



September 25, 2020

In his September 17, 2020, speech at the National Archives on history education, President Trump railed against “Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history,” which he characterized as “toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country.” Coming at the end of the White House Conference on American History—a hastily-arranged gathering, organized without input or participation from historical associations and including panelists who are not experts in the field—the remarks are only the most recent example of the Trump administration’s misguided and dangerous attempts to politicize the teaching and writing of United States history.

As the largest professional organization in the country representing historians of U.S. history, the Organization of American Historians opposes the biased views and mischaracterizations of historical inquiry and education expressed in these statements. Further, the OAH rejects the narrow and celebratory “1776 Project” put forward in this speech as a partisan ploy meant to restrict historical pedagogy, stifle deliberative discussion, and take us back to an earlier era characterized by a limited vision of the U.S. past.

History is not and cannot be simply celebratory. Vibrant democratic societies are not built upon a foundation of selective depictions of the past, but rather demand critical examination of and grappling with the historical record. The best historical inquiry acknowledges and interrogates systems of oppression—racial, ethnic, gender, class—and openly addresses the myriad injustices that these systems have perpetuated through the past and into the present. We ignore such history at our peril.

The history we teach must investigate the core conflict between a nation founded on radical notions of liberty, freedom, and equality, and a nation built on slavery, exploitation, and exclusion. The 1619 Project’s approach to understanding the American past and connecting it to newly urgent movements for racial justice and systemic reform point to this conflict, and to the ways in which slavery and racial injustice have and continue to profoundly shape our nation. Critical race theory provides a lens through which we can examine and understand systemic racism and its many consequences. It does not introduce the “twisted web of lies in our schools and classrooms” of the President’s telling, but rather illustrates the wide gap between the ideal and reality of opportunity in our shared past, as well as long-unfulfilled promises and possibilities.

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 both the triumphs and tragedies of our nation’s past. It is only through purposeful interrogations of our national story that we can appreciate the history of the United States in its full complexity and utilize our knowledge of it to inform our present and build a better future.

On behalf of the Executive Committee of the Organization of American Historians,

George Sanchez
President

Beth English
Executive Director