

Statement, US Congress, The House Administration Committee.

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July 20, 2026.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

As historians we often dwell in the past. Professionally, we should. In spring, 2025, with President Trump's Executive Order, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," and now with the White House's Report, "Saving America's Story," the present has come storming into our work lives with vengeance. We welcome the challenge. The present is inherently interwoven into the present.

The White House now believes it should pronounce on the nature of history and the presentation of the nation's treasures at the Smithsonian. The recent Report by the White House Domestic Policy Council is nothing less than a declaration of political war on the historians' profession, as well as on the freedom and curiosity of *anyone who reads* or visits museums. In other words, President Trump has declared war on free minds and free education. Historians are not voices of the state; we are keepers of memory, storytellers with what one great philosopher of history, R. G. Collingwood, called "trained imaginations." The White House Domestic Council contains not a single person trained in history. And yet they declare with such certainty what forms of "heritage," "destiny," "settled truths," and indeed "stories" that the Smithsonian should "instill" (a favorite verb) in the minds of the public.

The historian's beautiful and ancient craft is essential for any society's need for self-understanding. We are equipped with a host of modern methods, but guided ethically

by some very old rules that no authoritarian political movement ought to be allowed to profane. A historian reads, listens, searches, measures, imagines his/her way into and through all manner of evidence – facts, sometimes clear and sometimes slanted every which way. We examine, read, accumulate, sift, study interwoven modes of evidence with, hopefully, empathy and humility. Then we rise from our sources, and all manner of contexts, and fashion all this into story, into narrative, in order to inspire and take our audiences somewhere. And once we get them there, we are bound by our craft to make an argument about why this all happened and why it matters.

People often comment about how Trumpism would like to return us to some version of the 1950s, when America was “great.” In this Report, they have, transparently, done just that. The Report is rooted explicitly in the Cold War of the 1950s, when the National Museum of American History was founded. The founding words and sentiments, understandably, breathed the rhetoric of Cold War triumphalism. How could it have been otherwise? 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. They might also have consulted Edward R. Morrow’s famous commentary in 1954 on Joseph McCarthy and his assaults on free speech: “We can deny our heritage and our history,” said Morrow, “but we cannot escape responsibility for the results.” Erase McCarthyism, and any dozens of other difficult or uncomfortable elements in our history, and you will repeat them.

Triumphalist history cannot tolerate nuance, ambiguity, complexity. But they are lifeblood for real historians. Also in a deep Cold War context of 1962, James Baldwin wrote, in an essay, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," that the problem with the way Americans approach history is that "words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not to wake him up."⁶ We do not write "woke" history, whatever that is, but we do try to awaken citizens. In recent decades, we sowed the wind; here comes the whirlwind.

In 1993, Tony Morrison, one of our greatest writers, told us to beware when any state tries to control history and language: it results in "sanctioned ignorance." This was 1993 in the hopeful wake of the end of the Cold War! "When language" about truth and history "dies," said Morrison, "all users and makers are accountable for its demise." We are all accountable.

