



President Joseph R. Biden Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

February 18, 2021

Dear President Biden,

In the waning days of the Trump Administration, a Presidential Advisory Commission issued the “1776 Report.” This report can best be described as an unfortunate call for the indoctrination of American students around an unquestioned appeal to the sanctity of the nation’s founding documents, and a rejection of the ways the institution of slavery has shaped our beginnings as a nation. As the [American Historical Association’s condemnation of the report](#) put it, this Commission enacted a process to “elevate ignorance about the past to a civic virtue.”

On the very first day you assumed the presidency, your Administration wisely disbanded the Commission and removed the report from all federal government websites. However, as the largest professional organization in the country representing historians of U.S. history, the Organization of American Historians remains concerned about the continued politicization of the research, writing and teaching of U.S. history, and the increased sentiment that there is only one narrative that is legitimate in explaining the unfolding of the American nation.

Several conservative-leaning foundations have reposted the “1776 Report” on their websites, and, problematically, the report continues to have an effect on public policy debates about history and history education throughout the United States. For example, in Arkansas, state lawmakers introduced HB 1218 and 1231 on January 21, which would mandate that no public schools in the state—including K-12, two-year and four-year colleges—can teach about social justice issues. Schools doing so would face a reduction of public funding as a penalty. These bills further prohibit the use of public-school funds to teach about slavery by using the *New York Times* “1619 Project.” Similar proposals have been introduced in state legislatures in Iowa and Mississippi.

As noted in our [response to the September 2020 White House Conference on History](#), the OAH believes that it is only in the telling of *multiple narratives* of the founding of our nation that the truth and complexity of the American condition can be explored and understood. Moreover, it is clear to us that events of the past few months have shown the relevance and urgent need for a new commitment to the lessons of the U.S. Constitution and American democracy. While democracy in the United States has always been fragile and incomplete, direct threats to inclusion of those who have been historically left out of the political process have increased, while rampant voter disenfranchisement of communities of color, as well as incarcerated individuals and those with criminal records, continues.

The Organization of American Historians therefore calls on your Administration to enact, support, and fund multiple efforts to broaden the research, writing, teaching, and public discussion of the complicated history of American democracy, including the institution of slavery and the dispossession of Indigenous people. As part of these efforts, we recommend establishing a bipartisan commission tasked with examining the founding of our nation. Like the now defunct 1776 Commission, this newly appointed commission should examine the importance of 1776 and the country’s founding documents, but with the crucial difference of looking at this critical moment in the nation’s past

from multiple perspectives and exploring the multiple ways the nation's founding was recorded and later interpreted and understood. We stand ready to help you with this endeavor.

The OAH is already an active partner in efforts to commemorate and better understand the origins of American democracy in all its complexity. In cooperation with the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), for example, the OAH has begun planning and engaging the public in conversations around the commemoration of the upcoming 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026. As part of this collaboration, we are working to develop new tools for [communicating history's value with the public](#) in an effort to make U.S. history more relevant to all Americans in their daily lives, and to help facilitate public conversations that engage with the uncomfortable realities that shaped the nation's founding, including slavery and Indigenous dispossession. Addressing these topics deliberately is critical for understanding the relevance of multiple narratives and evolving historical interpretations to an appreciation for the many efforts to enact "a more perfect union" and a renewed commitment to democracy.

To advance these goals, the OAH is developing programming that dives headlong into the debate over contested meanings of history, organized around the theme, "The Struggle for the Future of the Past." The 2021 OAH Annual Meeting—"Pathways to Democracy"—will convene virtually in April and include myriad sessions focusing on historic and more recent events that have both challenged and moved forward U.S. democracy and democratic practice. A special session will convene to consider the broader history framing the assault on U.S. democracy and support for white supremacy that culminated in the January 6 attack on the Capitol. Subsequent to this event, monthly publicly accessible webinars will broadly address the ways in which the research, writing, and teaching of U.S. history is twisted to support limited, narrow conceptions of the nation's founding and the unfolding of the history of the United States. Through this programming, the OAH hopes to directly facilitate the ways that the broader public understands and appreciates historical complexity and the power of multiple narratives in U.S. history.

The Organization of American Historians remains dedicated to promoting excellence in the scholarship, teaching and presentation of American history, and to encouraging informed public discussion of and engagement with historical questions that are critical to understanding our nation's past. This is a teachable moment for the nation, and we hope your Administration will join with us in support of this important work.

Sincerely,



George J. Sanchez
President, 2020-2021



Beth English
Executive Director