

Make America Great Again – Mythic History and the Quest for National Redemption

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Make America Great Again – *Mythic History and the Quest for National Redemption*

This article analyses how right-wing intellectuals aligned with the post-2016 "MAGA" movement mobilise mythic narratives of American history to legitimise exclusionary politics and delegitimise critical scholarship. Focusing on two key case studies, the Claremont Institute and the Trump administration's 1776 Commission, the paper shows how these actors construct a redemptive national myth centred on the Founding, moral unity, and heroic tradition. Through close readings of primary texts such as Michael Anton's "The Flight 93 Election" essay and the 1776 Report, the article demonstrates how historical complexity is rejected in favour of simplified, moralised narratives that frame dissent as unpatriotic. Drawing on theories of political myth, collective memory, and anti-intellectualism, it argues that these actors weaponize the past to undermine pluralist democracy and reframe historical knowledge as a matter of loyalty rather than inquiry. In doing so, they contribute to an epistemic environment in which civic education is reoriented toward indoctrination, and historical truth is subordinated to ideological coherence.
Keywords: political myth; American Founding; MAGA; Claremont Institute.

Make America Great Again — *História mítica e a busca pela redenção nacional*

Este artigo analisa a forma como intelectuais da direita norte-americana alinhados com o movimento "MAGA" pós-2016 mobilizam narrativas míticas da história dos Estados Unidos para legitimar políticas de exclusão e deslegitimar a produção historiográfica crítica. Focando-se em dois estudos de caso centrais – o Claremont Institute e a Comissão 1776 do governo Trump –, o artigo mostra como esses atores constroem um mito redentor em torno da fundação da nação, da unidade moral e da tradição heroica. Através da análise de fontes primárias como o ensaio "The Flight 93 Election" de Michael Anton e o Relatório da Comissão 1776, demonstra-se como a complexidade histórica é rejeitada em favor de narrativas simplificadas e moralizantes que retratam a dissidência como antipatriótica. Baseando-se

em teorias sobre mito político, memória coletiva e anti-intelectualismo, o artigo defende que esses autores instrumentalizam o passado para enfraquecer a democracia pluralista e redefinir o conhecimento histórico como um teste de lealdade. Os mesmos contribuem, assim, para um ambiente epistémico em que a educação cívica é orientada para a doutrinação e a verdade histórica é subordinada à coerência ideológica.
Palavras-chave: mito político; fundação dos EUA; MAGA; Claremont Institute.

Make America Great Again – Mythic History and the Quest for National Redemption

Karina Cretu*

I. Introduction

The struggle over American history did not begin with Donald Trump. Since the late 1980s and especially the 1990s, disputes over multicultural curricula, national history standards, museum exhibitions, Confederate memory, the Smithsonian's proposed Enola Gay exhibition, and later the 1619 Project have repeatedly turned the past into a field of ideological conflict[1]. In these "history wars," arguments about what should be taught, commemorated, or displayed have rarely been only about accuracy. They have also been arguments about national identity: whether the United States should be narrated primarily as a

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1 See Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996); Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1997); Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: the case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (1995): 1036–1063.

story of liberty and providential progress, or as a more nuanced history marked by slavery, settler colonialism, racial hierarchy, exclusion, democratic struggle, and unfinished promises[2].

The post-2016 period nevertheless marks a distinct intensification of this older pattern. Trump's 2015-2016 campaign and subsequent presidency gave national visibility to a network of right-wing intellectuals and institutions that treated history not simply as memory or civic inheritance, but as a weapon in a broader struggle over regime legitimacy. Figures such as Michael Anton and Glenn Ellmers, together with institutions such as the Claremont Institute, Hillsdale College, and the 1776 Commission chaired by Larry Arnn, repeatedly framed contemporary political conflict as a struggle over the "true" meaning of the American Founding[3]. Their core claim is not simply that the Founding matters, which is hardly controversial in American political thought. Rather, they argue that one particular interpretation of the Founding – centred on natural rights, moral unity, civilisational confidence, and hostility to egalitarian or multicultural reinterpretations – should function as the authoritative standard by which present institutions, curricula, and citizens are judged[4].

2 The tension between these two narrative modes has its own extensive historiography. For the "exceptionalist" reading of American history as a story of liberty, see Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); for critiques and complications of that tradition, see Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Abram C. Van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). On the counter-tradition foregrounding slavery and exclusion as constitutive rather than aberrant, see Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) traces how these competing self-understandings have shaped American intellectual life more broadly.

3 Publius Decius Mus [Michael Anton], "The Flight 93 Election," *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016; Glenn Ellmers, "'Conservatism' Is No Longer Enough," *The American Mind*, March 24, 2021; Donald J. Trump, Executive Order 13958, "Establishing the President's Advisory 1776 Commission," November 2, 2020; President's Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report* (Washington, DC: The White House, January 2021).

4 Richard Slotkin, *A Great Disorder: National Myth and the Battle for America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2024), 13.

This article examines the politics of the past through the concept of historical myth-making. As Maurice Halbwachs argued in his foundational work on collective memory, groups do not preserve the past intact; they reconstruct it in light of present needs, selecting and reframing events to stabilise collective identity[5]. By historical myth-making, this article refers to a mode of political narration that selects, simplifies, sacralises, and moralises the past in order to make it politically binding in the present. This process does not necessarily require the fabrication of events, although outright falsehoods and distortions may form part of it. Mythic history differs from historiography not because it narrates the past — all historical writing involves narrative — but because it converts a selective account of the past into a source of unquestionable normative authority. Its purpose is less to open the past to inquiry than to close it around a set of moral certainties.

This understanding draws on scholarship on collective and cultural memory. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* is useful here because it shows how particular sites, texts, symbols, and commemorative objects can be deliberately invested with national meaning once an unbroken relationship with the past is perceived to have been lost. Jan Assmann similarly distinguishes everyday "communicative memory" from institutionalised "cultural memory": a canonised body of texts, rites, images, and symbols that performs what he calls a "concretion of identity," defining who belongs to the community and where its normative boundaries lie.[6] Mythic history, in this sense, is history transformed into a symbolic structure of loyalty, belonging, and exclusion.

Moreover, national myths are not inherently right-wing, nor are they unique to the United States. All modern nations rely on symbolic repertoires that condense complex histories into stories of origin, trial,

5 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38–40.

6 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24; Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125–133; Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 109–118.

sacrifice, and collective destiny[7]. American exceptionalism has been especially powerful because it operates as both civic ideal and national myth: it presents the United States as a uniquely free, providential, or exemplary political experiment, while also supplying a language through which diverse actors can criticise the nation for failing to live up to its professed ideals[8]. Democrats, Republicans, civil-rights activists, abolitionists, Cold War liberals, religious conservatives, and social movements have all drawn from this reservoir. Martin Luther King Jr.'s invocation of the Declaration of Independence as a "promissory note," for example, used exceptionalist language to expose the contradiction between American ideals and racial injustice[9].

What distinguishes the MAGA[10] variant is not the use of national myth per se but three specific features: the claim that a single interpretation of the Founding should be immune from scholarly revision; the treatment of dissenting historiography as disloyalty; and the deployment of state power to enforce the preferred narrative.[11]

7 The classic accounts are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). On the narrative structure of national myths – the repertoire of origins, trials, and collective destiny –, see Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). On how academic historiography functions as a "script" through which citizens learn to experience the present as part of a national story, see Pertti Haapala, "Lived Historiography: National History as a Script to the Past," in Ville Kivimäki, Sami Suodenjoki, and Tanja Vahtikari, eds., *Lived Nation as the History of Experiences and Emotions in Finland, 1800–2000* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 29–56. For political myth as an ongoing process of narrative labour, see Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

8 On the dual character of American exceptionalism as both civic ideal and national myth – simultaneously a source of nationalist self-celebration and a critical standard against which the nation can be judged –, see Peter S. Onuf, "American Exceptionalism and National Identity," *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 77–100, who identifies "dueling exceptionalisms" (liberal-cosmopolitan vs. conservative-essentialist) as a constitutive feature of American political identity.

9 Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963, Avalon Project, Yale Law School.

10 In this paper, the term "right-wing" denotes the contemporary MAGA-aligned New Right, the network of nationalist-populist thinkers and activists that coalesced around the Trump Administration since 2016. This movement openly challenges liberal-democratic norms and multicultural inclusion. The paper uses MAGA, far right, and right-wing interchangeably to mean these post-2016 currents rather than older conservative traditions.

11 Leading examples of this intellectual posture include Christopher Caldwell, *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), which argues

The article develops this argument through two interrelated case studies. First, it examines the Claremont Institute, a long-standing conservative think tank that has positioned itself as a guardian of the American Founding and has promoted a highly moralised reading of constitutional history[12]. Second, it analyses the 1776 Commission, a presidential advisory body created by Donald Trump through Executive Order 13958 in November 2020 and chaired by Larry Arnn, Hillsdale College president and Claremont Institute former president. The Commission's final product, *The 1776 Report*, released in January 2021, sought to provide an official counter-narrative to the 1619 Project[13] and to promote what the administration called "patriotic education".[14] Its significance lies not simply in its defence of the Founding, but in its attempt to translate a mythic and redemptive account of American history into state-endorsed civic pedagogy. The report presented the Founding as the source of timeless principles, treated slavery and racism as deviations already overcome by those principles, and framed critical historiography as a threat to national unity. These cases share a common orientation toward the past as a normative resource and a site of political authority.

that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 created a "rival constitution" that displaced the original framework of limited government and freedom of association with an administered regime of identity-group entitlements – casting the entire post-1960s egalitarian project as a constitutional usurpation rather than a fulfilment of founding promises. Patrick Deneen offers a partly distinct critique in *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). He argues that the founders' own Lockean liberalism contained the seeds of the individualism and state centralisation that conservatives now lament – a position that shares the New Right's hostility to egalitarian reform but locates the original sin in the Enlightenment Founding itself rather than in its later betrayal.

12 The Claremont Institute, "Mission & Overview – The Claremont Institute," August 23, 2024, https://www.claremont.org/mission-overview/.

13 The 1619 Project was launched by *The New York Times Magazine* in August 2019, on the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Virginia. It sought to "reframe" American history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the centre of the national narrative. The project included essays, poetry, fiction, photography, a podcast, and later educational materials developed with the Pulitzer Center. See Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019; Pulitzer Center, "The 1619 Project Curriculum"; Jake Silverstein, "Why We Published The 1619 Project," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019.

14 Nicole Gaudiano, "Trump Creates 1776 Commission to Promote 'Patriotic Education,'" *Politico*, November 2, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/02/trump-1776-commission-education-433885?utm_medium=facebook&utm_source=dlvr.it.

The underlying structure is one of purity, betrayal, and redemption: a morally complete Founding corrupted by progressive elites, critical historians, and "identity politics," awaiting restoration through strong leadership and institutional purification. In this framework, history becomes less a field of inquiry than a terrain to be reconquered.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first situates the argument within scholarship on political myth, American exceptionalism, and anti-intellectualism. The second analyses the mythic grammar of the Founding in MAGA-aligned discourse. The third examines Claremont as a case of intellectual myth-making. The fourth traces the institutionalisation of this myth through the 1776 Commission, and Trump's second-term efforts to reshape public history. The conclusion reflects on the democratic stakes of this politics of history.

II. Theoretical Framework

As the literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies*, myth is a second-order semiological system: it takes an already existing sign or historical meaning and reworks it into a new signification. Its distinctive operation is naturalisation. In Barthes's well-known formulation, myth "transforms history into nature": it takes contingent, interested, and historically produced meanings and makes them appear self-evident, timeless, and apolitical[15]. This does not mean that myth is politically neutral. On the contrary, its apparent depoliticisation is precisely what makes it politically powerful: it conceals conflict, choice, and contingency behind the language of common sense, inheritance, or moral necessity. Political philosopher Chiara Bottici similarly treats political myth less as a false belief than as a process of "work on myth," through which a basic narrative pattern is continually reworked to satisfy a need for significance[16]. Political myths orient collective actors within complex political worlds; they assign roles, identify enemies, explain loss, and promise restoration.

15 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Random House, 1993), 109–111.
16 Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 8–9, 14–16.

This article therefore does not argue that all political uses of history are mythological or illegitimate. Political communities necessarily use the past to orient themselves. Constitutional interpretation, commemorative practice, civic education, and public history all involve choices about what matters. The problem emerges when political actors convert history into a loyalty test and treat dissenting interpretations as evidence of treason, hatred of the nation, or civilisational decay. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur makes a distinction between memory and history that is useful here: collective memory sustains identity, but when memory becomes detached from critical examination it can slide into abusive memory, a form of remembrance mobilised to justify power and silence competing accounts[17].

The American case is especially fertile terrain for this dynamic because American national identity has long been organised around a powerful exceptionalist narrative. The American sociologist and political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset described American exceptionalism as a "double-edged sword": it has supported liberty, egalitarian aspiration, and individualism, but also moralism, anti-statism, punitive politics, and resistance to structural remedies for inequality[18]. More recent historians have complicated the story further. Ian Tyrrell traces exceptionalism as an old but mutable idea, connected to the United States' self-understanding as a new experiment in a world of empires[19]. Abram Van Engen shows how the "city on a hill" became a twentieth-century story of American mission rather than a stable inheritance from the Puritan seventeenth century[20]. Sarah Churchwell reconstructs the entangled histories of "America First" and the "American Dream," showing that both phrases have been repeatedly contested and that nationalist uses of American greatness often coexist with racial exclu-

17 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 412–416.

18 Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 19–31.

19 Ian Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 12–19.

20 Van Engen, *City on a Hill*, 3–15.

sion and economic hierarchy[21]. The broader literature on Americanism and national narrative makes the same point: American identity has never been one stable creed, but a repertoire of competing political languages[22].

The MAGA-aligned New Right draws on this repertoire but narrows it. Its use of exceptionalism tends to remove the tension between ideals and contradiction. It treats the Founding as already containing the correct moral answer and treats later movements that foreground racial injustice, gender hierarchy, or exclusion as threats to national unity. This is why historian Jill Lepore's term "historical fundamentalism" is particularly useful. Lepore uses it to describe an approach to the past that treats founding documents and figures as sacred texts whose meaning can be recovered directly and authoritatively, rather than historically interpreted[23].

Historical fundamentalism is not unique to the United States. Authoritarian and nationalist movements across the world have used founding myths, heroic ancestors, and state-controlled memory to sacralise political authority[24]. But in the United States, this tendency

21 Churchwell, *Behold, America*, 5–16.

22 For influential accounts challenging the notion of a singular American political tradition, see Rogers M. Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 549–566. Smith argues that American political development has been shaped by the persistent interaction and conflict of liberal, republican, and ascriptive (racial, ethnic, and gender-based) traditions rather than by a coherent liberal consensus. For analyses of how competing political languages are mobilized in struggles over national identity and historical memory, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2001), and Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Cornell University Press, 1995), which traces the recurring opposition between the "virtuous people" and "corrupt elites" across both left- and right-wing populist movements.

23 Jill Lepore, "The Trump Administration's Efforts to Reshape America's Past," *The New Yorker*, August 25, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/09/01/the-trump-administrations-efforts-to-reshape-americas-past.

24 For case studies of state-directed memory politics, see Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), on the instrumentalization of historical memory in contemporary Russia; Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), on the Chinese Communist Party's use of the "Century of Humiliation" narrative to reinforce political legitimacy; and Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), on the political deployment of competing narratives of the Ottoman and Kemalist past.

acquires distinctive force because the Founding already occupies a quasi-scriptural position in civic life. The Founding was genuinely contested and contradictory, and multiple legitimate interpretations of it exist. The problem this article identifies is not that the right interprets it differently from professional historians, but that it denies the contest itself – insisting that one reading is the single authoritative account and that all others are acts of betrayal.

Ruth Wodak identifies a recurring structure across right-wing populist movements: the construction of an ethnic, religious, or linguistic minority as a scapegoat, the deployment of a "politics of fear," and the embrace of what she calls "the arrogance of ignorance" — an anti-intellectual posture that treats appeals to common sense as self-evidently superior to expert knowledge and marks, in her reading, "a return to pre-modernist or pre-Enlightenment thinking."[25] This orientation does not seek to restore any historically accurate condition; rather, it constructs a symbolic homeland purified of conflict, diversity, and ambiguity. In this framework, history becomes a usable past, a selectively curated archive mobilised rhetorically to naturalise inequality, justify border regimes, and portray pluralism as decay[26].

The anti-intellectual component is equally important. Historian Richard Hofstadter described American anti-intellectualism as a suspicion of expertise and abstraction, but he also noted that it did not reject all elites equally[27]. It often denigrated scholars, teachers, and reformers while admiring business, military, religious, or charismatic political authority. Contemporary MAGA-aligned historical politics reproduces this distinction. Academic historians, museum curators, journalists, and teachers are framed as ideological elites who corrupt the nation through complexity[28]. By contrast, self-styled guardians of the

25 Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (Sage Publications Limited, 2015), 22–23.

26 Wodak, *The Politics of Fear,* 126–130.

27 Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Vintage, 1963), 19–24.

28 Conservative strategist Christopher Rufo argues that the institutional elites have weaponized academic nuance to orchestrate a "cultural revolution" that subverts traditional American values; see Christopher F. Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Con-*

Founding claim to speak for "ordinary Americans," even when they operate through elite institutions, endowed colleges, think tanks, legal networks, publishing platforms, and federal commissions[29].

This produces what may be called revisionist patriotism – a form of national loyalty defined by adherence to a prescribed interpretation of the past. Historical knowledge that foregrounds violence, contingency, exclusion, or conflict is treated with suspicion when it unsettles the moral unity of the national story. In this way, historical complexity is often subordinated to civic affirmation, and the defence of national myths can come to function as a measure of patriotic commitment[30].

What gives this dynamic its historical depth is its rootedness in available cultural repertoires. As Richard Slotkin has shown, American political culture has repeatedly drawn on myths of frontier conquest, redemptive violence, and civilisational struggle in moments of perceived crisis – patterns that predate the current movement by centuries[31]. Steven Hahn makes the complementary point that illiberalism is not foreign to the American tradition but has coexisted with liberal ideals throughout its history: exclusion, coercion, racial hierarchy, and anti-democratic politics are recurring features of the republic, not aberrations. Together they suggest that the MAGA-aligned New Right does not invent its materials from nothing. It selects from historically

quered Everything (New York: Broadside Books, 2023). This sentiment is codified in *The 1776 Report*, which explicitly accuses the academic establishment of replacing patriotic history with divisive theories designed to fracture national identity; see The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report*.

29 This positioning is prominently exemplified by the Claremont Institute and Hillsdale College. Intellectuals affiliated with these networks claim to defend the "silent majority" against a corrupt administrative state; see Glenn Ellmers, *The Soul of Civics: The Claremont Institute's War on the Administrative State* (New York: Encounter Books, 2021). Similarly, elite legal networks like the Federalist Society operate under a populist rhetoric of returning power to "the people" while enacting top-down constitutional shifts; for a critical analysis of this network's institutional power, see Amanda Hollis-Brusky, *Ideas with Consequences: The Federalist Society and the Conservative Counter-Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

30 In contemporary scholarship, this framework is expanded by Stefan Berger, "National History Writing in Europe in a Global Age," *History Compass* 5, no. 1 (2007): 258–268, who analyzes how the state-sanctioned defence of national myths frequently treats critical history (foregrounding violence and exclusion) as a threat to the nation's moral unity, thereby transforming mythic fidelity into a baseline metric for patriotic commitment.

31 Slotkin, *A Great Disorder*, 1–25.

available repertoires, purifies them, and presents them as the authentic core of the nation – a process that makes the current movement harder to dismiss as aberration and harder to defeat through appeals to an imagined liberal consensus that was never uncontested[32].

III. The Myth of the Founding: Purity, Betrayal, and Redemption

The Founding occupies the centre of MAGA-aligned historical myth because it offers a symbolic origin point that can be portrayed as both political and sacred. In this narrative, 1776 and 1787 are not treated primarily as moments of conflict, compromise, contingency, and contested constitutional design. They become a moment of moral clarity in which the nation's principles were fully articulated. The task of politics is therefore not democratic negotiation among competing visions of the good, but restoration of an original order that later actors allegedly betrayed.

The first element of this grammar is purity. Claremont and Hillsdale texts repeatedly present the Founding as the authoritative source of American political morality[33]. They emphasise natural rights, constitutional self-government, and the Declaration of Independence as if these principles formed a coherent and stable moral order from the beginning. The aim is to purify the Founding of its contradictions, transforming a historically contested generation – divided over slavery,

32 Steven Hahn, *Illiberal America: A History* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2024), 1–22; 315-330.

33 This presentation of the Founding as an absolute moral baseline is present across several essays published in *The American Mind*. David Azerrad insists on treating the moral framework of 1776 as an unchanging truth superior to modern progressivism; see David Azerrad, "The Absolute Truth of America's Founding Principles," *The American Mind*, August 26, 2020. To enforce this moral baseline, Claremont legal scholars advocate for a rigid "Natural Law Constitutionalism" to dismantle the modern administrative state; see John C. Eastman, "Justice Thomas: Courage in Defense of Natural Law Constitutionalism," *The American Mind*, May 18, 2026. This positioning transforms constitutional debate into an existential struggle over the survival of the regime itself against an illegitimate ruling class; see Edward J. Erler, "What is Our Regime?," *The American Mind*, August 29, 2022. This ideological project is operationally institutionalized at the K-12 level through *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*, a comprehensive educational blueprint designed to replace critical historical scholarship with a celebratory narrative of natural rights and constitutional perfection; see Hillsdale College, *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College, 2021).

federal power, religion, political economy, party conflict, Indigenous dispossession, and the boundaries of citizenship – into a unified moral subject whose presumed consensus serves as an enduring source of political legitimacy.

This process often relies on invented or retrospective traditions. The phrases "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" as the national motto are frequently absorbed into claims about the Christian character of the Founding, although their federal institutionalisation belongs to the Cold War era rather than the eighteenth century[34]. Their power lies precisely in their capacity to project a later Christian-nationalist synthesis backward onto the founding period. It is an example of historical myth-making: a later symbolic settlement is presented as evidence of original national spirit[35].

The second element is betrayal. If the nation began in unity and virtue, present conflict must be explained as corruption. MAGA-aligned discourse repeatedly identifies "progressives," "globalists," "cosmopolitan elites," universities, bureaucrats, journalists, and critical historians as agents who have severed Americans from their inheritance. Some of these terms, especially "globalists" and "cosmopolitan elites," also carry

34 The inscription "In God We Trust" first appeared on a two-cent piece minted in 1864, during the Civil War, as a way of bolstering the Northern war effort; it did not enter paper currency and later, when coins were redesigned in the late nineteenth century, it disappeared altogether. During the Cold War, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation in 1955 mandating its appearance on all U.S. currency. The following year, "In God We Trust" was adopted as the official national motto, reflecting a broader mid-twentieth-century sacralisation of American identity rather than founding-era constitutional intent; similarly, the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance (added in 1954) and the motto itself are often retrospectively invoked in claims about the Christian character of the Founding, despite their institutionalisation belonging to the Cold War period rather than the eighteenth century.

35 See Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 4–12. Kruse demonstrates how the fusion of piety and patriotism in the 1950s was deliberately backdated to create the illusion that the Founding Fathers intended to establish an explicitly Christian state. For the sociopolitical mechanisms through which contemporary movements continue to utilize these Cold War relics as "proof" of an original Christian-nationalist foundation, see Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). See also Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), which details the legislative histories of the 1954 and 1956 Congressional acts.

long histories as antisemitic dog whistles, even when used in contexts where the speaker can deny explicit antisemitism[36].

Iterations of this narrative frequently invoke the Civil War and Reconstruction as historical analogies. Trump and his allies have described their opponents as an "enemy within[37]," portrayed the federal bureaucracy as an occupying force hostile to the real nation[38], and framed contemporary politics as an "American carnage[39]," a struggle between patriots and traitors. The recurring invocation of a "Second Civil War," together with depictions of political opponents as traitors or enemies of the people, casts the present as a moment of existential crisis in which compromise becomes impossible and extraordinary measures appear justified[40].

The third element is redemption. Within the MAGA narrative, this concept is personalised and dramatised. Leadership assumes mythic significance, with Donald Trump cast as the singular figure capable of restoring national greatness and reversing decline. Religious imagery saturates the rhetoric: Trump is frequently portrayed as God's chosen instrument (using AI imagery[41]), supporters compare his political career to biblical narratives of providential deliverance, and rallies often

36 The terms "globalists," "cosmopolitan elites," and "cultural Marxism" carry well-documented antisemitic genealogies, recoding older conspiracy theories about Jewish financial and cultural power; the "cultural Marxism" trope in particular descends from the Nazi-era charge of "cultural Bolshevism." For the specific analysis of how these terms have a different meaning within modern conservative populist media, see Jonathan Weisman, *(((Semitism))): Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 71–94. For a comprehensive peer-reviewed evaluation of how anti-elitist rhetoric conceals older conspiracy myths, see also Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

37 Stephen Groves, "Trump Suggests He'll Use the Military on 'the Enemy from Within' the U.S. if He's Reelected," PBS NewsHour, October 13, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-suggests-hell-use-the-military-on-the-enemy-from-within-the-u-s-if-hes-reelected.

38 Erich Wagner, "Trump Calls Federal Workforce 'Crooked,' Vows to Hold Them 'Accountable,'" *Government Executive*, August 28, 2024, https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2024/08/trump-calls-federal-workforce-crooked-vows-hold-them-accountable/399138/.

39 Donald J. Trump, "Inaugural Address," 20 January 2017, *Politico*, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907.

40 Wodak, "*Wodak, "T*he Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean," *Critical Discourse Studies* 12, n.º 4 (2015): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481211048499.

41 Brad Brooks, Helen Coster, and Joseph Ax, "Trump's AI Image of Himself as Jesus-Like Figure Follows Feud with Pope Leo," *Reuters*, April 13, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/trump-posts-ai-image-himself-jesus-like-figure-drawing-outrage-2026-04-13/.

adopt revivalist or crusading themes[42]. The pro-Trump "Jericho Marches" of 2020, for example, explicitly reenacted the biblical story of the Israelites circling Jericho before its walls collapsed, casting political opponents as obstacles to be removed through divine intervention[43].

This redemptive logic also accommodates strands of Evangelical apocalypticism. Rather than treating contemporary politics as a contest among legitimate rivals, Christian-nationalist narratives often frame the present as a moment of civilisational crisis in which the nation stands at the threshold of either destruction or renewal[44]. Political conflict is therefore invested with eschatological significance: America must choose between fidelity to God's design and national collapse. Such thinking helps explain the movement's hostility toward causes associated with progressive social change, including Black Lives Matter, which some Christian leaders portrayed not as a reform movement but as evidence of cultural and moral decay[45]. In the influential "Flight 93 Election" essay, Michael Anton grouped Black Lives Matter among the "inanities" produced by a decadent ruling class, locating racial justice activism within a broader narrative of national decline rather than democratic reform[46].

At its more militant edge, this redemptive imagination adopts explicitly crusading imagery. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth bears a Jerusalem cross tattoo on his chest, the phrase "Deus Vult" ("God wills it") on his bicep, a sword-and-cross design referencing Matthew 10:34

42 Peter Smith, "Jesus Is Their Savior, Trump Is Their Candidate. Ex-President's Backers Say He Shares Faith, Values," *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 2024, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-05-20/jesus-is-their-savior-trump-is-their-candidate-ex-presidents-backers-say-he-shares-faith-values.

43 David Smith, "In Trump We Trust: Religious Right on Crusade to Make Their Man President," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jun/22/trump-christians-president-religion.

44 Katherine Stewart, "Inside the Dangerous Rise of Christian Nationalism," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 83–87, https://doi.org/10.53483/ZCPC3596.

45 Ruth Braunstein, "The 'Right' History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America," *Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021): 95, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020095; Josh Buice, "Three Reasons Why Christians Should Reject #BlackLivesMatter," *Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel*, June 12, 2020, https://statementonsocialjustice.com/articles/three-reasons-why-christians-should-reject-blacklivesmatter/; Eliza Griswold, "How Black Lives Matter Is Changing the Church," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/how-black-lives-matter-is-changing-the-church.

46 Publius Decius Mus, "The Flight 93 Election,".

("I came not to bring peace, but a sword") with "Yeshua" inscribed on the blade, and the Arabic word "kafir" ("infidel") beneath "Deus Vult."[47] Historians of the medieval Crusades note that "Deus Vult" was the battle cry of the First Crusade and remains inseparable from Crusader symbolism[48]. Scholars, such as medievalist Thomas Lecaque and Dorothy Kim, have also remarked that the Jerusalem cross and "Deus Vult" have become popular symbols within sections of the far right and appeared together on banners at the 2017 Charlottesville rally[4950].

Moreover, Hegseth's 2020 book *American Crusade* repeatedly frames political conflict as a struggle to defend Christian civilisation, concluding with the exhortation, "See you on the battlefield. Together, with God's help, we will save America. Deus vult!"[51] Scholars, such as historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez and religion scholar Matthew D. Taylor, have situated Hegseth at the militant end of the movement, where political restoration is imagined not merely as electoral victory but as a form of holy struggle against perceived enemies of the nation[52]. Redemption is therefore imagined as a rupture: a moment in which the nation is cleansed of corrupting influences and returned to its rightful path[53]. Political slogans such as "Make America Great Again" operate

47 Marina Dunbar, "Pete Hegseth's Arabic Tattoo Stirs Controversy: 'Clear Symbol of Islamophobia,'" *The Guardian*, March 27, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/27/pete-hegseth-tattoo-arabic-language.

48 Tomasz Pełech, *Shaping the Image of Enemy-Infidel in the Relations of Eyewitnesses and Participants of the First Crusade: The Case of Muslims* (PhD diss., Université Clermont Auvergne/Uniwersytet Wrocławski, 2020), https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-03143783.

49 Lydia Wilson, "Pete Hegseth's Tattoos and the Crusading Obsession of the Far Right," *New Lines Magazine*, November 29, 2024, https://newlinesmag.com/essays/pete-hegseths-tattoos-and-the-crusading-obsession-of-the-far-right/.

50 Dorothy Kim, "The Alt-Right and Medieval Religions," *Berkley Forum*, Georgetown University, November 5, 2018, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-alt-right-and-medieval-religions.

51 Pete Hegseth, *American Crusade: Our Fight to Stay Free* (Nashville, TN: Center Street, 2020), 237.

52 Shannon Bond, Tom Bowman, Odette Yousef, and Quil Lawrence, "What's Behind Defense Secretary Pick Hegseth's War on 'Woke,'" *NPR*, November 15, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/11/14/nx-s1-5191941/pete-hegseth-defense-department-dei; Julia Carrie Wong, "Pete Hegseth's Holy War: The Militant Christian Theology Animating the US Attack on Iran," *The Guardian*, April 10, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2026/apr/10/pete-hegseth-christianity-iran-war-crusade.

53 Nicole LaFond and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, "Christian Nationalism's Role in the Insurrection Was Four Decades in the Making," Talking Points Memo, February 3, 2021, https://

within this logic, framing contemporary politics not as a negotiation among competing visions of the future but as a struggle to recover a lost moral order whose restoration carries both national and, for many believers, providential significance.

This framing also underpinned initiatives such as the 1776 Commission, which sought to institutionalise a "pro-American" historical narrative by displacing critical approaches to the past. Significantly, the Commission was created in direct opposition to the 1619 Project, whose central aim was to place slavery and the experiences of Black Americans at the centre of the national narrative. Within the logic of the myth, such reinterpretations could not appear as legitimate historical arguments; they had to be cast as acts of betrayal. The result was a rhetorical shift whereby disputes over race, memory, and historical interpretation were reframed as attacks on the nation itself. In this way, the redemption narrative defended a traditional, predominantly white understanding of American identity from critical scrutiny[54].

Taken together, the tropes of purity, betrayal, and redemption constitute a coherent mythic structure through which right-wing intellectuals reinterpret the American Founding. This structure does not merely simplify the past; it reorganises political conflict around moral absolutes, transforming historical interpretation into a test of loyalty and belonging. In doing so, it prepares the ground for exclusionary nationalism while rendering pluralist democracy –and the critical historiography that sustains it– morally suspect.

IV. The Claremont Institute and Intellectual Myth-making

The Claremont Institute is a conservative think tank founded in 1979 by four students of American political philosopher Harry V. Jaffa – Larry P. Arnn, Christopher Flannery, Peter Schramm, and Thomas Silver. Understanding Jaffa's intellectual influence is essential to under-

talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/without-help-christian-nationalism-decades-making-might-not-been-insurrection.

54 Slotkin, *A Great Disorder*, 186.

standing the Institute's approach to the American Founding and constitutional government. Jaffa, best known as a student of Leo Strauss and a prominent interpreter of Abraham Lincoln's political thought, became the leading figure of what came to be known as "West Coast Straussianism." Unlike East Coast Straussians, West Coast Straussians tend to treat the American Founding as the embodiment of a "best regime" grounded in natural-right principles, and interpret subsequent progressive institutional development as a departure from that founding order.[55]

This intellectual outlook is reflected in the Claremont Institute's stated mission to "restore the principles of the American Founding to their rightful, preeminent authority in our national life."[56] The statement is significant, presenting the Founding as a lost authority whose principles must be recovered and reasserted in contemporary political life. The Institute gained influence through its *Claremont Review of Books* and fellowships, educating many conservative public figures[57].

In practice, its fellows and associated publications[58] have developed a distinctive mode of intellectual myth-making that combines (1) a rhetoric of civilisational crisis, (2) an "original constitutional vision" presented as morally complete and politically prescriptive, and (3) an

55 Joshua Tait, "The Problem with Right-Wing 'Regime' Talk," *The Bulwark*, August 23, 2022, https://www.thebulwark.com/p/the-problem-with-right-wing-regime-talk.

56 The Claremont Institute, "Mission & Overview".

57 The Institute's fellowship and publication network has been connected to a wide range of influential figures in contemporary conservatism, including Vice President J.D. Vance; Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought; former Trump administration officials Michael Anton, Michael Ellis, and James Braid; media personalities Ben Shapiro, Laura Ingraham, Mark Levin, Charlie Kirk, and Jack Posobiec; elected officials and jurists such as Ron DeSantis, Clarence Thomas, and Tom Cotton; and intellectuals and strategists including John Eastman, Victor Davis Hanson, and Michael Needham.

58 Its principal publications include the *Claremont Review of Books,* its flagship quarterly journal of political thought; *The American Mind*, an online magazine and podcast; and the newly established *Founding.com*, which disseminates educational material on the American Founding. The Institute also operates the *Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence*, which promotes originalist constitutional interpretation through litigation and amicus briefs, and the C*enter for the American Way of Life*, a Washington-based policy centre devoted to advancing a "new Right" and defending, what it terms, the American way of life. In addition, the Institute cultivates future conservative leaders through its *Publius*, *Lincoln*, *John Marshall*, *Speechwriters*, and *Sheriffs Fellowships*, which provide intensive instruction in the principles of the American Founding and their contemporary application.

"anti-elitist" posture that treats critical scholarship as a form of subversion. The Institute's contemporary importance is partly institutional, its proximity to Republican political networks and media ecosystems, but it is also intellectual: it offers a language through which political conflict is narrated as regime-level emergency and history is mobilised as normative authority rather than as contested inquiry[59].

As political theorist Laura K. Field underscores, Claremont's current prominence reflects the degree to which the post-2016 environment rewarded apocalyptic framing and modes of argument that render the Founding not as a historical episode but as a moral standard, and contemporary adversaries not as opponents but as enemies of the regime[60].

The Rhetoric of Crisis

Claremont gave its most influential expression of political emergency in 2016, when Michael Anton (writing under the pseudonym "Publius Decius Mus") published "The Flight 93 Election" in the *Claremont Review of Books.* The essay frames the election as a last-resort decision under conditions of existential threat. Its opening formulation establishes the essay's central claim: "2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway.[61]" The metaphor treats democratic choice as an emergency action under hijacking: a Trump vote becomes a risky but necessary attempt to avert certain destruction. Anton deepens the metaphor by characterising a Clinton presidency as "Russian Roulette with a semi-auto," whereas with Trump "at least you can spin the cylinder and take your chances[62]."

However, Michael Anton's significance for Claremont's intellectual project cannot be reduced to the emergency rhetoric of "The Flight 93 Election." His broader work reveals a deeper theoretical claim: the

59 Jean Guerrero, "Donald Trump's Politics of White Fear Have Roots in Southern California," *LAmag*, September 11, 2020, https://lamag.com/opinion/claremont-institute-trump/.

60 Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right* (Princeton University Press, 2025), 29–30.

61 Publius Decius Mus, "The Flight 93 Election".

62 Publius Decius Mus, "The Flight 93 Election".

American Founding is a coherent political philosophy that should continue to serve as the authoritative standard for American political life. The Founders' principles are presented as universal in theory, but politically realised only within a particular people, culture, and constitutional order. He reads later developments in American history through the prism of fidelity or betrayal to the Founders' regime. Progressivism, administrative government, identity politics, and post-1960s egalitarianism appear not as legitimate reinterpretations of American principles, but as deviations from them[63].

In Anton's account, the Founders' regime rests on equal natural rights and government by consent. By contrast, modern progressivism is understood as replacing consent with expert rule and individual rights with group-based claims. The administrative state becomes, in this reading, not merely inefficient or bureaucratic, but unjust: it transfers political authority away from citizens and toward unelected experts. Likewise, contemporary social justice politics is interpreted as a return to a kind of aristocracy, because it assigns moral and political standing on the basis of group identity rather than equal citizenship[64].

Anton's view of the Founding also underpins his restrictionist approach to immigration and national belonging. Because he treats republican government as dependent on cultural commonality and civic solidarity, mass immigration appears as a threat not only to economic stability but to the conditions of self-government itself. The nation is not imagined as an abstract rights-bearing population, but as a historically formed political community with inherited principles and boundaries. In this respect, Anton's Founding is universal and exclusionary

63 Michael Anton, *After the Flight 93 Election: The Crisis of American National Identity* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019), 45–68. In this text, Anton explicitly builds upon his earlier polemics to argue that modern progressivism and mass globalization threaten the unique socio-cultural preconditions necessary to sustain the Founders' constitutional order.

64 Michael Anton, *The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return* (New York: Encounter Books, 2021), 115–142. Anton argues that the administrative state operates as an unjust, post-constitutional ruling class that strips citizens of political authority. Furthermore, he conceptualizes contemporary identity politics and social justice initiatives as a neo-aristocratic system that fragments the American republic by replacing equal individual citizenship with group-based moral hierarchy.

at the same time: universal because it affirms natural rights, but exclusionary because the political responsibility to secure those rights is confined to a particular constitutional people[65].

Anton's later reflections on American decline make this structure even clearer. Responding to the question of why American self-government had weakened, he argued that the regime was no longer operating as designed and that this alteration had been imposed by actors hostile to the Founders' original design[66]. His diagnosis linked American decline to modernity, mass immigration, the cycle of regimes, and the erosion of religious belief. The central concern was not simply that institutions had changed, but that the moral and intellectual conditions assumed by the Founders had been undermined[67]. The Founding was therefore cast as both a lost model and a still-available standard of restoration.

Seen in this light, "The Flight 93 Election" is not an isolated polemic but the political dramatization of Anton's founding philosophy. The essay's apocalyptic tone follows from a prior claim: if the Founders' regime is the best practicable regime, and if contemporary elites have abandoned or subverted it, then ordinary electoral politics can be reframed as a regime-level struggle. Trump becomes defensible not because he embodies Founding virtue, but because he is imagined as an instrument for halting the destruction of the regime that the Founders created. Anton's emergency rhetoric therefore depends on a mythic structure of purity, betrayal, and possible redemption.

Natural rights and the Jaffa inheritance

Claremont's apocalyptic politics rests on a longer intellectual genealogy. Harry Jaffa argued that the American Founding fused classical political philosophy, biblical morality, and modern natural-rights constitutionalism into a uniquely elevated regime. The phrase "Athens, Je-

65 Michael Anton, "The Case for Trump's Immigration Order," *Claremont Review of Books* 17, no. 1 (2017): 22–29.

66 Michael Anton, *Dispatches from the Late Republic: The Culture, Politics, and Greatness of America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2024), 89–114.

67 Michael Anton, "Unprecedented," *The New Criterion* 40, no. 4 (December 2021): 4–11.

rusalem, and Peoria," associated with interpretations of Jaffa's work, is telling: Athens signifies classical reason and virtue; Jerusalem signifies biblical morality; Peoria signifies ordinary Middle America rather than Washington as the moral centre of the regime[68]. The formulation helps explain Claremont's recurring claim to speak both philosophically and populistically: it presents itself as an elite interpreter of the Founding and defender of ordinary Americans against corrupt elites.

Jaffa's own writings treated liberty as inseparable from moral order. In his 2007 essay "The American Founding as the Best Regime," he insisted that the Framers understood liberty only in explicitly moral terms – for example, the Virginia Bill of Rights said liberty could only be preserved by "justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue". In this framework, liberty is not freedom as moral autonomy, but a "blessing" that must be good in the sight of God. As Jaffa argues, "...The idea of liberty – or the liberty which is a blessing – being an emancipation of the passions from moral restraint had no place in the constitutional doctrine of the *novus ordo seclorum*. The liberty which is a blessing must be good for the one who possesses it. It must therefore be a good in the sight of God, who is the source of blessings. Such a good must point to felicity, whether in this world or the next, as its consummation. By calling the advantages of liberty 'blessings,' the Constitution... aligns itself decisively with traditional moral philosophy and moral theology.[69]" Moreover, Jaffa bluntly stated that the Founders never imagined liberty encompassing what they deemed vice: "exhibitionism of lesbians, sodomites, abortionists, drug addicts, and pornographers"[70]. This illustrates the narrow, virtue-focused universe that Jaffa thought "Athens and Jerusalem" bequeathed to America[71].

This selective originalism appears clearly in Claremont-affiliated criticism of the civil-rights constitutional order. Jesse Merriam's essay

68 Robert P. Kraynak, "Moral Order in the Western Tradition: Harry Jaffa's Grand Synthesis of Athens, Jerusalem, and Peoria," *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 181–206, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034670509000308.

69 Kraynak, "Moral Order in the Western Tradition", 181–206.

70 Field, *Furious Minds*, 32-33.

71 Field, *Furious Minds*, 32-33.

"How We Got Our Antiracist Constitution," for example, argues that the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* constitutional order displaced natural rights with a new regime centred on racial discrimination as the supreme evil and diversity as the supreme good[72]. Civil-rights law is not treated as an attempt to fulfil the constitutional promise after slavery and segregation, but is reframed as a betrayal of the older order. This requires treating the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act as departures from the Founding rather than as the constitutional system's own mechanisms for addressing the injustices it originally entrenched. The political consequence is to make anti-discrimination law, affirmative action, and structural accounts of racism appear not as responses to historical injustice but as deviations from the Founding – a framing that provides intellectual cover for dismantling the civil-rights state while claiming fidelity to founding principles.

Cultural homogeneity and the boundaries of Americanness

Claremont writers frequently treat cultural cohesion as a precondition of republican self-government. In classical republican theory, this claim concerns the social conditions under which citizens can deliberate about the common good. In Claremont's post-2016 usage, however, cohesion often becomes a language for exclusion. Anton's immigration arguments link demographic change to national decline[73]. Glenn Ellmers goes further, declaring that many U.S. residents are "not Americans in any meaningful sense". He clarifies that besides illegal immigrants, many native-born citizens are "citizen-alien[s]" who "do not believe in, live by, or even like the principles, traditions, and ideals" that once defined America[74].

72 Jesse Merriam, "How We Got Our Antiracist Constitution: Canonizing Brown V. Board of Education in Courts and Minds," The American Way of Life, July 12, 2023, https://dc.claremont.org/how-we-got-our-antiracist-constitution-canonizing-brown-v-board-of-education-in-courts-and-minds/.

73 Publius Decius Mus, "The Flight 93 Election."

74 Ellmers, "'Conservatism' Is No Longer Enough".

Beyond the fact that such claims are nativist, they also transform Americanness from legal citizenship into fidelity to a prescribed historical narrative. The "real" American is the citizen who accepts the Claremont version of the Founding. The "citizen-alien" is the citizen who rejects or complicates it.

Michael Anton's essay "Toward a Sensible, Coherent Trumpism" (the Claremont Institute refused to publish it, but the article was uploaded on the *Journal of American Greatness* blog[75]) illustrates the method. In this post, Anton invokes Lincoln's "Dred Scott" speech, where Lincoln noted that "all men are not equal in all respects" to argue against mass immigration, suggesting that not all peoples are equally suited to republican self-government[76]. In Lincoln's context, the statement concerned the contradictions of slavery and equality in a republic built on universal principles. In Anton's use, it becomes a justification for new hierarchies of civic fitness. Field reads this as characteristic of Claremont rhetoric: historical fragments are removed from context and reassembled to make pluralism seem incompatible with republicanism[77].

A related manoeuvre appears in Claremont efforts to sanitise founding-era slavery. Some Claremont essays and reviews stress that the Constitution avoids the words "slave" and "slavery," and they treat this as evidence that the founding order was fundamentally antislavery in principle[78].

By spotlighting the bits of founding rhetoric that could plausibly be read as anti-slavery, Claremont literature minimises the framers' participation in slavery and the constitutional protections that sustained the slave system. Many Founders enslaved human beings, profited from slavery, compromised to protect slaveholding interests, and embedded

75 Field, *Furious Minds*, 48.

76 Publius Decius Mus, "Toward a Sensible, Coherent Trumpism," March 10, 2016, https://www.unz.com/article/toward-a-sensible-coherent-trumpism/.

77 Field, *Furious Minds*, 49-50.

78 Peter C. Myers, "Vindicating the Constitution," *Claremont Review of Books*, 2019, https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/vindicating-the-constitution/.

slavery in representation, fugitive-slave rules, and federal power[79]. Similarly, these narratives downplay the deep pluralism and conflict in early America. There is little space in Claremont's reconstructed myth for political or cultural diversity at the founding: conflicts over federal power, religious freedom, or women's rights are subordinated to the idea of a unified people. If any challenge to founder myths is raised, it is dismissed as "liberal" revisionism. The overall effect is to purify the founding generation into a monolithic ideological bloc, thereby justifying modern policies that prioritise "natural" hierarchies and exclude dissenters as anti-American.

Anti-elitism as anti-scholarship

A final component of Claremont intellectual myth-making is a populist epistemology that treats scholarly complexity as suspect. Glenn Ellmers dismisses "policy wonks and magazine scribblers" and depicts "universities" and corporate culture as "rotten to the core," insisting that ordinary Americans require action rather than elite discourse[80]. For Ellmers, the heroes are the "plumbers, insurance salesmen, gym owners, and factory workers" who live out authentic American values in their everyday lives. When asked what kind of conservative they are, Ellmers notes, real voters "never" ask – it is an "irrelevant" question.

The irony is obvious: these arguments are produced by intellectuals writing from elite-adjacent institutions for an elite conservative audience. But the rhetoric is politically effective because it divides elites into

79 On the enslaved populations connected to Washington, Jefferson, and Madison, see George Washington's Mount Vernon, "A Decision to Free His Slaves," https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/washingtons-1799-will; George Washington's Mount Vernon, "George Washington's Will,", https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/george-washingtons-will; Thomas Jefferson Foundation, "Slavery FAQs," *Thomas Jefferson's Monticello*, https://www.monticello.org/slavery/slavery-faqs; The Montpelier Foundation, "The South Yard Dwellings", https://www.montpelier.org/projects/the-south-yard-dwellings/; White House Historical Association, "The Enslaved Household of President James Madison," August 28, 2019, https://www.whitehousehistory.org/slavery-in-the-james-madison-white-house. On the constitutional protections and compromises related to slavery, see David Waldstreicher, *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 3–17; Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 34–42.

80 Ellmers, "'Conservatism' Is No Longer Enough".

illegitimate and legitimate types. Academic historians, journalists, and bureaucrats are corrupt; Claremont intellectuals are restorers of truth.

This posture shields mythic history from critique. When historians challenge the purity of the Founding, they can be dismissed as ideological enemies. When teachers discuss slavery, racism, or exclusion, they can be accused of indoctrination. When museums include painful histories, they can be accused of hating America. The result is an epistemic hierarchy in which one political camp claims exclusive authority to define the national past while denying the legitimacy of scholarly disagreement.

V. The "Patriotic Education" Project

The 1776 Commission was born of Trump's campaign for a federally-directed "patriotic education" and as a response to the 1619 Project launched by *The New York Times Magazine*. In Executive Order 13958 (Nov. 2020), the administration decried a "series of polemics grounded in poor scholarship" that teach students to "hate their own country". The Order insisted America had a "valiant and successful effort to shake off the curse of slavery" and warned that calling the country "irredeemably and systemically racist" ignores the role of Lincoln, King, and other "great heroes" in America's story. The White House directed the new 1776 Commission to promote *"patriotic education"* – meaning "the presentation of the history of the American founding and foundational principles, the examination of how the United States has grown closer to those principles throughout its history, and the explanation of why commitment to America's aspirations is beneficial and justified"[81]. By this definition, schools and federal agencies were to emphasise the Founders' ideals and America's "inspiring" journey toward equality while dismissing any narrative of enduring racial injustice.

The members of the Commission reveal how this project connected Trump-era patriotic education to a longer conservative educational

81 Trump, Executive Order 13958.

infrastructure. The Commission was chaired by Larry P. Arnn, president of Hillsdale College, who had previously served as president of the Claremont Institute from 1985 to 2000. Matthew Spalding, Hillsdale's vice president for Washington operations and dean of the Van Andel Graduate School of Government, served as the Commission's executive director[82]. This overlap matters because Hillsdale had already become a major institutional vehicle for translating restorationist constitutionalism into curriculum, teacher formation, and public pedagogy.

Hillsdale's role requires explanation because its contemporary politics of history draws selectively on an older institutional identity. Founded in 1844, the college presents itself as an abolitionist and non-discriminatory institution whose charter prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or sex[83]. This history does not so much complicate Hillsdale's current trajectory as enable it: the abolitionist founding supplies a usable past[84].

That interpretation became especially important in the late twentieth century, when Hillsdale came to define its institutional identity through opposition to federal oversight. The college refused federal and state funding, presenting independence from government regulation as necessary to preserve its educational mission[85]. This institutional history later became a rhetorical resource. Hillsdale could invoke its abolitionist and non-discrimination origins while opposing federal oversight, affirmative action, diversity initiatives, and critical accounts of race. In Hillsdale's contemporary self-presentation, equality is defined primarily as formal non-discrimination and institutional independence, while race-conscious remedies and critical accounts of structural inequality are framed as bureaucratic violations of equal treatment.

82 Hillsdale College, "White House Appoints Arnn and Spalding to Lead 1776 Commission," *Hillsdale in D.C.*, December 18, 2020, https://dc.hillsdale.edu/News/White-House-Appoints-Arnn-and-Spalding-to-lead-177/.

83 Emma Green, "The Christian Liberal-Arts School at the Heart of the Culture Wars," *The New Yorker*, April 3, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/10/the-christian-liberal-arts-school-at-the-heart-of-the-culture-wars.

84 Hillsdale College, "Founding Documents and Resolutions," https://www.hillsdale.edu/about/history/founding-documents/.

85 Hillsdale College, "Independence," https://www.hillsdale.edu/independence-/.

Under Arnn's presidency, this institutional tradition converged with the Claremont Institute's natural-rights constitutionalism. Hillsdale expanded beyond the model of a traditional liberal-arts college into a national infrastructure for conservative civic education: the Allan P. Kirby Jr. Center in Washington, D.C., the Van Andel Graduate School of Government, the Barney Charter School Initiative, and the Hillsdale K–12 curriculum all helped translate a particular interpretation of American constitutionalism into teacher training, public lectures, school networks, and curricular materials[8687]. This development became politically salient as debates over the 1619 Project, critical race theory, and public-school curricula intensified after 2019. Hillsdale's older abolitionist identity could be mobilised to support the claim that the American Founding was already fundamentally committed to equality, while its anti-regulatory tradition supported opposition to federal or state efforts to mandate more critical accounts of race, slavery, and structural inequality.

The college's involvement in the 1776 Commission therefore did not represent an accidental association with Trump-era politics. It marked the convergence of three longer trajectories: Hillsdale's formal non-discrimination tradition, Claremont's natural-rights constitutionalism, and the New Right's effort to build alternative educational institutions capable of transmitting a patriotic narrative of American history.

The 1619 Project as catalyst

The 1619 Project was launched in August 2019 as a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine* to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival

86 Hillsdale College, "Mission & History," *Hillsdale in D.C.*, https://dc.hillsdale.edu/About/Mission-and-History/; Hillsdale College, "School of Government Overview," *Hillsdale in D.C.*, https://dc.hillsdale.edu/School-of-Government/Program-Overview/; Hillsdale College, "Barney Charter School Initiative," *Hillsdale College K–12 Education*, https://k12.hillsdale.edu/Schools/BCSI/; Hillsdale College, "An American Classical Education," *Hillsdale College K–12 Education*, https://k12.hillsdale.edu/.

87 Green, "The Christian Liberal-Arts School"; Stephanie Saul, "A College Fights 'Leftist Academics' by Expanding into Charter Schools," *New York Times*, April 10, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/10/us/hillsdale-college-charter-schools.html.

of the first enslaved Africans in Virginia[88]. Journalists and scholars led by Nikole Hannah-Jones produced essays, poems and other features aiming to "...reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year."[89] The rationale for treating 1619 as the nation's "birth year" rests on the project's central argument that the arrival of enslaved Africans and the subsequent development of racial slavery constituted the foundational condition of American political and economic life. In this view, the United States is not primarily defined by the Declaration of Independence in 1776, but by the structures of slavery and anti-Black racism that preceded and shaped it, such that 1619 marks the beginning of the historical processes that produced the modern American nation[90].

The project generated legitimate scholarly debate and drew substantial support. Historian David Waldstreicher endorsed its framing of the Revolutionary era, particularly its emphasis on slavery and imperial politics in shaping colonial ideology[91]. Leslie M. Harris, who served as a fact-checker, publicly defended the project's overall interpretive value even while noting editorial disagreements, arguing that it provides an essential corrective to a historiography that has marginalized Black agency[92]. More broadly, scholars and public intellectuals including Matthew Desmond, Jamelle Bouie, Kevin Kruse, and Khalil Gibran Muhammad defended the central thesis that slavery and its legacies are foundational to understanding contemporary American inequalities – a position well within the mainstream of recent historiography[93].

88 Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project".

89 Silverstein, "Why We Published The 1619 Project".

90 Brett Milano, "Twitter and the Birth of the 1619 Project," *Harvard Gazette*, November 9, 2023, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/12/the-1619-project-started-with-a-tweet-says-nikole-hannah-jones/.

91 David Waldstreicher, "The Hidden Stakes of the 1619 Controversy," *Boston Review*, January 24, 2020, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/david-waldstreicher-hidden-stakes-1619-controversy/.

92 Leslie M. Harris, "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me," *Politico Magazine*, March 6, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248.

93 For the specific contributions of these authors defending the project's foundational thesis, see Nikole Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021): Khalil Gibran Muhammad, "Sugar," 73–89; Matthew Desmond, "Capitalism,"

The 1619 Project also generated significant criticism from a group of leading historians who challenged both its empirical claims and its broader interpretive framing. In December 2019, Sean Wilentz, Gordon S. Wood, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, and Victoria Bynum – five of the most prominent scholars of early American history and the Civil War era – issued a formal letter to *The New York Times* requesting corrections to what they described as factual inaccuracies and misleading interpretations[94]. Their primary objection focused on the project's claim that one of the central motivations for the American Revolution was the protection of slavery[95]; they argued that there is little historical evidence that British imperial policy posed an imminent threat to the institution of slavery in 1776. More broadly, they disputed the project's portrayal of figures such as Abraham Lincoln and its tendency to characterise the American founding as fundamentally rooted in slavery, arguing that this presentation oversimplified complex historical developments and ignored established anti-slavery traditions within American political thought. The historians further warned that the project exemplified a "displacement of historical understanding by ideology," in which interpretive and political commitments risked overriding empirical historical analysis. Although *The New York Times* defended the project and issued minor corrections[96], the letter itself became a focal point in wider debates over the relationship between historical scholarship, public history, and political narrative in contemporary America.

Conservative critics framed 1619 not simply as a flawed journalistic project but as proof that universities, media, and schools were teaching children to hate the country[97]. The 1776 Commission was

165–185; Jamelle Bouie, "Politics," 186–205; Bryan Stevenson, "Justice," 261–279; and Kevin Kruse, "Traffic," 280–294.

94 Sean Wilentz et al., "We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued The 1619 Project," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html.

95 Nathan Stone, "The 1619 Project and the 'Reframing' of History," *Public Discourse*, June 1, 2020, https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/01/59180/.

96 Jake Silverstein, "An Update to The 1619 Project," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2020, archived March 12, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/magazine/1619-project-update.html.

97 For prominent examples of conservative figures framing the project as an ideological effort

born directly from this political context. Trump announced the need for "patriotic education" in 2020, and Executive Order 13958 created a commission to promote the history and principles of the Founding while opposing what it called radicalised accounts of American history. The backlash to 1619 therefore gave institutional form to the mythic grammar of purity, betrayal, and redemption: 1776 would redeem the nation from 1619.

Educational outreach was an important part of the project's roll-out. In partnership with the Pulitzer Center, the 1619 Project team developed lesson plans, reading guides and other classroom materials for teachers who chose to use them[98]. According to the Pulitzer Center, these materials were adopted in over 3,500 classrooms within the first year, indicating substantial voluntary uptake at the district and teacher level[99]. However, since the curriculum was never mandated as part of federal education policy or incorporated into a nationally standardized curriculum framework, its presence in schools depended entirely on local discretion, with uptake varying significantly across districts and states[100].

At the state level, responses were highly uneven. Some jurisdictions and school districts – particularly in more progressive urban centres such as Chicago Public Schools, Newark Public Schools, and Washington, D.C. – experimented with incorporating elements of the

to foster national self-hatred and anti-American sentiment, see Donald J. Trump, "Remarks at the White House Conference on American History," September 17, 2020, *White House Archives*, where he officially condemned the project as "toxic propaganda" and a form of "child abuse" designed to make students ashamed of their heritage; and The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 16–18, which formally argued that such revisionist histories constitute a "radicalized challenge" meant to enforce anti-American indoctrination in schools. See also Mary Grabar, *Debunking the 1619 Project: Exposing the Plan to Rewrite American History* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2021), 12–25, arguing that the project's ultimate goal is to dismantle the constitutional legacy of the Founding Fathers by replacing objective history with resentment-driven ideology.

98 Naomi Schaefer Riley, "'The 1619 Project' Enters American Classrooms," Education Next, December 19, 2024, https://www.educationnext.org/1619-project-enters-american-classrooms-adding-new-sizzle-slavery-significant-cost.

99 Pulitzer Center, *Five Years of Teaching 1619: A Program Impact Report from the Pulitzer Center, the Original Education Partner of The 1619 Project* (Washington, D.C.: Pulitzer Center, 2024), https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/1619Report2024_0.pdf.

100 Riley, "'The 1619 Project' Enters American Classrooms".

materials into social studies instruction, usually as optional or supplementary resources rather than core curriculum content. By contrast, a number of Republican-led states moved to restrict or prohibit the use of the 1619 Project in public schools. Florida, under Governor Ron DeSantis, formally banned its use in K–12 instruction through state education standards and subsequent legislation limiting the teaching of materials deemed inconsistent with state civics requirements, while states such as Texas, Arkansas, and Iowa introduced or passed measures discouraging or restricting its classroom use. These legislative efforts framed the project as ideologically driven and unsuitable for classroom instruction, even as other states treated it as a legitimate interpretive resource within broader debates about how American history should be taught[101].

Writers affiliated with the Claremont Institute warned that its framing threatened to alienate "Americans from their country's true philosophical and political founding in 1776."[102] Figures such as Newt Gingrich and Senator Tom Cotton described the project as ideologically driven and misleading[103].

Content Analysis of *The 1776 Report*

The Commission's 45-page *Report* begins by blasting criticisms of the Founders as a "charge" that is "untrue, and has done enormous damage"[104]. Slavery is treated as a regrettable but universal condition, not

101 For the specific legislative acts and state board rulings banning or restricting the project, see Florida Administrative Code, r. 6A-1.094124 (2021), which explicitly prohibited instructional materials from utilizing *The 1619 Project*; Florida Statutes § 1003.42(2) (amended by the 2022 "Individual Freedom Act" or HB 7), restricting classroom discussions on systemic racism. For Texas, see Texas Education Code § 28.0022 (enacted via HB 3979 and SB 3), which bars teaching that slavery constitutes the true founding of the United States. For Iowa, see Iowa Code § 257.11 (enacted via HF 802, 2021), targeting concepts of systemic racism and prohibited curricula in K-12 instruction.

102 Richard Lindzen, "The 1619 Project Exposed: A Special Edition of the American Mind Podcast," *The American Mind,* June 22, 2021, https://americanmind.org/audio/the-1619-project-exposed-a-special-edition-of-the-american-mind-podcast/.

103 Anna Hiatt, "Conservatives' Freakout Over the 1619 Project Reveals Their Fear of America's Actual Past," *The Nation*, August 22, 2019, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/conservative-meltdown-1619-project/.

104 President's Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report.*

a uniquely American crime: "many Americans labor under the illusion that slavery was somehow a uniquely American evil," the Report declares, insisting instead that slavery "has been more the rule than the exception" in history. It then falsely portrays George Washington and Thomas Jefferson as morally consistent on slavery – e.g. claiming that "by the end of his life [Washington] freed all the slaves in his family estate", and repeatedly cites the Declaration's "all men are created equal" to argue that the Framers knew slavery was "incompatible with that truth". In this telling, the Founders *planted the seeds* of abolition: "the foundation of our Republic planted the seeds of the death of slavery in America," and "the movement to abolish slavery that first began in the United States led the way" to ending slavery. The overall tone is heroic and laudatory: founding principles and later civil rights achievements are described as a "magnificent truth" to be taught with "reverence and love,"[105] and the text repeatedly calls for a form of civic education grounded in affective attachment to the nation, and less in knowledge. This quasi-devotional language is notable. By framing the object of study in terms of "love," the Report treats historical interpretation as a form of civic formation rather than inquiry[106].

Other chapters continue this pattern. The report grudgingly recounts the horrors of Jim Crow, but immediately shifts blame to contemporary "identity politics." The 1960s civil-rights campaign is praised as fulfilling the Founders' promise, quoting Martin Luther King Jr. on the Declaration's "promissory note" to black Americans. Yet it quickly laments that the movement's "heady spirit" was "short-lived": it "was almost immediately turned to programs that ran counter to the lofty ideals of the founders," the report complains, especially the "abandonment of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity in favour of 'group rights'" modelled on antebellum racists[107]. In effect, the *Report* portrays

105 President's Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report.*

106 James Grossman, "History as Indoctrination: The 1776 Report," *Perspectives on History* 59, no. 2 (February 2021): 12–15. Grossman notes that the document explicitly treats the nation's founding principles as sacred dogmas rather than subjects for critical evidence-based investigation.

107 Grossman, "History as Indoctrination", 12-15.

any modern effort to address systemic racial injustice (affirmative action, protected classes, etc.) as a dangerous betrayal of "colourblind" principles. Similarly, it depicts early-20th-century progressive reforms such as the expansion of federal regulatory agencies, the establishment of the Federal Reserve System, the introduction of antitrust enforcement under the Sherman and Clayton Acts, and the creation of welfare-oriented labour protections – as initiating a slippery slope toward bureaucratic centralisation. Progressive reformers are thus implicitly likened to later authoritarian tendencies, with the expansion of the administrative state and expert governance cast as a gradual erosion of "unalienable rights"[108]. Throughout, the report omits or downplays entire episodes (for example, it largely sidelines the Confederacy as a political project of slavery and secession) and dismisses movements for political equality as deviations from the Founders' mythos[109].

This is not merely a conceptual inconsistency; it is the Report's central rhetorical operation. By celebrating abolition, the Civil War, and the civil rights movement as expressions of founding principles, the Report claims the moral authority of equality. By simultaneously rejecting the legal and political mechanisms through which equality was pursued in the twentieth century – affirmative action, anti-discrimination law, "group-based" frameworks – it protects the racial and social hierarchies that abstract equality alone has never dismantled. The contradiction is not a flaw in the argument but its function: abstract equality legitimises the myth, while the rejection of substantive equality preserves the status quo the myth serves.

Professional historians overwhelmingly condemned the Commission's report for its selective and ideologically charged treatment of the founding era. The American Historical Association, joined by dozens of scholarly organisations, issued a statement arguing that the Report

108 Gillian Brockell, "'A Hack Job,' 'Outright Lies': Trump Commission's '1776 Report' Outrages Historians," History News Network, January 19, 2021, https://www.hnn.us/article/a-hack-job-outright-lies-trump-commissions-1776-re.

109 "AHA Statement Condemning Report of Advisory 1776 Commission," American Historical Association, n.d., https://www.historians.org/news/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission/.

"consists of two main themes. One is an homage to the Founding Fathers, a simplistic interpretation that relies on falsehoods, inaccuracies, omissions, and misleading statements. The other is a screed against a half-century of historical scholarship"[110].

The Report's treatment of slavery illustrates this pattern. Its claim that Washington "freed all the slaves in his family estate," and its broader portrayal of slaveholding founders as participants in an essentially antislavery founding, are not simply neutral historical summaries but selective framings that compress contradiction into moral vindication[111]. Columbia professor Alexis Coe noted that the Report "lacks citations or any indication books were consulted, which explains why it's riddled in errors, distortions, and outright lies". Historian Ibram X. Kendi tweeted that the Report "makes it seem as if slaveholding founding fathers were abolitionists; that Americans were the early beacon of the global abolitionist movement; that the demise of slavery in the United States was inevitable[112]".

In addition to factual errors, the Report denounces modern colleges for supposedly "peddling resentment and contempt for American principles" (a theme carried into the Report's appendices[113]). It urges students to "stand up to the petty tyrants ... who demand that we speak only of America's sins while denying her greatness", effectively

110 "AHA Statement Condemning Report of Advisory 1776 Commission".

111 The point is not that Washington's manumission provisions were fictitious, but that the Report presents them in a misleadingly redemptive register. Washington's 1799 will provided for the emancipation of the enslaved people he legally owned after Martha Washington's death; Martha Washington manumitted them earlier, effective January 1, 1801. However, of the 317 enslaved people at Mount Vernon in 1799, only 123 were legally owned by George Washington and eligible for manumission under his will. A further 153 were dower enslaved people attached to the Custis estate, whom neither George nor Martha Washington could legally free, while others were rented from neighbours. Similarly, Jefferson's antislavery statements coexisted with his lifelong slaveholding: Monticello records that he enslaved more than 610 people over the course of his life and formally freed only seven enslaved men, two during his lifetime and five in his will. See George Washington's Mount Vernon, "A Decision to Free His Slaves"; George Washington's Mount Vernon, "Ten Facts About Washington & Slavery"; Thomas Jefferson Foundation, "Slavery at Monticello"; Thomas Jefferson Foundation, "People Enslaved at Monticello Who Gained Their Freedom."

112 Brockell, "'A Hack Job'".

113 The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report*.

branding any criticism of national myths as unpatriotic[114]. As the AHA pointed out, the effect is anti-pluralist: the Report "erases whole swaths of the American population – enslaved people, Indigenous communities, and women – the way the founders excluded those groups"[115]. Its singular tale of "great men" and grand ideals leaves no room for multiple perspectives or historical nuance.

Ultimately, the 1776 Report valorises uncritical patriotism. It promises a "patriotic education" that supposedly "teaches the truth about America" but does so with "reverence and love" – in practice, glossing over injustice. This pedagogy drew the ire of historians, who charged that it inverts the purpose of education. The AHA warned that the Report effectively "calls for a form of government indoctrination of American students, and in the process elevate[s] ignorance about the past to a civic virtue"[116]. In other words, unquestioning loyalty is held up as a virtue while critical engagement is denigrated. This contempt for "progressive" scholarship and insistence on a simple national myth underscores the Commission's aim: to cement a narrow, sanitised story of America through the power of the state, rather than foster open inquiry.

Trump's Second Term: The Institutionalisation of Mythic History

The ramifications of this project became clearer during Trump's second term. Its premises reappeared in 2025 through executive orders and federal cultural policy that treated public history as an object of ideological discipline. On January 29, 2025, Trump signed the executive order "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling," directing federal agencies to identify and eliminate support for what it described as "radical indoctrination" in schools. The order revived the logic of patriotic education by treating certain accounts of race, gender, and in-

114 The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report*, 16.

115 "AHA Statement Condemning Report of Advisory 1776 Commission".

116 "AHA Statement Condemning Report of Advisory 1776 Commission".

equality not as contested subjects of democratic and scholarly debate, but as anti-American ideological formation[117].

A more direct extension of the 1776 framework appeared in the March 27, 2025 executive order "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." The order targeted federal public-history institutions, including the Smithsonian, and called for the removal of what it termed "improper ideology" from museums, monuments, education centres, and public displays. Its language echoed the 1776 Report's central premise: that historical interpretation should inspire national unity and greatness rather than foreground conflict, exclusion, or structural injustice[118]. The issue was not simply commemoration, but institutional control over the conditions under which the national past could be publicly narrated.

The material consequences of this logic became visible in disputes over national parks and monuments. In June 2026, a federal judge ordered the administration to restore exhibits and signs removed or altered under the "Restoring Truth and Sanity" directive, including materials concerning slavery, civil rights, Indigenous history, and climate change[119]. The episode demonstrates how mythic history becomes ad-

117 Donald J. Trump, "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling," January 29, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-indoctrination-in-k-12-schooling/. For policy analysis of the order's implications for K–12 education and litigation, see Jon Valant, "The Status of Litigation Against the Trump Administration's K–12 Education Agenda," Brookings Institution, September 1, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-status-of-litigation-against-the-trump-administrations-k-12-education-agenda-a-guide-for-education-leaders/.

118 Donald J. Trump, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," March 27, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/. For an overview of the order's potential effects on the Smithsonian Institution, see R. Eric Petersen, "Smithsonian Institution: Potential Effects of Executive Order 14253," Congressional Research Service, IF12975, April 23, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12975. For responses from professional historical organizations, see Organization of American Historians, "Statement on Executive Order 'Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,'" March 31, 2025, https://www.oah.org/2025/03/31/statement-on-executive-order-restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/; American Historical Association, "Historians Defend the Smithsonian," approved March 31, 2025, https://www.historians.org/news/historians-defend-the-smithsonian/.

119 Complaint, *National Parks Conservation Association v. Department of the Interior*, No. 1:26-cv-10877 (D. Mass. Feb. 17, 2026), https://democracyforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/National-Parks-Conservation-Association-et.-al.-v.-Department-of-the-Interior-et.-al.-.pdf; Preliminary Injunction, *National Parks Conservation Association v. Depart-*

ministrative practice: interpretive signs, museum displays, and public monuments are recoded as ideological threats when they disrupt the preferred story of national innocence.

State-level developments reinforce the same pattern. PEN America reported that in 2025 state legislators introduced ninety-three bills across thirty-two states that would censor higher education, with twenty-one becoming law in fifteen states; it also identified educational gag orders and indirect censorship measures targeting teaching about race, gender, American history, and related subjects[120]. These laws did not begin with Trump's second term, but the federal revival of patriotic education and anti-DEI language strengthened a wider ecology of censorship.

Finally, the 2026 semiquincentennial provides a symbolic stage for this politics of history. Trump's January 2025 executive order on America's 250th birthday created Task Force 250 and reinstated the National Garden of American Heroes project. The White House's Freedom 250 page describes the anniversary as "the most important milestone in our country's history" and quotes Trump presenting 1776 as "the greatest political journey in human history.[121]" Such language is not unusual for

ment of the Interior, No. 1:26-cv-10877 (D. Mass. June 12, 2026), https://democracyforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Parks-PI-Order.pdf. For reporting on the injunction and the restoration of removed materials, see Nate Raymond, "Trump Administration Must Restore History, Science Materials at Parks, US Judge Rules," *Reuters*, June 12, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-administration-must-restore-history-science-materials-parks-us-judge-rules-2026-06-12/. For reporting on the scope of the removals, see Juliet Eilperin, "National Park Signs Related to Native Americans, Climate Change to Be Removed," *Washington Post*, January 27, 2026, https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2026/01/27/national-parks-signs-censorship/; Adrian Florido, "Trump Administration Is Erasing History and Science at National Parks, Lawsuit Argues," NPR, February 18, 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/02/18/nx-s1-5718006/trump-national-parks-lawsuit.

120 PEN America, *Expanding the Web of Control: America's Censored Campuses 2025* (New York: PEN America, January 15, 2026), https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-campuses-25-web-of-control/. See also PEN America, "PEN America Warns of Expanding Web of Control as Politicians Escalate Campaign to Censor U.S. Colleges and Universities," January 15, 2026, https://pen.org/press-release/pen-america-warns-of-expanding-web-of-control-as-politicians-escalate-campaign-to-censor-u-s-colleges-and-universities/; Liam Knox, "Report: State Lawmakers Enacted 21 Censorship Bills in 2025," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 15, 2026, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty/curriculum/2026/01/15/report-state-lawmakers-enacted-21-censorship-bills-2025.

121 Donald J. Trump, Executive Order 14189, "Celebrating America's 250th Birthday," 90 Fed. Reg. 8849 (February 3, 2025), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02231/

national commemoration, but in context it belongs to a broader effort to centralise, curate, and spectacularise a heroic national story at the very moment federal institutions are pressured to remove narratives of slavery, race, gender, and exclusion.

The political intention, then, is not merely to celebrate the nation. It is to control the terms under which national memory can be publicly narrated. The power project served by mythic history is threefold: it delegitimises adversaries by portraying them as enemies of the Founding; it disciplines institutions such as schools, museums, archives, parks, and universities; and it presents strong executive intervention as restorative rather than radical.

VI. Conclusion

This article has argued that the MAGA-aligned New Right has constructed a coherent mythic history of the American Founding – organised around the tropes of purity, betrayal, and redemption – and has progressively acquired the institutional means to impose it. What began as intellectual production at the Claremont Institute and Hillsdale College became federal policy through the 1776 Commission, and has since hardened into executive orders, museum purges, digital erasure, educational gag orders, and a commemorative apparatus designed to spectacularise a heroic national story while suppressing the histories of slavery, racial exclusion, Indigenous dispossession, and democratic struggle.

The mythic structure this article describes performs three political functions. First, it delegitimises adversaries by recasting pluralist reinterpretation as betrayal of the Founding – a move that transforms scholarly disagreement into evidence of disloyalty. Second, it disciplines institutions: schools, universities, museums, archives, monuments, and

celebrating-americas-250th-birthday; Section 3 reinstated Executive Order 13934, "Building and Rebuilding Monuments to American Heroes," and Executive Order 13978, "Building the National Garden of American Heroes," and directed the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy to recommend additional historically significant Americans for inclusion in the National Garden, bringing the total number to 250. See also White House, "Freedom 250," https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/.

federal websites are made answerable not to standards of evidence but to a prescribed narrative of national greatness. Third, it provides a moral grammar in which strong executive action appears not as authoritarian overreach but as restoration – the recovery of a lost order that never existed in the form its defenders claim.

The democratic stakes are not abstract. When the 1776 Report calls on students to "stand up to the petty tyrants" who teach uncomfortable truths, and when federal agencies strip references to minority military service from their websites, the politics of mythic history has moved beyond rhetoric into the material conditions of civic life. What counts as the national past – who appears in it, whose contributions are acknowledged, whose suffering is narrated – is no longer a matter of scholarly debate alone. It has become a site of state power.

This article contributes to scholarship on memory politics by demonstrating how intellectual myth-making, institutional diffusion, and executive action form a connected chain rather than isolated phenomena. It also underscores that the defence of critical historiography is not a partisan act but a democratic one. As the American Historical Association has emphasised, confronting the full complexity of the national past – including its contradictions, its violence, and its unfinished promises – is not anti-American. It is the condition under which informed citizenship remains possible.

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