The Fight Over America's Public History

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The American people can never forget the Revolutionary War and the Declaration of Independence—for the simple reason that if they ever do forget, they will no longer be Americans.

As individuals, we are not entirely defined by our personal histories. We can change. So can nations. But just as no one would discard his or her personal history—memories of family and friends, of love nurtured and adversity overcome—for anything less than the most dire of reasons, a nation cannot erase or tamper with its own history unless it has decided to become something else: a new country, unattached to its old founding principles and formative experiences.

A man would only give up his personal past if he believed it was irredeemably wicked and that he must become a wholly new man to be a good man. The same is true for our nation: any case for forgetting or rewriting our national story must assume that our past is thoroughly wicked—that to be good and worthy in the future, we must become something other than the America that was founded in 1776.

Political progressives in the U.S. have long believed that they can improve on America's founding principles. Woodrow Wilson, in his 1913 book *The New Freedom*, lamented that some Americans "have never got beyond the Declaration of Independence." Similarly, dreamers in America's institutions of higher education—rejecting the American Founders' belief in a fixed and imperfect human nature—have imagined that our nature could be perfected through the use of government unshackled from the limits imposed by the Constitution.

In more recent times, these ways of thinking have wormed their way deep into our institutions of public history as well, creating a crisis that deserves our urgent attention.

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Public history is the branch of the historical field that is specifically devoted to presenting the past to the people at large—not just to students or to specialists but to everyone. Our great museums and historic sites, our battlefields and presidential libraries, our national monuments and local memorials are all representations of public history. They are cared for and curated not only by scholars but also by national park rangers, other public employees, volunteers, philanthropists, and charitable organizations.

Many of our national historic sites are entirely in private hands, and some of those—such as Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington—are exemplary in their dedication to presenting America's story truthfully and affirmatively.

The most fundamental question any historic site must answer is not what happened at a given place in the past but why it matters for the public. The latter question unavoidably involves moral judgment. Take the example of Mount Vernon. As a historic site, should it celebrate Washington? That depends on whether Washington was the sort of man who should be celebrated—whether his achievements were good or not.

Our Founding Fathers were not morally unblemished, and they had no illusions about their failings. They knew, for instance, that slavery was iniquitous. Yet they were confident that the cause of the United States was just and that its institutions—which they devised through much struggle and disagreement—would provide an effective means to pursue justice in practice. Washington deserves to be honored in our nation's memory because what he advanced, in total, was not oppression, not slavery or wickedness, but justice.

Our historic sites must, by their nature, do more than supply accurate factual information. They must also be places of moral education, where the justice of the American story is presented to the public. Americans long to understand themselves better by understanding their history. They are searching for more than just the facts—they want to know what our story means for who we are as a people.

This is why millions of families and individuals flock to our Civil War battlefields and national museums. It's why local museums and historic sites generate remarkable interest and enthusiasm as well—not least from the volunteers who are often indispensable to keeping them open. The public funds and private donations dedicated to our museums and historic sites are a testament to the importance the American people place on their national and regional memory. These institutions of public memory serve a higher purpose than curiosity or nostalgia.

In 1838, in one of his most important early speeches, Abraham Lincoln taught his audience at the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois—as well as future generations of Americans who would read his speech—that *memory* had sustained our republican institutions and our freedom in the perilous infancy of the nation. Americans knew who they were as a people because they remembered what they had fought for in the Revolution. The memory was fresh because the men who did the fighting were still to be found in the public square and the family home: veterans of the Revolutionary War kept alive the *feeling* that had animated the struggle. The *scenes* of the Revolution were still almost before the eyes of the succeeding generation.

In this speech, Lincoln the statesman speaks also as a theater critic and close reader of Shakespeare: our history was a drama that continued to purge men's passions and shape their emotional attachments. But Lincoln had a warning for his later-day audience:

I do not mean to say, that the scenes of the revolution *are now* or *ever will be* entirely forgotten; but that like every thing else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time. In history, we hope, they will be read of, and recounted, so long as the Bible shall be read. . . . Even then, they *cannot be* so universally known, nor so vividly felt, as they were by the generation just gone to rest. At the close of that struggle, nearly every adult male had been a participator in some of its scenes. . . . [I]n the form of a husband, a father, a son or a brother, a *living history was* to be found in every family—a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related. . . . But *those* histories are gone. They *can* be read no more forever.

"They *were* the pillars of the temple of liberty," Lincoln continued, "and now that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason." What *passion* had accomplished in our earliest decades as a free country—through scenes that had a lingering presence as a mental echo—*reason* would now have to continue. We, as a people, wouldn't always know the feeling of the Revolution, but we could remember its rational and moral cause. We could remember the justice of that cause, which reason could and did—and does—establish.

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American history is not just a history of philosophy, but it is unavoidably philosophical just as it is unavoidably moral. Lincoln knew this, and American historians for the better part of 200 years knew it, too. But beginning in the 20th century, a new anti-American counter history started to develop. This revisionist

history was moral by its own lights, but it was short on sound reason. Its moral starting point was that our national story had its roots not in the pursuit of justice through self-government but rather in injustice and oppression.

The spirit of revisionism took advantage of the great idealism and capacity for self-criticism that remain genuine traits of our national character. But it took its inspiration from a source contrary to America's philosophy: the thought of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others who followed him, including Karl Marx. This new philosophy held that freedom and prosperity had been the original or natural condition of mankind before the introduction of private property, which was the source of selfish pride, violence, and inequality. By this way of thinking, Western Civilization became the most prosperous civilization in history only because it was the most unjust.

In both the classical philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian theological tradition, human nature is understood to be imperfect or sinful. As inheritors of those traditions, the historical understanding of America's Founders and of most Americans down through time was that our *less* imperfect civilization came into contact with, and ultimately replaced, *more* imperfect civilizations. And what is more, that our civilization has shown an exceptional capacity to become *more perfect* over time through the exertion of reason and virtue, as seen in such events as the American Revolution, the adoption of the Constitution, the Civil War and abolition of slavery, the civil rights advances of the 1950s and '60s, the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in World War Two, and the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

For adherents of the philosophy of Rousseau and Marx, by contrast, sinfulness and imperfection are unnatural, the product of circumstances and the wickedness of specific classes and individuals that have exploited those circumstances. They focus single-mindedly on the imperfections of our history, condemning Christopher Columbus and the Englishmen who subsequently established colonies here as if America's coming to be destroyed a historical Eden.

According to this ideological corruption of historical scholarship, America's story is only the culminating chapter in the book of Western Civilization's injustices. Real history, from this point of view, is the story of how constant oppression kept everyone who was not bourgeois or Christian or white or "cishet"—a word recently invented by leftists to describe a heterosexual whose gender coincides with the "gender assigned at birth" (i.e., biological gender)—from living perfectly prosperous and happy lives.

This new moral philosophy placed history in the service of a political myth that required the establishment of a new political order through a revolution *against*

America. Yet this revolution did not have to be violent—at least not in its early stages. It could largely be brought about through re-education and the rewriting of history.

Understanding this, we can understand what is happening with public history in America today.

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America's capacity to become more perfect over time through the exertion of reason and virtue was most clearly evident at the moment of its creation, with the writing and signing of the Declaration of Independence. This year marks the Declaration's 250th anniversary. Yet our institutions of public history have, in all too many instances, failed to celebrate this anniversary as they did the Declaration's bicentennial 50 years ago in 1976. The reason for this is that they have adopted, whether openly or covertly, the moral philosophy descended from Rousseau and Marx that is incompatible with the American Founding and therefore with America itself.

The 21 museums and galleries of the Smithsonian Institution, to take a prominent example, may not be as obviously ideologically radical as many university history departments are. But the Smithsonian, along with all too many historic sites maintained by the National Park Service—and too many privately-controlled (yet often publicly funded) historic places as well—has moved steadily in the revisionist direction. Year after year it continues down the path of least resistance, in an environment where intellectual elites have adopted the moral assumptions of the ideological Left.

Sometimes the omissions are more glaring than the inclusions: in this 250th year of the Declaration of Independence, for example, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has featured few exhibits on the American Revolution, the Continental Congress, or the Founding Fathers. What takes the place of such exhibits are often features on the travails of immigrants or slaves—important subjects that are part of our story, and are not to be overlooked, but that cannot explain how our nation came to be or why its coming to be matters. And some exhibits openly flaunt the radicalism of the new moral underpinnings of public history: a "crotch harness" has been on display at the National Museum of American History to celebrate the sadomasochistic side of LGBTQ ideology, for example.

If our institutions of public history had an effect only on those who visit our museums and historic sites, that would be bad enough. Only visitors would come away with the impression that America has been, from the start, a land of injustice whose traditional civic heroes were either irrelevant or villainous. Yet the

degradation of public history has much more wide-ranging consequences, particularly in the case of the Smithsonian, given that educational materials it prepares and endorses are used in classrooms across the country, from kindergarten to college.

The Smithsonian's own history gives it tremendous prestige, which is now being conscripted into the service of racial and gender ideologies. Although those ideologies originate in the hothouses of higher education, our institutions of public history now popularize and disseminate them, often in rather more moderate—and therefore in fact more subversive—forms.

It is natural that the public believes a presidential historic home or library has unique authority to speak for that president's legacy. So when Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and James Madison's Montpelier come under the control of boards that subscribe to Rousseauian-Marxist philosophy and the anti-American understanding of history that follows, the result is that the national memories of Jefferson and Madison are distorted.

The American public is not easily persuaded that our republic's old heroes were in fact knaves or monsters, yet they do not have to be persuaded—it suffices if they are merely repulsed, or if the way our past is presented is so dull and tawdry that fewer and fewer Americans pursue their natural curiosity about who we are as a people in the first place. Alienation is a weapon of radicalism, and to the extent that Americans are made to turn away from their history, to become indifferent to the greatest Americans of the past, patriotism will inevitably wither. And once a people has lost its patriotism, it ceases to be a people. It becomes a mass—at best an aggregate of individuals who have lost the confidence required for self-government, at worst the seedbed of new revolutionary movements intent upon creating a new state from the ruins of the old.

If one truly believes that America was morally wrong from the beginning—that what our Founding Fathers achieved was only to devise new systems to keep men and women from returning to their natural self-fulfillment and material equality—then it is entirely logical to do the opposite of what Lincoln called for: not to shore up our memories and institutions with reason, but to stoke feelings of resentment and hatred toward our past in order to build a radically different future. Yet the kind of future one can build depends on human nature, and if it is our imperfect, sinful nature rather than our historical inheritance that is preventing us from creating heaven on earth, then we will find that abandoning that inheritance will only make us more miserable and less free.

There are remedies for what is being done to our institutions of public history, but they require strenuous efforts both public and private. Governments at all levels need to prevent public funds and public resources from being used to promote ideologies contrary to the principles of the American Founding. Watchdogs outside of government need to keep a keen eye on the abuses perpetrated by the leadership of the Smithsonian and other museums and historic sites and bring them to the attention of our political representatives and of the American people at large. Ultimately, of course, in this as in everything else, the American people themselves must take action.

Do Americans still wish to be the nation that was founded in 1776? Or do they wish to be a new nation founded on principles entirely different from those of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? The fight over public history is a fight to influence that decision. For only if Americans can be made to forget who they are, and who they have been, can they be taught to try a new experiment in founding a powerful state based on the myth of natural perfection and plenty.