Zeitschrift des Max-Planck-Instituts für Rechtsgeschichte und Rechtstheorie
Journal of the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory

Rechts Rg geschichte

Rechtsgeschichte
Legal History

www.lhlt.mpg.de

http://www.rg-rechtsgeschichte.de/rg34
Zitiervorschlag: Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History Rg 34 (2026)
http://dx.doi.org/10.12946/rg34/201-202

Rg 34 2026 201 – 202

Jimena Perry*

United States History on Trial: Public Historians and the Struggle for Memory

* Department of History, Iona University, New York, jperry@iona.edu

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Jimena Perry

United States History on Trial: Public Historians and the Struggle for Memory

Since the start of Donald Trump's second term in January 2025, museums in the United States have faced profound challenges and criticism. The administration has clearly articulated its intent to reshape the interpretation and communication of the nation's past, a goal clear in actions like Executive Order 14253, issued on March 27, 2025, titled »Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History«.[1] The document declares that federal cultural institutions must »promote unity through pride«, avoid »divisive ideological distortions«, and return to »fact-based, patriotic narratives« in the presentation of US history. These statements are not only dangerous but deeply offensive as they jeopardize fights for freedom, civil rights, and equality in the country. They endanger how history is understood, taught, and practiced, undermining decades of scholarship and public engagement that have sought to tell a more inclusive, complex story of the American experience. By framing critical and intersectional interpretations of history as »anti-American«, this order reactivates patterns of historical denial, political control, racism, discrimination, and cultural censorship.

As many scholars have stated throughout the decades, museums are never neutral.[2] They are instruments of power that mediate between ideology and public consciousness. When a government declares that national institutions must »restore truth«, it is in fact seeking to control memory. Therefore, the mentioned Executive Order weaponizes history as propaganda, turning museums into battlegrounds over identity, belonging, and citizenship. The case of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) exemplifies this conflict. Since its opening in 2016, the museum has been a vital space for reckoning with the nation's legacies of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism. Its exhibitions, such as »Slavery and Freedom and A Changing America«,[3] encourage visitors to confront uncomfortable truths and recognize African American history as central to the story of the United States. Under the new order, these interpretive frameworks are scrutinized. Federal reviewers have questioned whether exhibits that address racial violence, protest movements, or contemporary inequality »promote disunity« or »undermine patriotic education«. Behind this language lies a chilling objective: to silence dissent and erase narratives that challenge dominant myths of nationalism. Such rhetoric suppresses participation, creativity, analysis, and criticism, the very elements that sustain meaningful dialogue, making it both reprehensible and dangerous.

Public history in the United States has always been tied to the politics of identity,[4] but the current scale of state intervention marks an alarming amplification. The narrative of »restoring san-

1 President of the United States, Executive Order 14253: Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History, 27 March 2025, Federal Register.

2 Tony Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics, London 1995; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge, London 1992; Carol Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, London 1995; James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, Cambridge (MA) 1997; Ivan Karp, Steven D. Lavine (eds.), Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, Washington, DC 1991.

3 Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African American History & Culture, »Slavery and Freedom«, first opened 24 September 2016, accessed 9 October 2025, https://www.si.edu/exhibitions/slavery-and-freedom:event-exhib-4840.

4 Faith Davis Ruffins, Building Homes for Black History: Museum Founders, Founding Directors, and Pioneers, 1915–95, in: The Public Historian 40,3 (2018) 13–43; idem, Grassroots Museums and the Changing Landscape of the Public Humanities, in: Daedalus 151,3 (2022) 179–191; Bennetta Jules-Rosette, African Art Reframed: Reflections and Dialogues on Museum Culture, London 2020; Portia James, Building a Community-Based Identity at the Anacostia Museum, in: Curator: The Museum Journal 39,1 (1996) 5–17; Laura Burnham, Cultural-Political Climates and African-American History Museums, in: The Museum Scholar 3 (2020) 1–12, https://articles.themuseumscholar.org/2020/06/05/tp_vol3_burnham/; Journal of the History of Ideas Blog (2020), Black Museums as Knowledge Sites: Three Institutions, 21 October 2020, https://www.jhiblog.org/2020/10/21/black-museums-as-knowledge-sites/.

ity« implies that the historiographical mainstream – critical race theory, feminist history, and Indigenous perspectives – is irrational or threatening (to whom or what, one may ask.) The order's language echoes earlier efforts, such as the 1776 Commission Report of 2021,[5] which dismissed systemic racism as a false ideology and promoted a triumphalist view of American history centered on exceptionalism and manifest destiny. What distinguishes the 2025 directive is its enforcement power: funding cuts, personnel reviews, and administrative oversight of museum content. This erodes the professional autonomy of curators, historians, and educators, effectively turning cultural work into an arm of political propaganda. In this climate, public historians face a moral and professional dilemma. Should they comply to preserve their institutions, or resist defending intellectual integrity and pluralism? This question defines the future of our practice in the public sphere.

Public historians, educators, archivists, and professionals that use research-creation methodologies occupy a fragile space between scholarship and the public imagination. Their task is not only to present facts but to mediate meaning, connecting past struggles to present realities. The current political landscape distorts this mission by restricting what can be said, displayed, or questioned. Freedom of interpretation is threatened by censorship, and fear of reprisal encourages self-censorship, the most scarring form of control. Efforts to promote collaborative and participatory initiatives, where communities co-create exhibitions and other products, and interpret their own histories, are stunted by political narratives that privilege hierarchy and elite control. In addition, education itself is being redefined. Instead of fostering critical thinking, museums are pressured to indoctrinate visitors through simplified and heroic portrayals of the nation. This goes against museums' role as spaces of inquiry and dialogue, transforming them into instruments of ideological conformity and taking us back to the 18th and 19th centuries when museums were understood as control devices.[6]

However, public historians are far from powerless. In the current political and cultural climate, creative methodologies have emerged as essential acts of resistance. Increasingly, professionals in the field are developing innovative strategies to safeguard plural voices and sustain spaces of dialogue. Collaborations with communities have become vital for generating exhibitions that operate beyond federal oversight and bureaucratic constraint. Digital archives and online storytelling initiatives play a central role in preserving endangered materials and silenced narratives, while artists and historians join forces in performance-based installations that transform public spaces into living classrooms. Within museums, critical pedagogical approaches are redefining tours and educational programs as arenas for dialogue and inquiry rather than passive consumption. Collectively, these practices affirm the conviction that creativity and ethics are inseparable dimensions of public history. This idea finds a compelling expression in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Designed by David Adjaye, the museum's architecture invites visitors to carefully examine slavery and its horrors and the resilience of the victims, survivors, and descendants. Its narrative is not simply represented but materialized through spatial design, illumination, and sound, producing an experience that is both affective and reflective. This curatorial and architectural language demonstrates how creativity can function as an ethical intervention, revealing the capacity of design and narrative to rehumanize historical experience and resist political simplification.

In the current US climate, silence in the face of authoritarian control is itself a political act. Museums and public historians must articulate, through both words and practice, that democracy depends on the capacity to face uncomfortable truths. The work of the NMAAHC demonstrates that truth-telling is not divisive; it is restorative and healing. Confronting the violence of the past strengthens the nation by fostering empathy, understanding, and accountability. The attempt to erase such narratives under the guise of »unity« betrays the democratic promise of history. In moments of repression, courage becomes the defining quality of public history.

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5 President's Advisory 1776 Commission, The 1776 Report, Washington, DC: The White House, January 2021, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf.

6 Bennett, The Birth of the Museum (fn. 2).