

Testimony for Anthea M. Hartig, PhD
Elizabeth MacMillan Director, National Museum of American History
Committee on House Administration
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Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I know this Committee has questions about the National Museum of American History, and I welcome the chance to answer them directly and to work with you.

As a historian, I have spent my career studying, teaching and preserving the history of the United States. My family has served this country since the Revolutionary War, and I was raised with a deep sense of obligation to this country and to the democratic ideals it asks each generation to uphold.

I started at the Smithsonian in 2019 and am honored to serve as the Elizabeth MacMillan Director of your National Museum of American History, the home of the Star-Spangled Banner. It is a true honor to serve alongside my devoted fellow public servants who staff the Museum, and I am immensely proud of our work.

The Smithsonian Institution was created by Congress in 1846 with a mission for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” It is an independent trust instrumentality of the United States, outside of the Executive Branch of government, governed by a Board of Regents, consisting of the Vice President, the Chief Justice, three Members of the House of Representatives, three Members of the Senate, and nine distinguished citizens appointed by Joint Resolution of Congress.

I want to address the White House Domestic Policy Council’s report directly, because you deserve directness. I take the concerns it raises seriously, as does the Smithsonian, and where we can do better, we will do better. At the same time, as we continue to fact-check the report, and as the director of the museum for the last 7 years, I can attest that the report does not fairly characterize the full body of work at this museum. I am familiar with the depth and breadth of our collections, exhibits, and programming. And while I recognize there is always room for improvement, I also know the beauty, inspiration, and expertise that exists in our museum.

Let me begin with what a family finds when they walk through our doors, free of charge, as two million people did last year. They find the Star-Spangled Banner, the flag that flew over Fort McHenry and became one of the most powerful symbols of the nation’s survival and independence. They find the desk on which Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, Horatio Greenough’s statue of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln’s top hat, the Greensboro lunch counter, the gowns of the First Ladies and the story of Americans in uniform in *The Price of Freedom*. They find the inventions that changed the world and the ordinary Americans who built it. I have watched ten-year-olds with their families stand before

that flag with their hands over their hearts. No one told them to. That is the National Museum of American History at its most powerful: patriotism, not instructed, but inspired.

Our work is governed by the Smithsonian's standards of scholarship, accuracy, independence, and nonpartisanship. Those standards live in daily practice of rigor and integrity. The museum does not take sides in America's political debates. We preserve and document the evidence of American life in all its breadth, so that the public can encounter the past and draw their own conclusions. That has been the charge Congress gave the Smithsonian 180 years ago, and it remains our steadfast commitment today.

We are also always learning. When visitors, scholars, members of Congress, veterans and teachers tell us we have gotten something wrong or only half right, we welcome the feedback; we take it seriously, and we make changes when the evidence supports them. When historians talk about reframing a traditional narrative, we do not mean erasing it. We mean adding the evidence, voices and objects that earlier tellings left out, so that more Americans can see themselves in the national story. Examining the harder chapters of our history is not the same as hostility toward America. We can and do honor the Declaration, the Revolution, the Constitution, and our national symbols, and also tell the truth about the times the country fell short of its own founding ideals. Telling our history fully is not anti-American. It is a form of respect for the American people and a commitment to constantly be in pursuit of "a more perfect union."

It is my hope that you will judge this museum the way the American people do, by what is on its walls and in its care. Please accept our sincere invitation to come visit. Walk the building with me. Bring your families and your staff. Stand in awe in front of the Star-Spangled Banner.

I believe what you will find is not an institution that has forgotten its country, but one that loves it enough to tell the full sweep of our history, the triumphs and the struggles, the courage and the promise. I love this country. I consider it the privilege of my career to help preserve its treasures and serve the American people, and I am grateful for the chance to answer your questions today.