

ARTICLE

Trump's Attack on the Smithsonian: The Past and Future of America's 250th Anniversary

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Abstract

America's history and culture wars have escalated at pace since Donald Trump returned to office in January 2025. And while the President's second term has been marked by a rapid stream of executive orders and supporting remarks, articles, and statements affecting all aspects of life, it has demonstrated a particular interest in the nation's cultural assets and has coalesced on the Smithsonian Institution. This article argues that Trump's attention to the Smithsonian Institution has arisen because 2026 is the 250th anniversary of American independence. It presents archival evidence from the Smithsonian alongside contemporary analysis to demonstrate that the political playbook being utilized by President Trump has an extensive history. To make its point, the article offers a case study of *The West as America*, an exhibition that was shown in 1991 at the Smithsonian and generated such political controversy that it ended up being the subject of extensive questioning in Congress. The article aims to show the clear similarity between political and public responses to the 1991 exhibition—which was designed to commemorate a national anniversary but occurred in a period of heightened history wars—with conservative attempts to regulate culture in 2025, ahead of “America 250.” It exemplifies how important historical inquiry is in informing decisions and responses to processes of cultural production in the current era.

Keywords: culture wars; museums; political interference; public history; Smithsonian Institution; Trump

A wave of statements critical of the Smithsonian Institution's leadership, exhibitions, and messaging were released by the White House throughout 2025, the first year of President Trump's second term in office. Initiated by the “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” executive order, which committed to “Saving Our Smithsonian,” they culminated in an official, unsigned article titled “President Trump Is Right About the Smithsonian.”¹ The statements are part of a wider campaign to remove “improper,” “woke,” or “anti-American ideology” from the cultural sector (Figure 1).² They reflect an administration that has its

¹ “EO 14253: Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” 2025. White House 2025b; Ables and Kingsberry 2025; Kingsberry et al. 2025; Thies 2025.

² Trump 2025a.

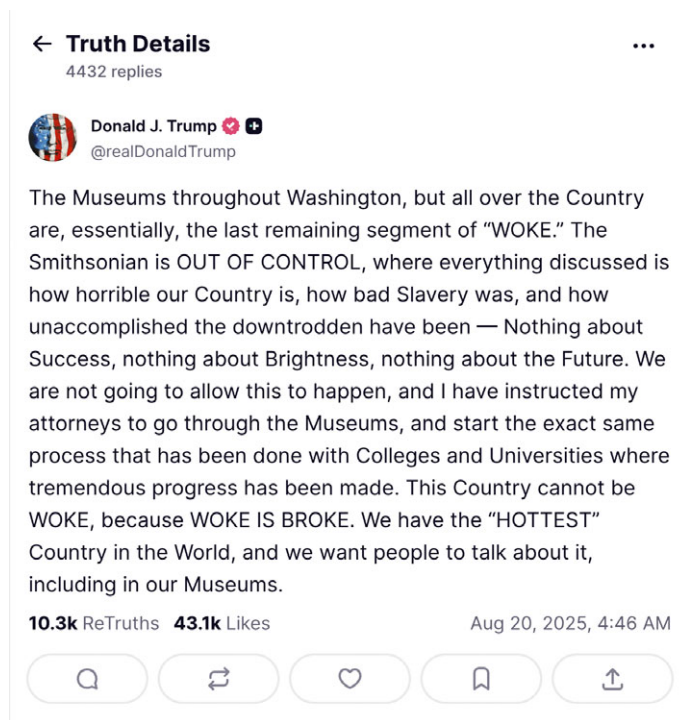


Figure 1. Post by President Trump on social network *Truth Social* on August 20, 2025. Truth Social/Donald Trump (screenshot).

sights on the nation's archives, libraries, museums, creative and performing arts, as well as the agencies that fund projects and develop pipelines for people working in culture and humanities.³ The Smithsonian Institution has been singled out for special attention by these initiatives. It is both the nation's "cultural crown jewel" and, as the world's largest museum, education and research complex, custodian for more than 157 million items, 21 museums, 21 libraries, 14 education and research centers, a zoo, and several historical and architectural landmarks.⁴ Founded in 1846 as an entity independent from the US government, most of its funding today comes through federal appropriations.⁵ Its Board of Regents includes the US vice president and the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court.⁶

The President's express interest in cultural institutions in 2025 marks a change from his first term, during which he paid little attention to cultural operations or institutions, including the Smithsonian.⁷ The reason for this shift is, I contend, articulated in a letter sent by President Trump to current Smithsonian Secretary, Lonnie Bunch III. "As we prepare to

³ Even before the White House announced the review of the Smithsonian, President Trump fired the Archivist of the United States, the Librarian of Congress, and said he would fire the Director of the National Portrait Gallery. He initiated an overhaul of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as well as drastic cuts at the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Shogan 2025; Bennett et al. 2025; Timotija 2025; Stoilas 2025. Trump 2025b; Andrews and Brasch 2025.

⁴ American Association for State and Local History 2025. <https://www.si.edu/>.

⁵ Smith 2025; Anderson 2011.

⁶ <https://www.si.edu/regents/members>.

⁷ Smith 2025; Horton 2025.

celebrate the 250th anniversary of our Nation's founding," the President explained, "it is more important than ever that our national museums reflect the unity, progress, and enduring values that define the American story."⁸ The letter instructed the Smithsonian to replace all exhibition interpretations considered "divisive" with descriptions deemed to be properly "historical" and "constructive."⁹ The anniversary referred to is the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, an event that is known both as the US "semiquincentennial" and as "America 250."¹⁰ At around the same time, the White House released a presidential action in celebration of the major anniversary and established Task Force 250, a project chaired by the President and housed in the Department of Defense.¹¹

In this article, I contend that statements made in 2025 by the President and White House demonstrate an attempt to engage in cultural revisionism ahead of next year's America 250 commemorations.

I compare historical evidence about previous exhibitions sourced from the Smithsonian archives, congressional hearings, and comments in visitor books with contemporary statements from the White House and responses to Trump's executive actions to demonstrate previous instances where politicians have either tried to influence Smithsonian programs directly or sought to activate controversial exhibitions to their advantage.¹² Although a number of other precedents have existed throughout the post-war period, this article focuses on *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920*, an exhibition that showed at the National Museum of American Art for four months from March 15, 1991 and that generated such great political controversy that it ended up being the subject of extensive questioning in Congress.¹³ I argue that this exhibition has specific relevance to the

⁸ White House 2025a.

⁹ The letter was complemented by the article titled "President Trump Is Right About the Smithsonian" that provided 20-odd examples of displays the White House considered objectionable. White House 2025a; Crenshaw and Stanley 2025.

¹⁰ Message 2025; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/america250/>.

¹¹ "EO 14189: Celebrating America's 250th Birthday" 2025. Between the time this article was written and published, the name of the Department of Defense had been changed to the Department of War. ABC (Australia) 2025.

¹² Trump's attacks on the Smithsonian are part of a long political playbook in which culture has been targeted for representing an inclusive view of the American union, only the most recent effects of which are described by Amy Sherald, an artist who withdrew her upcoming show at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery over fears of censorship. In a statement, she said "History shows us what happens when governments demand that museums perform loyalty." The playbook has shallow roots in the Trump administration's engagement with US colleges and universities in the last eight months but has a deeper history in responses made by US governments to Smithsonian exhibitions, especially ones that have commemorated national events. Sherald 2025; Breuninger 2025.

¹³ Message 2014. Previous instances of the Smithsonian being drawn into political controversy include an exhibition opened at the Museum of History and Technology (now called the National Museum of American History) in 1972 to celebrate the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Called *The Right to Vote*, the exhibition had been scheduled as a venue for President Richard Nixon's inauguration ball. Upon inspection, Nixon's team decided the exhibition was too controversial and had it walled off for the duration of their events. Soon after, in 1975, the Museum of History and Technology opened an exhibition called *We The People: The American People and their Government*. Part of the Smithsonian's 1976 Bicentenary programming, it asked visitors to consider "who, precisely, are 'the people'?" The museum's director explained that it sought to "awaken" Americans to the "flexibility" of their political framework and encourage civic participation and recognition of diversity. Public responses to the exhibition were mixed. One academic complained that it was "lacking in judicious and energetic perspective" because it used artefacts collected from contemporary life and that it "displayed a preoccupation with confrontation politics" because it explored public protest and collective action. After their experience with *The Right to Vote*, curators expressed concern that *We The People* might also be closed for being too "leftist" and controversial. Message 2014, 92; Niekrasz 2020; <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalmuseumofamericanhistory/4406641665>.

political environment in 2025 because of the national anniversary that it was designed to commemorate and because it occurred in a period of heightened culture wars.

1. 1990s: The Smithsonian goes to Congress

The 1990s was an exciting and dynamic period for the Smithsonian. Its leadership articulated a commitment to cultural pluralism that was affirmed by the passage of legislation enacting the National Museum of the American Indian in 1989 and a decision by the Board of Regents to support the establishment of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.¹⁴ Despite this progressive outlook, the Smithsonian was simultaneously falling out of step with the world around it, which was being swept into an era of escalating history wars. The situation was enflamed by the surge in American nationalism that followed the end of the Gulf War and tensions surrounding the 1992 Columbus quincentenary.¹⁵ Contextualized by a period agitated by social, political, and economic uncertainty, the Smithsonian became the subject of heated debate in Senate Committee on Appropriations Hearings from 1990 to 1992.

The West as America, an exhibition that grappled publicly with ideas about nationalism, storytelling and authority, quickly became a trigger point that intensified conflict between institutional confidence, sectoral best practice, political conservatism, and public culture. It displayed 164 paintings, prints, sculptures, and photographs alongside curatorial interpretations that presented them as archival or historical records rather than as images to be appreciated for their beauty alone. The exhibition's interpretative material was, unusually for the time, given center stage, while the artworks played a supporting role. It contributed to historical and museological innovations of the day that sought to engage the audience in questions about how and why certain meanings are produced over others. Informed by "new interpretations of western art on the major new histories of the west that have emerged since the US bicentennial of 1976," curators encouraged visitors to understand that the legends and mythologies of a national imaginary are created for reasons of political and cultural expediency.¹⁶ The exhibition's primary goal was to show the role that visual culture and national mythologies played in the expansion, progress, and the development of the "heroic West" archetype where US history is sanitized, one-sided, and omits the destruction of Native communities and slavery.¹⁷ To help educators lesson plan around the complex themes of the exhibition, the museum created a teachers' guide that explained that the exhibition "argues that this art is not an objective account of history and that art is not necessarily history; *seeing is not necessarily believing*."¹⁸

¹⁴ At the 1991 Hearings before the Committee on Appropriations, Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1992, Smithsonian Secretary Robert McCormick Adams said: "The National Museum of the American Indian and the Quincentenary Commemorations provide the basis for gaining new Institutional experience in fulfilling responsibilities to exemplify cultural pluralism. As we proceed, these experiences will set the pattern for the Institution's national and international outreach. The pattern will help shape, for example, the expansion and incorporation of African American programs and facilities on the Mall." US Senate 1991, 379; Message 2014, 158–9.

¹⁵ The Gulf War ended on 28 February 1991, a couple of weeks before *The West as America* opened on March 15. For an overview of the history wars see Luke 2002; Message 2014.

¹⁶ Broun to Kostmayer, June 26, 1991; Aron 2016. National Museum of American Art 1991a.

¹⁷ Kingsberry and Ables 2025.

¹⁸ Smithsonian Museum of American Art 1991. This interpretation has become mainstream in national collections. See for example the "Manifest Destiny and the West" teaching packet developed by the National Gallery of Art for the current *Uncovering America* series: <https://www.nga.gov/educational-resources/uncovering-america/manifest-destiny-and-west>.

In rejecting the premise that art is universal and speaks across time, place, and cultural barriers, the exhibition's curators, led by William Truettner, argued that mid-nineteenth century paintings of an imagined frontier revealed more about the knowledge and belief systems in place during the period of production than they did about the history they depicted.¹⁹ It was one of the first times curatorial intentions became visible to audiences. Their approach was supported by one visitor who commented: "Good exhibit. Need lots more of this type of re-interpretation as the 'Quincentennial' year rolls around. A strong nation and world come only after confronting past mistakes and making amendments—and that includes re-structuring our ways of seeing."²⁰ Another said "I strongly encourage you to mount more exhibitions like this combining socio-political analysis with paintings. Very powerful."²¹ According to a third: "To be critical of our past can only help us to be better in the future. This does not make you a Bad American. Good job!"²²

However, the curatorial preference for national reflection and critique was not appreciated by all. As one of the earliest quincentenary events, it was perceived as setting the tone for other events that would be rolled out over the next year, and became something of a test-case. Critics likened its "revisionist" approach to a left-wing ideological preference for multiculturalism that would undermine national pride, identity, and cohesion. One visitor said, "The narrative which accompanies the work of art is among the most racist, anti-white tripe I have ever seen."²³ Media commentators articulated outrage that the exhibition was being used by the national museum to abuse its authority to rewrite the history of western conquest to fit a newly "spun" postmodern and pluralist national storyline.²⁴ Other visitors said there must be something to be proud of in America's history and that the museum should focus instead on positive celebrations.²⁵

Congress' interest in the exhibition was initially triggered by a well-publicized comment made by Daniel Boorstin, who was at the time Librarian of Congress, University of Chicago History professor and former director of the Smithsonian's own Museum of History and Technology. After attending the exhibition opening, he wrote on the first page of the visitor's book that it was: "A perverse, historically inaccurate destructive exhibit! No credit to the Smithsonian!"²⁶ It was not long before politicians took notice. The exhibition became a regular agenda item at the Senate Committee on Appropriations hearings between 1990 and 1992.²⁷ Smithsonian Secretary Robert McCormick Adams was grilled during hearings by senators, led by Ted Stevens, who demanded accountability for the institution's use of

¹⁹ Truettner and Nemerov 1992; Nickel 2004, 362.

²⁰ P. Nash, Fairfax, VA, *West as America* visitor book no. III, 185. In National Museum of American Art 1991b.

²¹ Patricia [surname unreadable], *West as America* visitor book no. IV, 83. In National Museum of American Art 1991b.

²² Laura Harris (Comanche), *West as America* visitor book no. II, n.p. In National Museum of American Art 1991b.

²³ Michael Manuel, *West as America* visitor book no. IV, 44. In National Museum of American Art 1991b.

²⁴ Hughes 1991.

²⁵ Directly underneath her husband's comments Ruth Boorstin expressed anxiety about what she identified as the exhibition's negative purview. "Surely," she said, there is "something good about this country and the men and women who settled it and made it a great land of liberty and abundance?" *West as America* visitor book no. I: 1. In National Museum of American Art 1991b.

²⁶ Boorstin was famous for his conservative views, and his antirevisionist comments may be read as a defense of his own scholarship and the approach taken in his best-selling book, *The Discoverers*, in which he praised the conquering Columbus in a "personal note to the reader." Boorstin 1985, 10.

²⁷ The list of topics debated at the 1992 hearing included "exhibitions based on social problems," "editorializing in Smithsonian Exhibitions," "Congressional oversight of Smithsonian Programs," as well as the enduring "concerns over possible political agenda." US Senate 1992, 388–400.

federal funds for the purposes of producing exhibitions that challenged traditional ideas of American nationalism. The nature of their discussions are summed up by this opening comment by the committee's chair, Harry Reid:

Senator REID. ... I think it's fair to say that for most of 1991 and thus far in 1992 the Smithsonian has found itself at the center of a great deal of controversy. There are some, including respected members of this subcommittee, who have expressed alarm at the Smithsonian's apparent preoccupation with pursuing a political agenda. My interpretation of this concern is that the Smithsonian is increasingly perceived as being more concerned with becoming conversant in what is politically correct than in effectively managing its collections, that the Smithsonian seems more intent on moralizing rather than simply preserving and exhibiting this Nation's heritage. ... Would you care to comment on those concerns?²⁸

Secretary Adams was consistent in his assertions that the Smithsonian had an *obligation* to exemplify the nation's pluralism, precisely because it was publicly funded. He had previously argued that:

The Smithsonian is a national institution dependent on tax resources appropriated in the name of all the people. Hence, we cannot lose sight of the importance of the cultural representation that can be uniquely provided in the heart of the nation's capital by our exhibits and educational programs. Accordingly, the inclusive breadth and sensitivity of those programs and the effectiveness of the dialogues we maintain with external constituencies to assure those qualities is a matter of prime importance.²⁹

Media reporting of the budget hearings generated a circus atmosphere that encouraged people to visit *The West as America* and write comments in the exhibition's visitor books. Their responses represent a range of opinions and viewpoints but many reiterated Stevens' views (even though he never personally visited the exhibition). In totality, the museum received 195 letters or visitor feedback cards about the exhibition. Those who expressly mentioned seeing the exhibition were favorable in their comments by a ratio of 3 to 1. Those who said that they had *not* seen the show were critical of it by a ratio of 4 to 1. More than 70 people explained that their main driver for sending opinions about the exhibition was press coverage rather than their own experience of it.³⁰ All but 11 responses came from people living outside Washington DC. At least 50 letters were sent by people who had not seen the exhibition but were driven to complain about it anyway because they had received a letter from the Smithsonian asking them to renew their membership following negative political and media reporting. Coming on top of the media controversy about the Smithsonian's "politically correct rewriting" of national history and Senator Stevens' threats to reduce future appropriations, these letter writers did not appreciate this request to extend or

²⁸ US Senate 1992, 388.

²⁹ US Senate 1991, 750. Also see Smithsonian Museum of American Art 1991; National Museum of American Art 1991c.

³⁰ In his account of audience responses to the exhibit, Andrew Gulliford says that at the time he wrote the article, four visitor books of several hundred pages each had been filled (five ended up being completed) with over 700 individual responses included. A majority (510 of the 735) of the comments were "generally positive." 509 were "specifically positive about some aspect of the show." 199 people singled out the wall texts for praise; while 177 felt negatively about them. An additional 136 people wrote about other comments or issues. Gulliford 1992b. See also Gulliford 1992a, "The West as America"; "Showdown at *The West as America* Exhibition" 1991; Truettner and Nemerov 1992.

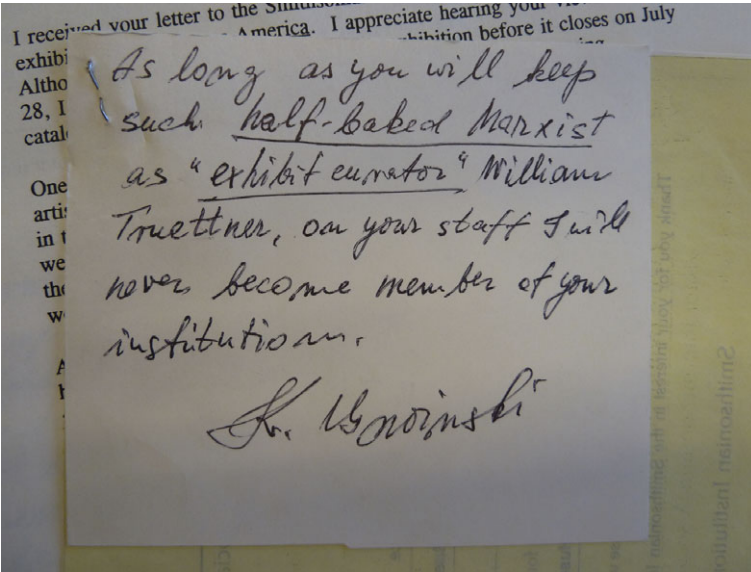


Figure 2. Feedback card about *The West as America* exhibition. Smithsonian Institution Archives (author's photograph, permission to reproduce from the Smithsonian).³¹

further promote the approach taken in *The West as America*. Over 100 people responded to Smithsonian Secretary Adam's ill-timed request by stating that they no longer wished to support the Smithsonian at all (Figure 2).³²

No other budget hearing from recent times had registered anywhere near this level of interest in the Smithsonian.³³ In contrast to usual hearing topics—issues related to resource management, taxation, and infrastructure problems—the themes of cultural pluralism and identity politics were a novel feature of the budget hearing held in March 1990 (for Financial Year 1991). It is unsurprising that the terminology employed by the Smithsonian Secretary at this time was more extreme and potentially antagonistic than what he subsequently employed at the next two years' proceedings, when his words and language were as closely scrutinized as the *West as America* exhibition Congress was attacking.³⁴ In the pre-*West as America* period, for example, Secretary Adams said that the recently legislated and yet to be built National Museum of the American Indian would be a Smithsonian museum that would,

³¹ Author's name unreadable, *West as America* visitor book no. I, 56. In National Museum of American Art 1991b.

³² Nickless to Broun, September 20, 1991.

³³ Correspondence by Tom L. Freudenheim, Assistant Secretary of Museums at the Smithsonian, to Betsy Broun, Director of the National Museum of American Art, observes that strong political and public reactions could be attributed in part to factors external to the exhibition such as a wave of nationalism that swept the country as the Gulf War ended and a national debate occasioned by the 1990 census about the shift in power and representation from the eastern states to the west. The exhibition “served as a lightning rod for those concerned about the way the forthcoming Columbian Quincentennial would be celebrated. It also reflected national anxiety about the increasing demands of ethnic minorities, especially Hispanics and Native Americans, for greater representation within national culture.” Freudenheim to Broun, September 16, 1991.

³⁴ The range of media articles, reviews and editorial comments included Ringle 1991; Huckshorn 1991; Cockburn 1991; Hughes 1991. Articles written after the hearing on May 15 1991 (for Fiscal Year 1992) referenced the comments made by Senator Stevens and others. "Senators take to warpath: Cultural Warfare at the Smithsonian" 1991; Stevens 1991b.

“to an unprecedented extent, ‘belong’ to Native Americans.”³⁵ He also explained that the Smithsonian “cannot narrowly favor, idealize, or reify purported ‘mainstream’ cultures or values [because] Ours is a multiracial, pluralistic country.”³⁶

In 1990, these comments raised no significant concerns. By the time of the hearing for the 1992 fiscal year, however, which took place two months into the *West as America*’s four-month run, a statement that questioned the ownership of the national past would have further exorcized senators such as Ted Stevens who warned Secretary Adams that he was “in for a battle” because the exhibition promoted “a political agenda that is not consistent with that of the United States.”³⁷ Stevens’ understanding of political correctness came from Lynne Cheney who was then chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He reiterated Cheney’s argument that it “typically involves faculty members trying to impose their views on others” and is “a threat to the free inquiry and free expression which have made this Nation so great.”³⁸

In the end, congressional interest in the Smithsonian subsided as quickly as it had arisen, with Senator Jake Garn—who served for a decade on the Smithsonian Institution Board of Regents—cautioning the subcommittee in 1992 that those making accusations of political interference also needed to consider “the other side of the coin.” Garn reminded members that “Congress plays with the Smithsonian for their own political gains as well.”³⁹ Concerns about political interference were also circulating throughout the media. In reporting the brouhaha, *New York Times* commentator Michael Kimmelman used language that would not be out of place today when he wrote that *The West as America* controversy, “raises questions about Government involvement in the arts. No exhibition on westward expansion could be free of political connotations of some sort.” He went on to ask: “Is it now the job of Congress to police its constituents’ thinking about the art in those museums?”⁴⁰ The shadow of political correctness was ubiquitous throughout the quincentenary events that followed, with controversies rising to the surface on a number of occasions and high degrees of self-policing evident in curatorial decisions made by Smithsonian staff.⁴¹ However, it was not until 1995, when an exhibition about another national anniversary (this time the 50-year anniversary of the US bombing of Hiroshima that ended World War II) was proposed that the Smithsonian again found itself directly back in the cross-hairs of the culture wars.⁴²

2. 2025: Cultural institutions and the countdown to America’s 250th anniversary

Parallels between the 1990s and the current day abound. They include federal government cuts—real and threatened—to funding for the Smithsonian and other arts agencies as well

³⁵ US Senate 1990, 379.

³⁶ US Senate 1990, 378.

³⁷ US Senate 1991, 755, 757.

³⁸ Stevens 1991a. Stevens insisted that an article by James F. Cooper, called “A Season in Hell—The Inquisition of Political Correctness” be included “by unanimous consent” in the Congressional record (Stevens 1991b). Elsewhere, Lynne Cheney argued that the “radical relativism” of a “postmodern generation ... has changed cultural institutions such as museums, where curators now see politics as an important part of their mission.” Cheney 1995, 17.

³⁹ US Senate 1992, 403.

⁴⁰ Kimmelman 1991.

⁴¹ Message 2014, 177–95.

⁴² Controversy about plans to exhibit the Enola Gay (a B-29 bomber that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945) at the National Air and Space Museum arose from perceptions that the exhibition proposal failed to adequately celebrate the United States’ wartime victory. Members of Congress again threatened the Smithsonian with hearings and budget reductions. They called for the curator’s resignation and exerted public pressure that contributed to the exhibition’s eventual cancellation. Kimmelman 1991; Message 2014, 33–34, 154–57; Wright 2020; Harwit 1994; Hirsch 1995.

as “skirmishes” on the political battlefield that the art world was—and is again—said to have become.⁴³ A review of a Smithsonian exhibition called *The Shape of Power: Stories of Race and American Sculpture* by long-time *Washington Post* arts writer Philip Kennicott demonstrates some points of similarity.⁴⁴ This exhibition, shown at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from November 8, 2024 to September 14, 2025, was criticized in the “President Trump Is Right About the Smithsonian” article for using “American sculpture to invite dialogue and reflection on notions of power and identity.”⁴⁵ It followed the “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” executive order, which singled out the same exhibition for portraying “American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive.”⁴⁶

Despite its focus on sculpture rather than painting and its presentation of artworks produced over a much longer time frame (until 2023), *The Shape of Power* echoed some of the themes, approaches, and techniques used in *The West as America*. It applied to its interpretation methods a similar pedagogical approach that presented a scholarly and analytical lens to issues about the manipulation of race and ethnicity evident in discourses of American nationalism.⁴⁷ It also included artworks produced during the nineteenth century, such as Ferdinand Pettrich’s *The Dying Tecumseh* (1856), that romanticized the genocidal destruction of Native Americans in the pursuit of westward expansion.⁴⁸ Also, it attracted audience responses that express dissonance with the President’s political messaging about the exhibition. According to Kennicott, visitor reactions recorded in public comment books were overwhelmingly positive. He noted as being typical of the 2405 responses recorded in the visitor book this comment, written by a visitor called Nelson: “The repetition of it all is striking. The same tropes + visualizations of hierarchy ... over + over again for centuries. No wonder we have a hard time seeing otherwise.”⁴⁹

The disjunct between museum practice and political narratives becomes clearer yet when we compare the representational framework of *The Shape of Power* with a social media post by the Department of Homeland Security in September 2025. The post reproduced one of the most controversial paintings included in *The West as America*, a painting by John Gast (1872) called *American Progress*. It celebrates the nineteenth century concept of “Manifest Destiny” by showing a young white woman—a goddess-like personification of the US known as Columbia—floating westward, “enlightening” the darkened west as she symbolically clears the land for white settlers. She carries tools of progress with her (a schoolbook and an unspooled telegraph wire), while Native Americans and wild buffalo scatter into the painting’s darkened margins.⁵⁰ The nineteenth-century concept of Manifest Destiny asserts that the US Government has a providential right to expand its territory, even against its Indigenous peoples and close neighbors. The term came back into popular use after

⁴³ Lewis 1991; Durenberger 1992; Kennicott 2004, Note 13. The language of “revisionism” used by *West as America* curators and across the Smithsonian in the 1990s by Secretary Adams and others was echoed by Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery in the years leading up to Trump’s calls to fire her. In 2022, she told a reporter that the Portrait Gallery’s aim was to “rectify historical and cultural distortions by focusing on underrepresented populations and subject matter and embracing new parameters for what work is exhibited, collected and programmed.” Van Straaten 2022.

⁴⁴ Kennicott 2025; <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibition/67675/sculpture-shape-of-power>.

⁴⁵ White House 2025b. This is the same museum that exhibited *The West as America* which, in 2000, was renamed the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

⁴⁶ White House 2025b. “EO 14253: Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” 2025.

⁴⁷ <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibition/67675/sculpture-shape-of-power>.

⁴⁸ <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/the-dying-tecumseh-19670>.

⁴⁹ Kennicott 2025.

⁵⁰ Trachtenberg 1991.



Figure 3. *American Progress* by John Gast, 1872. Reproduced on social network X, July 24, 2025. X/ Homeland Security (screenshot).⁵¹

President Trump pledged, during his 2025 inauguration speech to “pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars.”⁵²

The US Government’s resocialization of frontier images that have been criticized decades apart (including by *The West as America* and *The Shape of Power*) for de-politicizing the impact that westward expansion progress has had on people and communities in the nineteenth century continues to be contested. It does not seem to be a coincidence that *American Progress* was selected by the Department, or that it was accompanied by the deceptively simple caption: “A Heritage to be proud of, a Homeland worth Defending (Figure 3).”⁵³ A spokesperson from the Department of Homeland Security responded to criticism about the post by saying that if people need “a history lesson on the brave men and women who blazed the trails and forged this republic from the sweat of their brow, we are happy to send them a history textbook.”⁵⁴ I understand this statement as providing evidence of the importance of controlling historical narratives about the nation as the semiquincentennial approaches. Given the sector’s concerns about interference that has already occurred, statements from Trump’s administration might also represent an attempt to get ahead of any controversies over political correctness and accusations of political interference that may arise from programming, for which *The West as America* exists as a key precedent. However, these attempts might have overshot their target because lessons from history evidence that what

⁵¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_West_as_America#/media/File:American_Progress_\(John_Gast_painting\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_West_as_America#/media/File:American_Progress_(John_Gast_painting).jpg).

⁵² White House 2025c.

⁵³ Homeland Security 2025.

⁵⁴ Kingsberry and LeVine 2025.



Figure 4. Webpage: “Countdown to America’s 250th Anniversary” from October 25, 2025 (screenshot).⁵⁵

the government has referred to as “historical accuracy” has already been proven to be the project of rewriting national history for political purposes.⁵⁶

3. Looking forward: Where to from here?

The day-by-day countdown clock on the official America 250 website shows that it is still many months before semiquincentennial programming is realized.⁵⁷ However, the significance of disputes over the role of politics in culture is evidenced by the fact that despite the reappearance of the nineteenth century frontier imagery, the battle for hearts and minds—and the role that art, culture, and museums play in building our collective history lessons—remains unchanged, even decades after *The West as America* drew attention to its stakes. The countdown website also includes other partisan details that are unprecedented for their directness of messaging. They include the banner advising that “Democrats Have Shut Down the Government” and a parallel counter that, at the time of writing, recorded the shut-down as being up to 23 days, 17 hours, 5 minutes, and 4 seconds (Figure 4). This single image alone illustrates what an explosive phase the nation’s developers of historical programs are inhabiting. It is an image that can be contextualized historically through information about previous exhibitions such as *The West as America* because politicization of the Columbus anniversary also occurred primarily in the year prior to the anniversary.

Many thoughtful responses have been made about the current and previous attacks on culture by scholars working with public institutions—which, like the Smithsonian—have

⁵⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/america250/>.

⁵⁶ American Association for State and Local History 2025; Kendall Adams 2025.

⁵⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/america250/>.

both official and informal restrictions around criticizing the government. They include Kimberlé Crenshaw and Jason Stanley, who recently made comments that extend the belief articulated by museum leaders in the 1970s that the past is a prologue for the future.⁵⁸ “Knowing our history,” they suggest, “can give us the weapons and wherewithal to battle Trump’s efforts to catapult us back to a time when the majority of Americans lacked both the civic and economic power that we have now.”⁵⁹ Their assertion is that resisting fascism requires understanding this shared and complex fractured history.

Similar views have been previously expressed by current Secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie Bunch III, who is also the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Bunch has not spoken publicly about this year’s attacks on the Smithsonian. We can, however, look to his past statements to understand his views about the role museums play in the contemporary world. In his 2019 memoir, Bunch recalled taking President Trump, on the eve of his first term, on a tour of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. He commented: “It was not my job to make the rough edges of history smooth, even for the president.”⁶⁰ Bunch understands that museums are, at their heart, political sites—and instruments of power.⁶¹ He also understands the impact that exhibitions have on the hundreds of thousands of visitors—some of whom go to the trouble of writing comments in visitor books—who explore Smithsonian museums each year.

In the end, museums are critical sites in debates over political culture and cultural politics. From the nineteenth century, when neoclassical public museum buildings and the artworks they reified contributed to establishing ideals of whiteness, European power and civility, through to the reimagination of these same values by exhibitions like *The West as America* and *The Shape of Power*, museums are central to our understanding of who we are—as individuals and members of a national polity—and who we can aspire to be. Trump’s attacks on the Smithsonian need to be understood in this context, as being part of a long political playbook in which culture has been targeted for representing an inclusive view of the American union. However, as I have shown in this article, the Smithsonian has weathered political attacks on its exhibitions in the past. Combined with analysis of contemporary events, the lessons from history highlight the importance of protecting the Smithsonian as an independent authority that withstands political interference at all costs.

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⁵⁸ Message 2014, 80.

⁵⁹ Crenshaw and Stanley 2025.

⁶⁰ Bunch 2019.

⁶¹ Message 2014, 194.

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