

Method for oral exams: from audio summary to commentary

Source document

Americans divided on nation's history as 250th anniversary nears

The introduction

- A catchphrase that places the audio document in context
- An identification of the document's central thesis
- A naturally introduced structure:
 - Either follow the document's logical progression
 - Or identify its key ideas and reorganise the summary around them

Possible summary 1 – Following the document's progression

President Trump's efforts to promote a more celebratory account of American history have made the country's 250th anniversary politically divisive. This is the tension explored by Judy Woodruff in the PBS NewsHour audio document "Americans divided on nation's history as 250th anniversary nears", broadcast on March 18, 2026. It shows how commemorating a shared past exposes disagreements about what a truthful national story should include. Moving from Gettysburg to Philadelphia, the document examines the administration's intervention before confronting competing views of historical balance.

At Gettysburg, Alan Spears, who works for the National Parks Conservation Association, explains that the battlefield tells more than a military story. It was also home to a free Black family who fled the approaching Confederate army for fear of enslavement. For Spears, acknowledging this experience makes American history more complete. He fears that such stories could disappear if historic sites are expected only to celebrate the nation.

The document then connects these concerns to government policy. President Trump has ordered a review of how historical sites present the past, arguing that ideological interpretations have distorted American history. His administration wants public monuments and memorials to emphasise national achievements and progress.

Philadelphia illustrates the consequences. An exhibit about people enslaved by George Washington was removed from a historic site. Visitors condemned what they saw as an attempt to erase an uncomfortable past. The city challenged the removal in court, and a judge ordered the panels restored while the case continued.

However, Brenda Hafera, a scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation, considers the administration's intervention a necessary correction. She argues that the Philadelphia exhibit gave slavery disproportionate attention, leaving too little room for Washington's role in establishing the presidency. She does not reject discussing slavery: she praises Mount Vernon for presenting both Washington's achievements and the lives of those he enslaved. For her, balance means avoiding both whitewashing and an excessive focus on injustice.

Spears challenges this reasoning. He argues that the experiences of minorities have only recently gained recognition after a long history of exclusion. He also contrasts the careful work of historical experts with political decisions he considers arbitrary and lacking transparency. His organisation has joined a legal challenge against the removals.

The document therefore ends with an unresolved disagreement: both interviewees claim to defend truthful history, but differ over what deserves emphasis and how that should be decided.

Possible 2 – Reorganizing the document around its main ideas

President Trump's efforts to promote a more celebratory account of American history have made the country's 250th anniversary politically divisive. This is the tension explored by Judy Woodruff in the PBS NewsHour audio document "Americans divided on nation's history as 250th anniversary nears", broadcast on March 18, 2026. It shows that Americans disagree about what a truthful national story should include. Two competing understandings of historical balance emerge from the interviews, alongside a struggle over who should have the authority to shape public memory.

For Alan Spears, who works for the National Parks Conservation Association, telling the whole story means including experiences that were long overlooked. Gettysburg illustrates his position. Beyond the famous Civil War battle, the site preserves the story of a free Black family who fled Confederate troops to avoid being enslaved. This connects military history with the experience of African Americans. Spears argues that such stories complicate the national narrative, but are essential to understanding it.

Brenda Hafera, a scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation, approaches balance differently. She believes that some historical sites have placed too much emphasis on injustice at the expense of national achievements. However, she rejects whitewashing as well. She praises Mount Vernon for combining Washington's political and military achievements with recognition of the people he enslaved. The disagreement therefore concerns the relative importance given to different aspects of the past.

Philadelphia brings this conflict into focus. For Hafera, an exhibit about people enslaved by Washington devoted disproportionate attention to slavery and neglected his contribution to building the presidency. For opponents of its removal, taking down the exhibit meant erasing an essential part of American history. Spears argues that demands for balance overlook how recently these neglected experiences have entered public memory.

The dispute also concerns who controls historical interpretation. President Trump's administration has ordered reviews of historical sites to promote national achievements and counter what it describes as ideological distortion. Spears, by contrast, stresses that exhibits result from years of research involving specialists. He criticises political removals as arbitrary and lacking transparency. Public opposition and legal challenges show that this authority is contested. Philadelphia sued over the removal of its slavery exhibit, and a judge ordered the panels restored while proceedings continued. Spears's organisation has also joined a lawsuit against the removals.

Ultimately, the document presents the anniversary as a test of national identity: Americans share a history, but remain divided over how to tell it.

The transition

The transition must establish a logical connection between the audio document and the commentary that follows. A document can lead to several possible lines of discussion. How far you broaden the discussion depends on your knowledge, ideally including examples from the news. You may connect the document to a wider topical issue, explore one aspect in greater depth, or address something it leaves out. There are many possibilities. However, the transition remains essential to help the examiners understand and accept your choice of focus. Here is food for thought inspired by the document at hand.

Patriotism and criticism

Both interviewees claim to care about their country, yet they disagree about how its history should be presented. This suggests that their disagreement also concerns the meaning of patriotism itself. Beyond historical commemorations, how can criticism of one's country become a form of patriotism?



National identity in a diverse society

The stories discussed in the document raise the question of whose experiences belong in the national narrative. Including previously overlooked voices can make that narrative more representative, but it can also challenge familiar ideas about the nation. This leads to a broader question: how can diverse societies build a shared identity while recognising their differences?

Rewriting American history today

The document shows how choosing which stories to tell about the past shapes the way Americans see their country today. Highlighting national achievements or giving greater visibility to past injustices can promote different visions of what America stands for and who belongs. This raises a broader question: what is at stake in attempts to rewrite American history today?

Culture and national identity

The debate over historical exhibits shows how cultural institutions influence the way a nation sees itself. Museums, monuments and commemorations give visibility to certain experiences and help define what a society values. This leads to a broader question: how can culture help build a shared national identity while reflecting the diversity of American society?

Historical recognition and inequalities today

The opposition to removing the Philadelphia exhibit shows how much public recognition of past injustice matters. Yet making an experience visible does not necessarily address its consequences in the present. We can therefore move from the representation of historical inequalities to a broader question: how far can symbolic recognition contribute to greater equality today?

Confronting the past and reconciliation

The document suggests that acknowledging painful history can be both necessary and divisive. Beyond deciding what should appear in an exhibit, societies must consider how that recognition can improve relationships in the present. This opens onto a wider question: what does it take for confronting past injustices to lead to meaningful reconciliation?

National celebrations and social cohesion

An anniversary might be expected to bring a country together, but the document shows how it can also reveal deep divisions. This raises questions about the role of public celebrations beyond this particular American example. Under what conditions can national commemorations strengthen a sense of belonging in a polarised society?

Illustrating your arguments with concrete examples

What makes the difference is your cultural knowledge and your ability to illustrate your arguments by showing the breadth of what you know. For each of the approaches above, the following concrete recent examples may be useful.

National identity and public memory

1 Patriotism and criticism

How can criticism of one's country become a form of patriotism?

Example and context	Presentation
No Kings protests United States • June 2025	On 14 June 2025, Americans joined “No Kings” demonstrations against what they saw as President Trump’s excessive use of power. Protesters carried American flags and invoked constitutional freedoms, while a military parade took place in Washington. Their message was that defending the country could mean challenging its president. National symbols thus became tools of democratic protest as well as official celebration.
Bruce Springsteen speaks out United States • May 2025	Opening his tour in Manchester, American singer Bruce Springsteen condemned the Trump administration while explicitly declaring his love for America. He appealed to democracy, liberty and the country’s founding ideals to justify his criticism. His intervention presents dissent as an expression of loyalty to national values: a citizen can oppose the government because they believe it is betraying the country they love.
The Irish flag dispute Ireland • October 2025	A campaign to place Irish flags on Dublin lamp-posts divided residents. Supporters described it as national pride, while critics feared that the flags were being used to intimidate immigrants and claim neighbourhoods for Irish-born people. Some opponents stressed their attachment to the flag while rejecting this use of it. Criticising a supposedly patriotic campaign can therefore mean defending a more inclusive understanding of the nation.

2 National identity in a diverse society

How can diverse societies build a shared identity while recognising their differences?

Example and context	Presentation
Zohran Mamdani’s election United States • November 2025	Born in Uganda to Indian parents, Zohran Mamdani won New York’s mayoral election in November 2025, becoming its first Muslim mayor. His campaign openly embraced his background, including through references to Bollywood, while addressing everyday concerns such as housing and affordability. His election suggests that a visible minority identity can coexist with a broad civic appeal. Belonging need not require people to hide their origins.
Canada’s Speech from the Throne Canada • May 2025	Opening Canada’s Parliament, King Charles III described the country as bilingual and multicultural, with British, French and Indigenous roots. He also acknowledged Indigenous territory and called for reconciliation in actions as well as words. The speech followed Donald Trump’s suggestion that Canada could become an American state. Its message was that Canada’s independence and shared identity could be defended while recognising different histories and languages.



Example and context	Presentation
The Treaty Principles Bill New Zealand • April 2025	New Zealand's Parliament rejected a bill that sought to redefine the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding agreement between Māori and the British Crown. Supporters presented the proposal as equal rights for everyone; opponents argued that it threatened Māori rights and the partnership promised by the Treaty. The dispute exposes a central difficulty: treating everyone identically can conflict with recognising different historical relationships to the nation.

3 Rewriting American history today

What is at stake in attempts to rewrite American history today?

Example and context	Presentation
The Smithsonian review United States • August 2025	The White House announced a review of Smithsonian museums, including their exhibits, websites and plans for America's 250th anniversary. It wanted greater emphasis on national achievements and the removal of narratives it considered divisive. Because these museums help millions of visitors understand the country, their presentation of history carries political weight. The dispute concerns whether government priorities should determine which parts of the national story receive attention.
Stonewall and transgender visibility United States • February 2025	The National Park Service removed references to transgender people from the Stonewall National Monument website after a presidential order on sex and gender. Stonewall commemorates the 1969 uprising in New York that became a landmark in the struggle for LGBTQ rights. Critics argued that the changes excluded people who belonged to that history. Altering a few words on an official website can change whose contribution a nation publicly recognises.
Fort Liberty becomes Fort Bragg United States • February 2025	The North Carolina army base became Fort Liberty in 2023 as part of a move away from names honouring the pro-slavery Confederacy. In 2025, the administration restored "Fort Bragg", officially honouring World War II soldier Roland Bragg rather than Confederate general Braxton Bragg. The distinction matters: the familiar name returned with a different official explanation. Naming a public place can preserve a tradition while changing the story used to justify it.

4 Culture and national identity

How can culture help build a shared national identity while reflecting the diversity of American society?

Example and context	Presentation
Beyoncé and country music United States • February 2025	Beyoncé's Cowboy Carter won Album of the Year and Best Country Album at the 2025 Grammy Awards. She became the first Black artist to win the latter award. By entering a genre strongly associated with American identity, she challenged assumptions about who belongs within it. Her recognition shows how familiar cultural traditions can expand as performers previously seen as outsiders gain visibility and authority.

Example and context	Presentation
Nationhood Memory and Hope United Kingdom • 2025 to 2026	Launched during Bradford's year as UK City of Culture, this photography exhibition brought together work by Aïda Muluneh and UK photographers. It explored identity and belonging across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and toured beyond Bradford. Presenting different faces and experiences within one national project offered a shared cultural space. A national portrait can include disagreement and diversity without reducing everyone to a single image.
Indigenous Australian art at Tate Australia and UK • 2025 to 2026	London's Tate Modern staged a major exhibition of Australian artist Emily Kam Ngwararray, whose paintings drew on her ancestral land and Anmatyerr cultural knowledge. The exhibition ran from July 2025 to January 2026. Giving this work a prominent international platform helped present Indigenous culture as central to Australian artistic achievement. It also challenged the idea that national culture is defined mainly by its European inheritance.

5 Historical recognition and inequalities today

How far can symbolic recognition contribute to greater equality today?

Example and context	Presentation
Windrush compensation reforms United Kingdom • January 2026	The Windrush scandal affected lawful residents, many from Caribbean backgrounds, who were wrongly denied work or services because they could not prove their status. In January 2026, compensation reforms expanded payments to cover lost pension contributions and allowed earlier partial payments during reviews. The changes address damage that an apology alone cannot repair. Recognising a community's contribution must be accompanied by practical remedies when the state has harmed its members.
Tulsa's Road to Repair United States • June 2025	Tulsa announced a "Road to Repair" initiative addressing the continuing effects of the 1921 massacre, when a white mob destroyed the prosperous Black district of Greenwood. The programme included steps towards a charitable Greenwood Trust focused on economic opportunities for affected communities. It connected remembrance with present inequalities. Its significance lies in moving beyond public acknowledgement towards material repair, although an announced initiative does not itself prove that inequalities have been overcome.
Closing the Gap Australia • July 2026	Australia's 2026 Closing the Gap report showed continuing disadvantages affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Life expectancy and housing were improving too slowly to meet agreed targets, while adult imprisonment and the removal of children into care were worsening. The findings contrast with the visibility of Indigenous recognition in public life. Respectful words and ceremonies matter, but equality also depends on services, resources and communities having a say in decisions.

6 Confronting the past and reconciliation

What does it take for confronting past injustices to lead to meaningful reconciliation?

Example and context	Presentation
A former Hudson's Bay store Canada • Redevelopment ongoing in 2026	The former Hudson's Bay department store in Winnipeg is being redeveloped under First Nations leadership after its transfer to the Southern Chiefs' Organization in 2022. The ongoing project plans homes, health services and cultural spaces in a building associated with colonial commerce. This makes reconciliation tangible through ownership and community control. A place once linked to unequal power is being adapted to meet needs identified by Indigenous people themselves.
Victoria's first statewide Treaty Australia • November and December 2025	The Australian state of Victoria signed a Treaty with the First Peoples' Assembly in November 2025, which commenced in December. It provides for a permanent Indigenous representative body, truth-telling and an independent accountability mechanism. The agreement links recognition of past injustice with an ongoing relationship in which Indigenous people can influence decisions. Reconciliation becomes more credible when communities gain a lasting voice and governments can be held responsible for their commitments.
Taranaki Maunga New Zealand • January 2025	New Zealand passed legislation recognising Taranaki Maunga, a mountain sacred to Māori, and its surrounding peaks as a legal person, following negotiations with local Māori communities. The settlement included an apology for the mountain's confiscation and arrangements giving Māori a role in its care, while preserving public access. It connected historical acknowledgement with changes in how a place is governed. Repair can involve restoring a people's relationship with land as well as recognising what they suffered.

7 National celebrations and social cohesion

Under what conditions can national commemorations strengthen a sense of belonging in a polarised society?

Example and context	Presentation
Two Lights for Tomorrow United States • April 2025	Communities were invited to display two lights on 18 April 2025, recalling the lantern signal associated with Paul Revere's ride before the American Revolution. In Ohio, organisers also encouraged a day of community service. This approach linked a national anniversary to local participation and helping others. It suggests that commemorations can create connections when citizens share an activity, rather than simply watch an official ceremony.
VE Day and Commonwealth service United Kingdom • May 2025	The eightieth anniversary of victory in Europe renewed attention to the Commonwealth soldiers who fought alongside Britain, including men from India, Africa and the Caribbean. British Future called for their contribution to receive greater recognition as part of the commemorations. Remembering this shared service can challenge a narrowly white image of British wartime history. A familiar national anniversary can become more inclusive when more communities can recognise their families within it.



Example and context	Presentation
Australia Day and Invasion Day Australia • January 2026	On 26 January 2026, citizenship ceremonies welcomed new Australians while Invasion Day rallies protested the same date's association with British colonisation. The government appealed for unity, but the contrasting events revealed different relationships to the national past. A day that represents belonging for some can represent dispossession for others. Commemorations risk deepening divisions when participation assumes that everyone can celebrate the same event in the same way.

EXAMPLE OF IDEAS & EXAMPLES FOR A COMMENTARY:

America 250: renewing the promise of 1776

The disagreement presented in the document takes on particular significance as America marks 250 years of independence. Celebrating a nation founded on liberty and equality inevitably raises questions about how far those ideals have been fulfilled and what they should mean today. The anniversary can renew that promise by celebrating progress honestly, confronting its limits and encouraging citizens to put shared ideals into practice.

1 America's founding ideals remain worth celebrating.

Argument	Example
The anniversary can reaffirm a shared commitment to freedom and self-government. These principles allow people from different backgrounds to belong to the same political community. Celebrating them can remind Americans of what they have in common.	Mount Vernon naturalisation ceremony in July 2026 On 4 July 2026, immigrants became American citizens at Mount Vernon, George Washington's former home in Virginia. They took an oath of allegiance during the anniversary celebrations. Linking the nation's birthday to the arrival of new citizens presented American identity as something people can join through a shared civic commitment.
The country can also celebrate the expansion of rights since its founding. Progress gives the ideals of 1776 substance and recognises the efforts of later generations to make freedom and equality more widely available.	The National Archives display in 2026 The National Archives added the Emancipation Proclamation and the Nineteenth Amendment to its permanent display alongside the founding documents in 2026. The former advanced freedom from slavery; the latter prohibited denying voting rights on grounds of sex. Displaying them together presents the American promise as a project that later generations have helped develop.

Yet these achievements do not mean the promise has been fulfilled.

2 Celebration must remain honest and democratic.

Argument	Example
A credible anniversary must acknowledge the people excluded from the original promise. Recognising injustice gives the ideals of liberty and equality their full meaning and allows citizens to judge the country by the standards it claims to uphold.	Boston community reading on 26 June 2026 On 26 June 2026, people gathered at Boston's Museum of African American History to read Frederick Douglass's speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" as part of the anniversary year. Delivered in 1852 by the formerly enslaved abolitionist, the speech exposed the contradiction between celebrating liberty and maintaining slavery. Reading it today makes critical reflection part of commemoration.
An anniversary of independence should reaffirm government by the people. Turning national celebrations into a tribute to a current leader risks confusing loyalty to democratic principles with loyalty to one individual. A shared anniversary must leave room for political disagreement.	Commemorative passport design in June 2026 In June 2026, President Trump unveiled a passport design for America's 250th anniversary featuring his own portrait and signature, with the Declaration of Independence behind him. The limited edition was intended for applicants at the Washington Passport Agency. Placing a current president at the centre of this national symbol raises questions about whose image the anniversary is celebrating.

Renewing the promise therefore requires citizens to take an active part.

3 Citizens must help keep the promise alive.

Argument	Example
Renewing the national promise means giving citizens a part in shaping it. Inviting people to contribute their own experiences can make national identity more representative and encourage a sense of ownership of the country's future.	A mobile recording studio in Columbus in August 2026 For 19 August 2026, America250's Our American Story project invited Ohio residents and Columbus Crew supporters to record their experiences outside the Columbus Crew stadium. A mobile studio was open to the public without a match ticket. Selected contributions were intended for preservation at the Library of Congress. This brought the anniversary into an everyday setting and invited citizens to help tell America's story.
Founding ideals gain meaning through everyday civic responsibility. Helping others and working across differences can make a national anniversary useful to communities and build habits that continue after the celebrations have ended.	The Wish Assist donation drive in Texas in June 2026 In Beaumont, Texas, United Way organised a Wish Assist donation drive linked to the 250th anniversary. Running from May to June 2026, it asked residents to provide items requested by local charities so they could support families. The anniversary became a reason to meet concrete community needs. Such initiatives give citizens a practical way to contribute to their country.

Conclusion

America's 250th anniversary can renew the promise of 1776 if it treats liberty and equality as continuing responsibilities. Its lasting achievement should be a stronger commitment to making those ideals a reality for more people.