Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon, in truth smaller historic and cultural sites outnumber their natural counterparts two to one. Further still, every unit in the National Park System has cultural and historic components that are central to its legacy. Simply, put America's national parks have been in the history business since the agency was founded in 1916.

What's new is that over the last 30 years the National Park Service has taken great strides to make the system more representative to all Americans. Civil War battlefields have been joined by civil rights sites; space exploration has been tied to the advancement and recognition of women in the workplace; our founding history and the story of a new, emerging nation has been rightfully linked to the challenges that the "Founding Fathers" were unable to resolve. We are all better for learning about the complex nature of our history and then being able to consider how our victories as well as the times when we failed to live up to the better angels of our nature have shaped this country and influence us to this day.

Unfortunately, in March of 2025, President Trump issued an executive order calling for the restoration of truth and sanity to American history. The National Park Service was not the only agency impacted by the president's E.O. but it nonetheless had a chilling impact on the staff.

QR codes were placed in national parks to encourage visitors to report any interpretative materials they believed denigrated America or Americans. NPCA's analysis of the public response to those codes showed that respondents in vast numbers approved of the job that that Park Service was doing regarding historic interpretation, often time sharing they wished to learn more about complex and vexing matters such as race, slavery, or Indigenous history.

Next, NPS managers were instructed to create lists of interpretive materials exhibited at their sites that might run afoul of the presidents E.O. or Secretary Burgum's S.O. 3431 from May 20, 2025. The lists were prepared (some parks did opt out for reasons we remain uncertain of) and leadership within the administration began a process of review.

Interpretive signage about climate change was removed from Acadia National Park in the fall of 2025. Reference to Transgender history and activism were scrubbed from NPS websites including interpretive materials at the Stonewall Inn National Monument around this same period.

Then, in January 2026, NPS staff at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia removed interpretive signage and art work that told the story of enslaved Africans brought from Mount Vernon to Philadelphia in the 1790s by President George Washington. Over the next several weeks sources including Reuters, the Washington Post, and E & E reported that "Trump administration officials ordered [in January] that signs in at least 17 additional parks" were flagged for editing or removal. The parks from which interpretive signs were removed included the Grand Canyon, Glacier, and Zion.

The process being led by the Trump administration lacks transparency. What we have been able to determine regarding signage removed or edited, or interpretation of American history that is currently being subject to rewrite, follows...

- Grand Canyon National removed a portion of an exhibit after "flagging potentially problematic passages" stating that federal officials "pushed tribes off their land to establish the park."
- Glacier National Park had one sign flagged for removal by the administration that described to readers how the retreat of the park's glaciers was linked to human caused climate change.
- At the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument in Jackson, Mississippi, it was reported that the Park Service wanted to redraft a brochure because it referred Byron De la Beckwith, a lifelong klansman and the person who murdered civil rights icon and World War 2 veteran Medgar Evers in the driveway of his own home, because it referred to the assassin as a "racist."

It is the grave concern of the National Parks Conservation Association that as we head towards the Semiquincentennial of America's independence from Great Britain that the National Park Service is being required to distort the telling of accurate, inclusive, and truthful history. This will adversely impact the ability of the agency, the nation's leading storyteller, to provide interpretation that is accurate, inclusive, and inspiring. Which in turn

may cause some Americans, far too many we fear, to disassociate from their history and this great anniversary.

We urge Congress to restore NPS staffing levels by filling those 4,000 vacant positions and oppose ongoing efforts to sanitize or erase American history as it is told in our national parks.

We are citizens of a nation with fascinating, diverse, and complex history. We need the leadership of the National Park Service unimpaired to help us enhance our understanding of our shared experiences. And when necessary we can handle the truth.