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Joint Statement on Federal Censorship of American History

The American Historical Association (AHA) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) condemn recent efforts to censor historical content on federal government websites, at many public museums, and across a wide swath of government resources that include essential data. New policies that purge words, phrases, and content that some officials deem suspect on ideological grounds constitute a systemic campaign to distort, manipulate, and erase significant parts of the historical record. Recent directives insidiously prioritize narrow ideology over historical research, historical accuracy, and the actual experiences of Americans.

As the institution chartered by the US Congress for “the promotion of historical studies” and “in the interest of American history, and of history in America,” the American Historical Association must speak out when the nation’s leadership wreaks havoc with that history. So, too, must the OAH, as the organization committed to promoting “excellence in the scholarship, teaching, and presentation of American history.” It is bad enough to forget the past; it is even worse to intentionally deny the public access to what we remember, have documented, and have expended public resources to disseminate.

At this writing, the full range of historical distortions and deletions is yet to be discerned. Federal entities and institutions subject to federal oversight and funding are hastily implementing revisions to their resources in an attempt to comply with the “Dear Colleague” letter issued by the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights and executive orders such as “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.” These changes range from scrubbing words and acronyms from websites to papering over interpretive panels in museums. Some alterations, such as those related to topics like the Tuskegee Airmen and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, have been hurriedly reversed in response to public outcry. Others remain. The scrubbing of words and acronyms from the Stonewall National Monument webpage, for instance, distorts the site’s history by denying the roles of transgender and queer people in movements for rights and liberation. This distortion of history renders the past unrecognizable to the people who lived it and useless to those who seek to learn from the past.

It remains unclear whether federal agencies are preserving the original versions of these materials for future reference or research. Articles written by historians for the National Park Service, for example, have been altered, and in some instances deleted, because they examine history with references to gender or sexuality. These revisions were made without the authors’ knowledge or consent, and without public acknowledgment that the original articles had been revised. The AHA’s *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* is clear: “Honoring the historical record also means leaving a clear trail for subsequent historians to follow. Any changes to a primary source or published secondary work, whether digital or print, should be noted.”

Words matter. Precision matters. Context matters. Expertise matters. Democracy matters. We can neither deny what happened nor invent things that did not happen. Recent executive orders and other federal directives alter the public record in ways that are contrary to historical evidence. They result in deceitful narratives of the past that violate the professional standards of our discipline. When government entities, or scholars themselves, censor the use of particular words, they in effect censor historical evidence. Censorship and distortion erase people and institutions from history.

The AHA's *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* makes clear that historians can neither misrepresent their sources nor omit evidence because it "runs counter" to their interpretations. The OAH and AHA condemn the rejection of these professional standards. Classifying collective historical scholarship as "toxic indoctrination" or "discriminatory equity ideology" dismisses the knowledge generated by the deep research of generations of historians. It violates the training, expertise, and purposes of historians as well as their responsibility to public audiences.

Our professional ethics require that "all historians believe in honoring the integrity of the historical record." We expect our nation's leadership to adhere to this same basic standard and we will continue to monitor, protest, and place in the historical record any censorship of American historical facts.