

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

Behold the Fall of “American Greatness” at the Smithsonian Institution

As an organization committed to protecting the freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression, the National Coalition Against Censorship is dismayed at growing reports that the Smithsonian Institution—which includes 21 museums, 14 education and research centers, a zoo, and historical and architectural landmarks—is distorting its programming in response to censorship pressures from the federal government. While the Smithsonian Institution was established by Congress and receives significant federal funding, it is designed to operate independently from the government. Indeed, this independence is an essential part of the institution’s founding charge “to increase and disseminate knowledge,” a mission that requires fealty to facts and free inquiry, rather than complying with the whims of partisan politics. Nevertheless, following an Executive Order demanding that the Institution rid its programs of any content that contradicts the President’s idea of “American Greatness,” the Trump Administration has repeatedly pressured, investigated, and targeted the Smithsonian for hosting exhibits and cultural events it disfavors. The Institution’s subsequent acts of self-censorship suggest that it is changing its programming in an effort to avoid presidential retaliation. This is in sharp contrast with the Smithsonian’s mission.

In July alone, there have been four such reported incidents of self-censorship. First publicized was the Trump Administration’s call for the review of *Entertainment Nation*, an exhibition at the National Museum of American History, because it includes contextual references to grim aspects of U.S. history, such as Jim Crow Era racism, American imperialism, Watergate, the Vietnam War, and more. The Smithsonian agreed to cooperate with the review. Shortly after, allegedly in an effort to avoid the ire of the President, the Smithsonian proposed to insert a documentary video into *American Sublime*, the upcoming Amy Sherald exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. The video would have included perspectives directly opposed to the vision of the artist and would have served to undermine her intent.

Now, new reports reveal that early in the month, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Heritage covered part of a temporary mural commissioned from high school students as part of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, stating that it “doesn’t promote or endorse individual political statements.” The covered mural includes the depiction of a protest sign with the words “Free Palestine,” that was singled out among other depictions of youth holding protest signs about climate, immigration, and gun control. Officials told the teen artists that the “free Palestine” slogan was “antisemitic and hateful,” before proceeding to cover the work. By inviting students to express their ideas in an artwork, then revoking that invitation, the Smithsonian undermines its program’s purpose as a platform for youth political expression and its purported intent to “explore how young people [...] agitate for change.”

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Most recently, the National Museum of American History removed text addressing the “Limits of Presidential Power” in a display within *The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden*. The Smithsonian claims that the temporary wall label—which was created in 2021 to acknowledge the two impeachments of President Trump as well as those of other U.S. presidents—has been removed because it “did not meet the museum’s standards in appearance.” A new wall label is promised that will, apparently, include mention of Trump’s impeachments, but it is not clear when it would be installed. The removal, even if not intended as censorious, raises questions: why is a label so urgently removed after it had been in place for four years? Why not wait until the new wall labels are created? An action like this, which suppresses information critical of a sitting president under questionable pretexts, deeply undermines trust in the Institution.

In the era after World War II, the United States stood out among dictatorships and dominated as a global leader because it modeled freedom: the freedom to engage with art, literature, and historical and scientific inquiry without overt government intervention. But no freedom is forever guaranteed, and today there is an existential challenge to the American experiment—the establishment of a republic upon the ideals of liberty, equality, and self-governance. If the nation’s premier cultural institution surrenders its independence and becomes a mouthpiece for the ideologies of the current political administration, other cultural institutions may very well follow.

There is no liberty without the freedom to learn, explore, and share information and ideas; therefore, the National Coalition Against Censorship calls on the Smithsonian Institution to stay true to its mission and resist pressures to censor artists and omit key parts of the country’s history from its programs.

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National Coalition Against Censorship

Since its inception in 1974, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) has functioned as a first responder in protecting freedom of expression, a fundamental human right and a keystone of democracy. Representing over 60 trusted education, publishing, and arts organizations, NCAC encourages and facilitates dialogue between diverse voices and perspectives, including those that have historically been silenced.