

COMMENT

AT THE SMITHSONIAN, DONALD TRUMP TAKES AIM AT HISTORY

The urge to police the past is hardly an invention of the Trump Administration. It is the reflexive obsession of autocrats everywhere.

By David Remnick

April 6, 2025



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs (left to right) by Kevin Dietsch / Getty; Carl Court / Getty; Beata Zawrzet / NurPhoto / Getty; WPA / Alamy

In the very first paragraph of Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's operating manual for a second Trump Administration, battle lines over history are drawn: "America is now divided between two opposing forces: woke revolutionaries and those who believe in the ideals of the American revolution." Three weeks after Donald Trump's election, Mike Gonzalez, a contributor to Project 2025, and Armen Tooloee, the former chief of staff to the right-wing activist Christopher Rufo, elaborated on the new Administration's martial maneuvers, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* that, in order "to put a spike through the heart of woke," the White House was duty bound to "retake control of museums, starting with the Smithsonian Institution."

During the campaign, Trump professed ignorance of Project 2025. "I've never read it, and I never will," he said. This was hard to parse. While it really was difficult to imagine Trump hunched over his desk, underlining passages in the report's nine hundred-plus pages, he obviously had what is known in Washington as a "situational awareness" of its prescriptions to maximize executive power, slash government agencies, punish perceived enemies, intimidate dissenters, and rule as an autocrat. Trump is enacting Project 2025 nearly to the letter, deploying executive orders, lawsuits, and rhetorical bombast in an effort to force judges, law firms, cultural institutions, university presidents, and press barons into postures of pitiable obedience. He has even taken time to bring to heel that center of Brechtian cultural rebellion, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

As is true of autocracies everywhere, this Administration demands a mystical view of an imagined past. In late March, Trump issued an executive order called “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History.” Its diagnosis is that there has long been among professors and curators “a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation’s history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth.” It continues:

Under this historical revision, our Nation’s unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness is reconstructed as inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed. Rather than fostering unity and a deeper understanding of our shared past, the widespread effort to rewrite history deepens societal divides and fosters a sense of national shame.

The Smithsonian, the vast complex of museums that millions of Americans visit every year to see Lincoln’s top hat, the Spirit of St. Louis, Harriet Tubman’s shawl, a moon rock, and Dorothy’s ruby slippers, is at the center of the executive order’s indignation. The order takes particular issue with a sculpture exhibit at the Smithsonian American Art Museum called “The Shape of Power,” saying that it pushes “the view that race is not a biological reality but a social construct.”

Perhaps it is rude or “revisionist” to question the scholarship of an executive order, but the curators got it right. As a wall text at the exhibit points out, human beings are “99.9 percent genetically the same.” The opposing view, racial essentialism, is hardly benign; it is the underpinning of virulent bigotry, from the description of Jews as vermin in *Der Stürmer* to the assertions in white-nationalist manifestos that Black people are cursed with inferior I.Q.s.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture—which, until recently, was run by *The New Yorker’s* poetry editor, Kevin Young—comes in for particularly splenetic denunciation. Trump, in his first term, expressed a modicum of admiration while visiting what is affectionately called the Black Smithsonian. It is a spectacular museum, one that richly represents the story of African American struggle, suffering, and achievement. Daily, adults and schoolkids take in exhibits about chattel slavery and Jim Crow, Reconstruction and the civil-rights movement, and leave with a deeper understanding of American history in all its darkness and its promise. But in a culture war that demands that political opponents be branded, en masse, as “woke revolutionaries,” there can be no complexity. And it will be the job, according to the executive order, of Vice-President J. D. Vance, who sits on the Smithsonian’s board, to make matters simple. Vance is charged with leading the effort to remove from the museum what is called, in exquisite Orwellese, “improper ideology.”

This urge to police the past is hardly unique to the Trump Administration. It is the reflexive obsession of autocrats everywhere. The history museums that were once a feature of many Soviet cities did not interrogate the life of Lenin. They were places of orthodox worship. His typescripts and teacups were sacralized, like the Shroud of Turin. More important, his ideological tenets were not left open to discussion. For decades, the second-most important figure in the Communist Party, after the General Secretary, was arguably the chief ideologist, who had the final word over what could and could not be said about history.

When Mikhail Gorbachev set out forty years ago to democratize the Soviet Union, one of his boldest moves was to encourage revisionism—or, better, free heterodox argument. This led to the sanctioned publication of countless previously censored writers, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who described in “The Gulag Archipelago” how Lenin had initiated a system of labor camps from Moscow to Magadan. Such historical revelations, belatedly publicized and debated, were necessary, yet immeasurably painful. Among the more hidebound leaders of the Party, this new liberalism—call it late-Soviet wokeism—was intolerable. At the time, one of Gorbachev’s rivals in the Party, Yegor Ligachev, complained to me (in tones that anticipated Project 2025) that when history was taken out of the hands of the Party it created a “gloomy” atmosphere in society. “People are longing for something positive, something shining,” he said. “Yet our own cultural figures have published more lies and anti-Soviet things than our Western enemies ever did.”

Ligachev, who died in 2021, lived to see the last embers of Russian liberalism extinguished. Vladimir Putin lacks a Heritage Foundation, but he has made do. In 2013, he complained that Russia’s short-lived period of historical pluralism led to textbooks replete with “internal contradictions and ambiguous interpretations.” His culture-war commissars took the cue, and approved a textbook filled with unquestioned assertions of official history: “Russia is a country of heroes.” And “Ukraine is a neo-Nazi state.” In the same spirit, according to *Foreign Policy*, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping oversaw the establishment a few years ago of a “historical nihilism” hotline so that citizens could rat out anyone who shared “wrong ideas and viewpoints.”

Trump’s executive order on history does not repeat precisely the tactics of Putin or Xi. But it rhymes. ♦

Published in the print edition of the April 14, 2025, issue, with the headline “Policing the Past.”

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