



**Testimony before the Committee on House Administration
United States House of Representatives
Hearing on “Oversight of the Smithsonian: Radical Revisionism
at the National Museum of American History”**

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Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jeff Anderson, and I am the president of the American Main Street Initiative, a think tank for everyday Americans.

The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History (NMAH) is perhaps the most important museum in America, yet its recent exhibits are substandard in almost every possible respect. Rather than depicting America’s history as it has traditionally and conventionally been conveyed—as the glorious and inspiring, though imperfect, story of a nation “conceived in Liberty”¹—it is depicted as a history of oppressors versus the oppressed, with most traditional American heroes portrayed as oppressors. When not condemning our history in this fashion, the NMAH often simply ignores it, leaving huge swaths of the American story untold.

The current leadership of the Smithsonian says that it is committed to having the Smithsonian be “a welcoming place of knowledge and discovery for all Americans.”² It declares support for an accurate and inclusive history that is non-partisan, fact-based, and informed by impartial scholarship. It emphasizes nuance, complexity, and context.

Unfortunately, the Smithsonian is not providing visitors with an accurate, non-partisan, nuanced, fact-based approach to American history. Instead, it is engaging in political activism and denigrating that history.

As is noted in the White House’s new report on the Smithsonian, “Saving America’s Story,” there has been a longstanding consensus about the proper role of the National Museum of American History.³ When the current museum opened in 1964 as the Museum of History and Technology (it was renamed the National Museum of American History in 1980), Remington Kellogg, the longtime director of the U.S. National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History) and former assistant secretary of the Smithsonian, said it was intended “to awaken in citizen and foreigner alike a clear understanding of the inspiring story of the United States—its origins, struggles, development, traditions, [and] strength.”⁴ At the museum’s dedication, President Lyndon Johnson said that its “iconic artifacts should be used to foster patriotism.”⁵

Contrast these sentiments with those of the current director of the NMAH, Anthea Hartig. As the White House report reveals, she has declared, “At the National Museum of American History, we work to reframe the traditional, celebratory narrative of U.S. history.”⁶ She has spoken of the importance of “connecting...research and scholarship to activism and advocacy.”⁷ She has called history “a prime tool of social justice.”⁸ In the lead up to this year’s national festivities, she talked about the need to “problematize” the “250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.”⁹ She has opined that “loving America is very complicated.”¹⁰

During Hartig’s tenure, the NMAH’s mission statement was changed.¹¹ The “infinite richness” of “American history” was taken out, along with the words “American” and “history.”¹² The word “future,” however, remained. (Indeed, Hartig has described this new mission statement as “very future-facing.”¹³) Increasingly, the National Museum of American History isn’t a museum about American history, but rather about activists’ attempts to shape the future.

Hartig also likes the word “complexity,” a term she uses in two senses. In the first, she sees complexity in the answer to questions to which most Americans across the ages would surely have answered “yes,” like, “Was the American founding great?,” “Were the American founders extraordinary?,” and “Does America have a glorious history about which Americans should be proud?”

But what Hartig usually means by “complexity” is simplicity, as our extraordinarily rich history is reduced to a formulaic story of oppressors versus the oppressed. The exhibits opened on her watch are the opposite of nuanced. They are heavy-handed, artless, agenda-driven, and dumbed down. Worse, they are anti-American, anti-historical, and disunifying.

Hartig is hardly the only culprit in the transformation of the Smithsonian. A major goal of Smithsonian leadership, stated explicitly by Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch, was to “legitimize” the widely discredited 1619 Project. A 2019 article published in the *Smithsonian Magazine* spoke of Bunch’s “insistence that the Smithsonian support the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project,” adding that “Bunch worked with [African American Museum] curator Mary Elliott on the museum’s contributions to the project and took pains to ensure the Smithsonian’s name would be publicly associated with it.”¹⁴ Secretary Bunch said he wanted the Smithsonian “to make diversity and inclusion so central that it’s no longer talked about” and “to legitimize important issues, whether it’s 1619 or climate change.”¹⁵

As Bunch has declared, “I always felt that the [Smithsonian’s] African American Museum was 1619 before the project, and critical race theory before critical race theory was popular.”¹⁶ Bunch has openly stated that the Smithsonian should use the “trust” that people place in museums to “inspire new generations of activists.”¹⁷

The central issue is how the Smithsonian should fulfill its civic mission. The NMAH, led for the past seven years by Director Hartig,¹⁸ portrays American history through a narrow lens of oppressors versus the oppressed, with most traditional American heroes falling into the former camp. It provides a sense that this nation’s founding constituted some degree of progress, but progress that was so incomplete as to not be worth celebrating as anything particularly noteworthy beyond a first step in the right direction by deeply flawed men. The museum is not particularly informative and is often inane, missing whole swaths of American history while focusing on present-day laments and trivialities. It is highly inconsistent and differs markedly

throughout. Its radical, tradition-eschewing agenda is so apparent as to be suffocating. In short, it is not remotely what a national museum should be.

Moreover, it is getting worse by the year. The newest parts of the NMAH are marked by spurs to activism, incessant social commentary, ubiquitous bilingual signage, dumbed-down exhibits, emphasis on the present-day at the expense of actual history, and focus on group identity at the expense of a shared American identity. In its newer exhibits, every sign in English is paired with a sign in Spanish. Not only is this disunifying, but the result is one of two things (or a blend of these): only half as much information is revealed on the signs; or the exhibits are cluttered with twice as many words. Some exhibits follow the former approach and are often embarrassingly uninformative; some follow the latter and are marred by a distracting excess of words, overwhelming the exhibits and creating an aesthetic eyesore.

The NMAH is really like multiple museums meshed together uncomfortably. Older exhibits are historically focused, informative, and unifying. Certain of these older exhibits are perhaps a bit bland or neglected, but none are overtly politicized or painfully simplistic like the newer exhibits, and all feature just one language and a sense of a common American heritage. “The Price of Freedom: Americans at War” is a good exhibit. “America on the Move” provides a history, full of compelling sights and sounds, of ground transportation used by Americans dating back almost 200 years, including a full-sized locomotive, a streetcar, and many automobiles. Meanwhile, the museum’s star attraction, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” apparently part of the museum since its opening in 1964, features the flag—calling it “a national treasure”—that flew above Fort McHenry and inspired the National Anthem.

Aside from these fine older exhibits, the NMAH is mostly a waste of valuable space—or worse. In the former category, earlier this year the entire east wing of the 2nd (main) floor—about one-sixth of the entire museum—had nothing in it. In the latter category, there are plenty of exhibits whose removal would represent addition by subtraction.

There is also a certain shoddiness to the museum. The interesting “On the Water” exhibit is poorly lit and strangely dark. During this Quarter-Millennial year, a letter was missing from a sign hanging in a prominent walkway. Many of the display spaces have been blocked off. And the sign beneath a bust of Thomas Edison has dangled crookedly, as if no one cared enough about Edison to fix it (which is probably the case). The museum has the markings of leadership more focused on other goals than on providing a high-quality experience for guests.

Beyond this, the NMAH says little to nothing to say about a wide range of major events in American history: the colonial period, the American founding, the Louisiana Purchase and subsequent Lewis and Clark expedition; the Lincoln-Douglas debates over slavery; the pioneers and settlers of the American West; the Roaring ’20s and follow-on Great Depression; the Cold War. It doesn’t have any historical exhibits focused primarily on motion pictures, perhaps the quintessential American art form; or on sports, arguably Americans’ favorite pastime; or on our nation’s defining music, ranging from the American songbook to big bands, jazz, and rock ’n’ roll.

Instead, it features exhibits on such matters as “Really Big Money,” which discusses large, almost entirely foreign, currency. Here we learn that the “tail feather of [a] male quetzal bird is 21 inches long,” and those living “in Mexico and Central America once used quetzal tail feathers to make payments.” In the exhibit called “Object Project,” a mirror shows visitors reflections from the

waist down as a sign asks them, “Who wears the pants?” (Another says, “Are you dressed American?”) In a large exhibit (housed in the “Hall of Culture and the Arts”) called “Corazón y Vida: Lowriding Culture,” we learn—as the song “Low Rider” plays on a loop and we see Lowrider cars on display—that “Lowriding is more than blinged-out cars and bold tricks. It’s a way of life.” Another exhibit, opened during the spring of this Quarter-Millennial year while the museum neglected essentially all aspects of the American founding, is called, “¡Puro Ritmo!: The Musical Journey of Salsa.”

Decades ago, the museum had a compelling exhibit showing actual television broadcasts of the Kennedy-Nixon debate and of Walter Cronkite describing the Apollo 11 moon landing as it happened, and interesting newsreel footage from World War II. Such exhibits allowed earlier Americans to speak in their own words. Now, the Smithsonian’s leadership prefers to speak *for* everyone and tell visitors what they should think about their forebears as well as about present-day America.

Take an exhibit called “Many Voices, One Nation,” where half the signs are in Spanish. The exhibit should be entitled, “Many Voices, Two Nations,” as that is largely what it depicts. Almost no sense is conveyed of a shared national identity in the manner that Abraham Lincoln talked about—a shared belief in our founding documents and principles. Instead, the exhibit suggests that the U.S. is made up of many people, with two languages, who share little common ground but ended up living in one place. A heading reading “Assimilation” is countered with one saying “Resisting Assimilation.”

The exhibit’s view of American settlers and founders is summed up in this large heading: “Unsettling the Continent, 1492–1776.” On that same sign, we’re told, “Our world today grows out of that unsettling history.” Elsewhere, we learn, “In creating the new nation, early leaders envisioned a country that promised opportunity and freedom—but only for some.” This conveys that the “self-evident” truth “that all men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” apparently shouldn’t be taken at face value, as Lincoln took it.¹⁹

This exhibit also features a bat from Stan Musial and a helmet from Carl Yastrzemski—two first-ballot Hall of Famers—alongside a glove from Diego Segui, a largely unknown Cuban-born player who had a losing record as a journeyman pitcher. By the time Segui cracked the big leagues, Cuban-born players had been playing in the majors for more than a half-century, so the rationale for his inclusion with these two all-time greats is a mystery. We do learn, however, that baseball “has been one way for immigrants and those facing discrimination to negotiate what it mean to be American.”

Elsewhere, in a strange new half-Spanish exhibit, opened in March 2024, called “Change YOUR Game”/“Cambria TU Juego”—which the Smithsonian [calls](#) “family-friendly”—visitors are asked, “Is Gender Testing Fair?”/“¿Es Justa La Verificación?” They’re then told that “critics argue that gender tests are humiliating and discriminate against athletes who challenge traditional gender norms.” (They’re also told roughly the same thing in Spanish.) This inane exhibit offers such keen historical insights as these (bold font in the original): “Who Can Be a Game Changer? **Anyone.**”/“¿Quién Puede Cambriar El Juego? **Cualquien.**” “Who Is a Game Changer? **You Are.**”/“¿Puedes Tú Cambriar El Juego? **Sí Puedes.**” “What problems—in sports or in your everyday life—do you want to solve?”/“¿Qué problemas (en los deportes o la vida diaria) quieres

resolver?” Such present-day bilingual inanities are a far cry from what everyday Americans expect, or want, from a museum ostensibly devoted to American history.

The museum’s politicized presentation is essentially never-ending. A display case in one hallway contains a lone NFL jersey. Is it from Jim Thorpe?— Red Grange?—Jim Brown? No, it’s from someone named Carl Nassib, who wore the jersey “when he became the first openly gay player to take the field in a regular-season game.” Nearby, in a mini-exhibit on video games, visitors are asked (in both English and Spanish), “Have you ever experimented with your identity in video games?”

In “Entertainment Nation,” a gallery combining compelling pop-cultural artifacts (like an R2-D2 and C-3PO) with almost constant leftist social commentary and huge signs providing space for Spanish alongside every word printed in English, visitors learn the following: “Inside the ‘What’s So Funny?’ micro-gallery is a program that comments on entertainment’s roots in and role in perpetuating racism.”

Finally, in “American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith,” the museum presents the two ways it suggests that visitors can view our nation’s founding and founding fathers: “Was it a complete, perfect, sacred event led by a great patriot who, as American children would learn, never told a lie?” Presumably not, so that leaves this: “Or was it part of a wider, unfinished movement” that was “deeply imperfect”? One can guess what the Smithsonian’s leadership would answer.

No such false dichotomies are presented 162 miles to the south, at the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown, which provides an enlightening contrast with the NMAH. There, the founders are portrayed not as having achieved utopian perfection, but as having been extraordinary leaders and statesmen who brought forth a great nation, partly because they understood human nature and the forms of government best suited to it.

At the start of the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown, visitors’ connection to the founders is strengthened through a series of photographs of people who actually witnessed the events of the American Revolution and lived long enough to be photographed in the mid-19th century. One photo and accompanying quote is from a man who personally witnessed the Boston Massacre. Another is from a man who describes crossing the Delaware with the Continental Army on the night of December 25, 1776. Yet another is from a woman who actually talked with George Washington at Yorktown in the days leading up to the British surrender. As the nearby sign puts it, “These are photographs of men and women who lived during the American Revolution. They are rare opportunities to see the faces of the revolutionary generation because not many witnesses of the war survived long enough to see the invention of photography.”

The museum’s introductory film, “Liberty Fever,” is pro-American and somewhat inspiring. Rather than depicting white males as the oppressors and everyone else as the oppressed, like the NMAH generally does, the film highlights Billy Flora, a free black man in Virginia who fought alongside his fellow Americans at the Battle of Great Bridge near Norfolk and is described as a “hero.” A woman is portrayed as a principled patriot who very much has control over her household (and husband). When her brother tries to recruit her husband to join the Loyalist cause, she rebukes her brother and tells her husband that if he goes with the British, he can stay with the British. (The brother leaves, and the husband stays.)

A soldier in the Continental Army then speaks of the remarkable bravery that George Washington showed while successfully rallying the American troops, at great personal risk, in the midst of a battle. He marvels at “Washington’s greatness.” At the same time, the film shows an Indian fighting for the Americans in South Carolina and wondering, “Will the independence of my people be remembered? Will your liberty be gained at the cost of my own?” In all, the film describes America as “a country founded on individual liberty and the consent of the governed”—a far better formulation than the NMAH musters in its “American Democracy” exhibit or perhaps anywhere else within its walls.

The American Revolution Museum does not remotely ignore the matter of slavery. It repeatedly notes its existence, with headings like, “Slavery in Colonial America,” “The Beginnings of the Anti-Slavery Movement in Britain and America,” “The Enduring Problem of Slavery,” and “The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the New Nation.” But it doesn’t blame the existence of that tyrannical institution on any one man, or any one group of men, who inherited that way of life.

Moreover, the Yorktown museum makes clear that most of the American founders recognized the injustice of slavery and its egregious inconsistency with the God-given right to liberty. They quote Virginian George Mason as saying, “Such a trade is...disgraceful to mankind,” and fellow-Virginian Thomas Jefferson as declaring, “The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced,” and “This abomination must have an end, and there is a superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it.” The museum also notes, “The American Revolution had a profound impact on African Americans throughout the 13 states of the new nation. The ideals of the Revolution made many more people decide that slavery was wrong” and “dramatically shifted public opinion on the issue.” Still, the issue would await Lincoln and a bloody Civil War for its ultimate resolution.

Nor does the museum shy away from discussing the plight of the American Indians, saying, “The relationship of Indians as groups and individuals to the British colonial population was complex. Some colonists interacted peacefully with the Indians and maintained their profitable trade with them. Other colonists just wanted to seize as much Indian land as possible.” It also observes, “Both the British and the Patriots felt justified in using very harsh tactics against their Indian enemies.” What’s more, “The Patriot victory in the Revolution had damaging consequences for most Indians”—most of whom had sided with the British—“living within the newly-independent United States.”

In all, however, the American cause is plainly portrayed as a noble and just one, as the American leaders, soldiers, and everyday patriots alike were willing to suffer great hardships to secure their God-given right to liberty and republican self-rule. As Thomas Paine wrote, in a quote featured on the museum’s timeline of the American Revolution, “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom, must, like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it.” A few years further down the timeline, Paine is quoted as saying, “The times that tried men’s souls are over—and the greatest and completest revolution the world ever knew, gloriously and happily accomplished.”

This is what most Americans rightly want from their American history museums, not the blend of activism, disparagement, and neglect provided at the NMAH. Visitors can vote with their feet, and many have been. According to the Smithsonian’s own published statistics, the NMAH experienced 1.8 million visits in 2025.²⁰ (The Smithsonian counts visits, not unique visitors.

Someone entering multiple times, even on the same day, is counted multiple times.) That's down from 2.1 million in 2018—a 14% one-year decline. Even more tellingly, in 2018, the last year before Anthea Hartig became the museum's director (and Bunch became the Secretary of the Smithsonian), the National Museum of American History experienced 4.1 million visits—so, annual attendance has declined by a whopping 56% on her watch. What's more, as recently as 2018, the NMAH had 85% as many visits as the National Museum of Natural History. By 2025, that number had dropped to 55%. In other words, attendance at the NMAH is in a free-fall.

Across all Smithsonian museums (including such properties as the National Zoo), average annual attendance dropped almost in half from 2018 (the last year pre-Bunch) to 2025, falling from 28.5 million visits to 14.9 million—a decline of 48% in just seven years. While a portion of that decline is presumably attributable to a lengthy renovation of the National Air and Space Museum on the National Mall that has been taking place since late-2018—as visits there declined from 6.2 million in 2018 to 1.9 million in 2025—visits to the other Smithsonian museums, apart from the National Air and Space Museum on the Mall, declined by 9.3 million and 42% from 2018 to 2025.

The American Alliance of Museums reports that a majority (51%) of U.S. museums had attendance in 2024 that matched or surpassed their pre-Covid attendance.²¹ Far from being among that majority, in 2024 the Smithsonian experienced a 24% decline in visits versus 2019 and a 44% decline versus 2010—even before a further 11% drop in visits in 2025. The decline in visits to the NMAH was steeper still. In short, attendance at the Smithsonian museums has dropped dramatically in recent years, while attendance at most museums in American has remained relatively constant.

Last fall, the Hudson Institute's John Fonte and I had the opportunity to interview Ken Burns shortly before the release of his documentary, *The American Revolution*. Burns called the American founders “a dream team.”²² When I asked him who came off as the greatest hero in his documentary, he replied without hesitation, “Oh, without a question, it's George Washington. We don't have a country without him.”²³

Burns then elaborated:

“Washington spent most of the six and a half years of the war in a tent, not home. He may have been the wealthiest person in America. So he's also mutually pledging not only his life...but his fortune—I wonder if the richest people in the world are willing at any time to risk that—and [his] sacred honor, which is, I think, at the heart of all of this. And the free electron that turns up in the quotes that we've assembled...—the free electron is the word ‘virtue.’ And I think that's sort of...missing from our conversations today.”²⁴

None of that sentiment appears in the newer exhibits at the National Museum of American History.

That's because such exhibits are not being designed by old-school liberals, by centrists, or by conservatives. They are being designed by activists—by woke revolutionaries who don't believe in the ideals of the American Revolution. Such activists want to fundamentally transform the nation and are using the NMAH in their attempts to do so. China, Iran, or North Korea would happily finance such anti-Americanism in our national museums, but they don't have to because American taxpayers are unwittingly footing the bill.

It's past time for a change of leadership and direction at the Smithsonian Institution writ large, and at the National Museum of American History in particular.

Thank you.

¹ Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863.

² <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-statement>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Smithsonian-Report-Saving-Americas-Story.pdf>

⁴ David K. Allison & Hannah Peterson, Exhibiting America: The Smithsonian's National History Museum, 1881- 2018 (Feb. 18, 2021), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-SI-PURL-gpo152991/pdf/GOVPUB-SIPURL-gpo152991.pdf>, at 54.

⁵ David K. Allison & Hannah Peterson, Exhibiting America: The Smithsonian's National History Museum, 1881- 2018 (Feb. 18, 2021), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-SI-PURL-gpo152991/pdf/GOVPUB-SIPURL-gpo152991.pdf>, at 44.

⁶ Anthea M. Hartig, In Slavery's Shadow: George Floyd and American Legacies, NAT'L MUSEUM OF AM. HIST. (May 31, 2020), <https://americanhistory.si.edu/press/releases/slaverys-shadow-george-floyd-and-americanlegacies-anthea-m-hartig-elizabeth>.

⁷ University of California Riverside, Chancellor's Distinguished Lecture Series: Anthea M. Hartig, (YouTube, Nov. 16, 2020) at 41:24, <https://youtu.be/QxKVJ1pYcEw?t=2484>.

⁸ Luskin Center for History and Policy, Doing History Now Musings on Relevance, Impact, and Service (Anthea Hartig), (YouTube, Feb. 25, 2025) at 3:01, <https://youtu.be/WaxpiAFKW8o?t=181>.

⁹ University of California Riverside, Chancellor's Distinguished Lecture Series: Anthea M. Hartig, (YouTube, Nov. 16, 2020) at 1:03:31, <https://youtu.be/QxKVJ1pYcEw?t=3811>.

¹⁰ Joseph McGill and the Slave Dwelling Project, Challenging the Narrative Landscape of the Past to Create a More Just Future (YouTube, Sept. 20, 2022) at 14:15, <https://youtu.be/CVpbfZnBNu4?t=855>.

¹¹ National Museum of American History – Strategic Plan: 2013-2018, NMAH (2013), https://amhistory.si.edu/docs/nmah_strategicplan_2013.pdf (showing NMAH's previous mission statement).

¹² See Strategic Plan 2020-2030, NMAH (Feb. 2020) (on file with author), at 1; see also Screenshot of Director Hartig outlining NMAH's new mission, available at <https://youtu.be/QxKVJ1pYcEw?t=2578>.

¹³ Luskin Center for History and Policy, Doing History Now Musings on Relevance, Impact, and Service (Anthea Hartig), (YouTube, Feb. 25, 2025) at 1:15:36, <https://youtu.be/WaxpiAFKW8o?t=4536>.

¹⁴ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/lonnie-bunch-sizes-his-past-and-future-smithsonian-180973198/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvZU2XkkuQ>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ <https://www.si.edu/about/bios/anthea-m-hartig>

¹⁹ The Declaration of Independence, 1776.

²⁰ <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/about/stats>

²¹ <https://www.aam-us.org/2024/11/14/2024-annual-national-snapshot-of-united-states-museums/>

²² https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2025/11/12/ken_burns_after_250_years_the_american_revolution_stands_as_the_most_important_event_since_the_birth_of_christ.html

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.