

WHOSE AMERICA IS BEING CELEBRATED?

PBS NewsHour • “Americans divided on nation’s history as 250th anniversary nears”

EXTRACT 1 — A FORGOTTEN STORY

1. Retrieve

PLACE	PERSON	EVENTS	IMPORTANCE
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; a few acres at the heart of the battlefield.	Abraham Brian, a free African American farmer, and his family.	As Confederate troops approached in 1863, the family fled for fear of capture and enslavement. The 11th Mississippi used his house and barn as reference points during the battle.	The site brings together the Civil War, slavery, freedom, civilian life and the Confederate cause. Yet Spears visited Gettysburg repeatedly before noticing this story.

2. Rephrase

Abraham Brian’s story shows that a familiar national site can contain a central but long-overlooked Black experience, thereby challenging a purely military or heroic account of the Civil War.

EXTRACT 2 — TWO PURPOSES FOR PUBLIC HISTORY

3. Listen selectively

ALAN SPEARS	THE PRESIDENTIAL ORDER
Public history should include the difficult elements that complicate the national narrative: Indigenous removal, slavery and emancipation, civil rights and other previously marginalised experiences. Their inclusion makes the story fuller and more truthful.	The order claims that ideology has replaced objective truth and requires monuments, memorials, statues and markers to focus on American greatness, achievement, progress and the beauty and abundance of the landscape.

4. Compare

Whereas Spears argues that public history should confront difficult evidence and include stories that complicate the national narrative, the presidential order seeks to foreground greatness, achievement and progress. This suggests two definitions of patriotism: honest inclusion and critical self-knowledge versus affirmative national celebration.

EXTRACT 3 — “WE WILL NOT BE ERASED”

5. Move from explicit to implicit

WHAT HAS BEEN REMOVED?	WHO MAY NO LONGER BE REPRESENTED?	POLITICAL MEANING OF “ERASE”
Material concerning LGBTQ history, climate change and women; most visibly, an exhibit on nine people enslaved by George Washington at the Philadelphia property.	Enslaved people, LGBTQ Americans, women and other groups whose histories had only recently gained public visibility.	To “erase” means more than removing panels: it means withdrawing public recognition, making groups and experiences less visible in the authorised national story, and encouraging collective forgetting.

6. Explain

Because an exhibit determines whose experience is publicly acknowledged, its removal changes the authorised narrative of the nation. It transfers symbolic legitimacy away from groups already underrepresented and turns curatorial policy into a struggle over belonging and memory.

EXTRACT 4 — RECONSTRUCT THE COUNTERARGUMENT

Listening rule

PROBLEM IDENTIFIED	CAUSE	TWO DISTORTIONS TO AVOID
Public history has, in her view, swung too far and lost accuracy and proportionality.	Systematic bias in favour of DEI; negative aspects may be disproportionately emphasised at the expense of other relevant stories.	1. Overemphasising the negative. 2. Whitewashing the past.

7. Rephrase

According to Brenda Hafera, the problem is not the inclusion of slavery or other injustices, but their disproportionate emphasis at the expense of other relevant achievements and contexts. She therefore warns against both overemphasising the negative and whitewashing history.

EXTRACT 5 — IS “BALANCE” ALWAYS FAIR?

8. Identify a rebuttal

THE APPARENTLY FAIR PRINCIPLE	SPEARS’S COUNTERARGUMENT
Each aspect of the past should receive proportionate attention; neither national	Abstract balance ignores the starting point: information about race, labour, women and LGBTQ people has moved from almost nothing

achievement nor injustice should dominate the account.	to only a minimum. Reducing it now would not restore neutrality; it would reproduce earlier exclusion.
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9. Create opposition

Hafera calls for balance, whereas Spears argues that equal treatment in the present can remain unfair when previously excluded histories have only just achieved minimal visibility.

Although balance may appear fair, it can conceal the unequal historical position from which different narratives enter public memory.

10. Return to the cartoon

Yes. Its visual symmetry can suggest two equivalent camps with equally strong claims. Yet that symmetry may conceal unequal institutional power, unequal historical visibility and the fact that one side seeks to preserve recently recovered stories while the other can use government authority to remove them.

EXTRACT 6 — CELEBRATION AND HISTORICAL TRUTH

11. Find the paradox

For Hafera, truth does not cancel celebration: an accurate account will still show that the United States has contributed much and has moved towards human freedom. Celebration should therefore emerge from the record rather than require the removal of its darker elements.

12. Synthesize

Ultimately, the report does not simply oppose celebration to criticism; it suggests that the real dispute concerns who selects the evidence, how much weight different experiences receive and whether patriotism requires a reassuring story or can withstand a complex one.

BUILDING THE ARGUMENT

FORGOTTEN STORY	COMPETING VISIONS	WHY THE DEBATE IS NOT FULLY SYMMETRICAL	FINAL INSIGHT
Abraham Brian’s experience reveals a central Black history hidden within a canonical Civil War site.	Inclusive, critical public history versus an affirmative narrative centred on greatness and progress.	Minority histories began with little or no visibility, while the administration possesses the institutional power to remove them.	The 250th anniversary is also a contest over authority, belonging and the criteria used to define the national story.

Whose America is being celebrated in 2026, according to the report?

The report begins by showing that even Gettysburg can hide part of America: Abraham Brian, a free Black farmer, fled his land to avoid capture and enslavement. The controversy opposes Spears's inclusive, critical vision of public history to an official narrative centred on national greatness and progress. However, presenting these positions as perfectly balanced is misleading because histories of race, labour, women and LGBTQ Americans have only recently gained minimal visibility, while the administration has the power to remove them. Therefore, the question is not only how America should celebrate, but who has the authority to decide which Americans belong in its national memory.

10 MINUTES, 1 SKILL — CROSS CONTRACTION

1. Rank the information

FUNCTION	ESSENTIAL INFORMATION
Necessary qualification	A president's participation in national anniversary celebrations is legitimate because the president officially represents the country.
Central claim	Freedom 250 blurs the boundary between civic commemoration and personal promotion.
Means	Repeated use of Trump's image, slogans and close allies; presentation of his political vision as the nation's natural story.
Consequence	The anniversary becomes an instrument of personal legitimation and marginalises other memories and forms of patriotism.

2. Build the architecture

Although presidential involvement in a national anniversary is legitimate, Freedom 250 blurs civic commemoration and personal promotion by repeatedly featuring Trump's image, slogans and allies, thereby legitimising his narrative while marginalising rival memories and visions of patriotism. **39 WORDS**