

Trump's American History Revolution

As the 250th anniversary of America's independence approaches, the president is moving to put his stamp on how the nation's story is told, in Washington and beyond.



President Trump and Melania Trump at Mount Rushmore on July 3, 2020, where the president delivered a speech decrying the vandalism of statues during racial justice protests. Credit...Anna MoneyMaker for The New York Times

By [Jennifer Schuessler](#)

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President Trump is not known as a student of history. He hasn't summoned historians to the White House for free-ranging [dinner conversation](#), like Barack Obama, or boasted of the fat biographies he devours, in the manner of George W. Bush's [reading contest](#) with his adviser Karl Rove.

During his first campaign, Mr. Trump drew mockery for a plaque at one of his golf courses commemorating [a Civil War battle](#) that never happened. For all his appeals to American greatness, he rarely extols the founding fathers, and once claimed he would have [crushed](#) a combined ticket of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

But Mr. Trump keenly understands the power of history. And since returning to the Oval Office, he has moved forcefully to advance his vision of it — and to reshape federal cultural institutions that shape the way the American story is told.

Last month, in an executive order titled [“Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History.”](#) he blasted what he sees as a dangerous “revisionist movement” that seeks to undermine “the remarkable achievements of the United States” and its “unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness.”

But the president has gone beyond rhetoric, moving to challenge or seize control of history-related federal cultural institutions including the Smithsonian, the National Park Service and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has also begun moving to put his stamp on planning for the 250th anniversary of American independence next year, and re-upped his concept for the [National Garden of American Heroes](#), a statuary park honoring figures from the past.

For many in the historical profession, Mr. Trump’s moves are nothing short of an assault on history, an effort to sideline critical inquiry and purge the past of uncomfortable facts.

“This is not a return to sanity,” the Organization of American Historians said in a [recent response](#) to Mr. Trump’s executive order. “Rather, it sanitizes to destroy truth.”

Recent [polls](#) show that a majority of Americans of all political stripes are open to complex history that shows the bad along with the good. But Mr. Trump’s recent actions, some observers say, are part of an escalating attempt to use history as a wedge that separates “real” Americans from naysayers who threaten the body politic.

Johann Neem, a historian at Western Washington University who has [written about the history wars](#) of recent years, said that Mr. Trump’s efforts are not about extolling some mythic all-white past, as some detractors assume. It’s about attacking enemies in the present who dishonor American greatness.

“The problem for him isn’t celebrating Harriet Tubman,” Mr. Neem said. “It’s the people today who think that there’s no such thing as heroes.”

A ‘Grand Celebration’

Mr. Trump’s flurry of statements about American history coincides with the march to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, which kicks into gear this weekend with [commemorations](#) of Paul Revere’s ride and the famous “shot heard round the world” at Lexington and Concord.

On Friday evening, with little fanfare, the White House posted [a countdown page](#), promising a “full year of festivities” to begin on Memorial Day. The page includes the first entries in a series of elaborately produced history videos, “The Story of America,”

created in partnership with Hillsdale College, the conservative school that was instrumental in writing and promoting his [1776 Report](#) on patriotic education released at the end of Mr. Trump's first term.

The [semiquincentennial](#), as the anniversary is officially known, is something Mr. Trump has been talking about since he first arrived in Washington.



President Trump at a 2016 campaign stop at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania. Credit...Damon Winter/The New York Times

“It will be one of the great milestones in the history of the world,” he mused in February 2017, in his first [joint address](#) to Congress. “But what will America look like as we approach our 250th year?”

Mr. Trump invoked the semiquincentennial again in a [combative speech](#) at his impromptu White House Conference on American History in September 2020, during which he attacked the “left-wing mobs” who had torn down statues and “desecrated” memorials.

In a 2023 campaign video, he proposed marking the anniversary with a yearlong [“Great American State Fair,”](#) complete with “patriot games” for high school athletes. And last November, barely a week after winning re-election, Mr. Trump [declared](#) that the cost savings from his new Department of Government Efficiency — to be achieved by July 4, 2026 — would be “a perfect gift to America” on its 250th birthday.

Shortly after taking office in January, Mr. Trump [announced](#) the creation of a new Task Force 250, charged with helping provide “a grand celebration” of the anniversary. It is overseen by [Vince Haley](#), a longtime speechwriter and adviser to Mr. Trump who is now director of his Domestic Policy Council.

Most events around the 250th birthday — like this weekend’s festivities in Boston — are organized at the state and local level, where the White House and the federal government have no direct role. But among some planners, the administration’s actions have caused deep alarm.

Earlier this month, after visits from DOGE, the National Endowment for the Humanities laid off much of its staff and canceled most of its existing grants across the country, including many that support 250th-related projects. Without federal support, humanities advocates say, some [state humanities councils](#) and small local organizations may simply collapse.

“This was going to be a moment that would be a big celebration for the country that recognizes the important work that state and local and national history organizations do,” John Dichtl, the president and chief executive of the American Association for State and Local History, said. “Instead, what’s happening is undermining all that. People are being told that this kind of work doesn’t matter.”

A ‘Garden of Heroes’

For some, the news that the canceled grants [would help pay for Mr. Trump’s National Garden of American Heroes](#) carried a particular sting.

Mr. Trump’s dedication to the sculpture garden, which will feature 250 heroes from different fields and backgrounds, has struck many observers as kitschy, or worse. But it’s of a piece with his longstanding belief in keeping heroes on their pedestals, literally and figuratively.

In 2016, amid debates about removing Andrew Jackson from the \$20 bill and replacing him with the abolitionist leader Harriet Tubman, he praised Tubman as “fantastic,” but [urged sympathy](#) for Jackson. “I think it’s very rough when you take someone off a bill,” he said.

During the racial justice protests of 2020, when statues across the country were vandalized, including some depicting Union soldiers and leaders, his language turned harsher.

“Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values and indoctrinate our children,” Mr. Trump said in a speech at Mount Rushmore in July of that year.

Some observers have been puzzled by the jumble of figures proposed for Mr. Trump's sculpture garden, which includes the anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, the antifascist philosopher Hannah Arendt and others not typically lionized by conservatives alongside traditional patriotic icons like George Washington, Betsy Ross and the Wright brothers.

Image



President Trump and the first lady, Melania Trump, at a Fourth of July celebration in 2019 in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

But some scholars say it's important to remember that liberals are not the only ones who care about inclusion, or get to decide what it means.

[Wilfred McClay](#), a historian at Hillsdale College who narrated one of the White House's newly released history videos, said that no group or individual — whether “certified professional historians” or the president — owns the American story. And conservative historians, he said, have as much right to contest prevailing scholarly interpretations as their liberal colleagues did before them.

Mr. McClay, a member of the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, said that the 250th should be a moment to bring all Americans together, including those “who disagree, and perhaps even loathe one another.”

“This isn’t the occasion to compel everyone to agree, or relitigate every old quarrel,” he said. “This is the moment to set all that aside.”

The White House declined to comment or make anyone connected with Task Force 250 available for an interview. But there are signs that it is moving to exert influence with other planners.

A Task Force staff member, Brittany Baldwin, has been contacting state planners by email, asking for information about their “top three to five” programs, and expressing interest in supporting “aligned initiatives.”

And in March, Mr. Haley and others from the administration attended a meeting at Mount Vernon of the [U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission](#), a bipartisan group authorized by Congress in 2016.

Shortly after, state planners were told that the commission had ended its relationship with Precision Strategies, a prominent Washington strategy and marketing agency founded by veterans of the Obama campaign and administration. The agency had been overseeing some tent pole 250th programs, including a student essay contest called [America’s Field Trip](#).

The commission has recently hired Event Strategies Inc., a company with deep ties to Trump circles that [drew scrutiny](#) for its role in helping to organize the Stop the Steal rally in Washington on Jan. 6, 2021, to support events and activities around [Our American Story](#), a crowdsourced oral history project.

Rosie Rios, the commission’s chair, who served as treasurer of the United States during the Obama administration, said she was thrilled by the White House’s strong support. She said there had been no criticisms of any of the commission’s existing programs, which include a volunteerism campaign called [“America Gives.”](#) And she said she did not believe the 250th itself would be politicized.

“They have been great partners,” she said of the White House. “I think we all want to create the largest and most inspiring celebration in our nation’s history.”

Mr. Neem, the historian, is more skeptical of Mr. Trump’s embrace of the 250th, and what he sees as his broader attack on expertise and scholarship of all kinds. But he said it’s also true that historical scholarship does not always leave room for appreciation for things like the heroism of the Minutemen who [fought on Lexington Green](#) 250 years ago.

For many Americans across the political spectrum, Mr. Neem said, that heroism remains real, and to dismiss it can feel like violating something “sacred.”

“If we miss that,” he said, “we are missing the point.”