How Biden Can Fix Trump's 1776 Disaster

Americans could use a commission that studies our founding—as long as it's thorough, historian-led and nonpartisan.

President Joe Biden speaks in the State Dining Room of the White House on Jan. 22, 2021. | Evan Vucci/AP Photo

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Before even taking office, Joe Biden pledged to disband Donald Trump's 1776 Commission—designed to promote "patriotic education" and counter the *New York Times'* controversial "1619 Project," which put slavery at the center of the American historical narrative. And by 12:01 p.m. on Inauguration Day, the commission's extravagantly mocked "1776 Report," a 45-page, unsourced so-called "definitive chronicle of the American Founding" (released only 48 hours

earlier on Martin Luther King Jr. Day), vanished from the White House website.

The disappearance was cheered by professional historians and large swaths of the population. The Trump administration's commission was "a hack job" reflecting a "clumsy partisan intent," argued two leading historians. It was a history written by nonhistorians that was responsible for "obscuring facts and ignoring historical context." The American Historical Association called the report "a simplistic interpretation that relies on falsehoods, inaccuracies, omissions and misleading statements."

But a thorough, historian-led, nonpartisan commission on the founding isn't such a bad idea. These kinds of history-driven government initiatives, when done right, have in the past been useful tools for fostering unity and promoting civic responsibility—two things America is badly in need of today. If Biden wants to promote his call for "unity" and respond "to the call of history," as he said in his inaugural address, he can offer no stronger foundation than a new, improved government-led project to provide a factual foundation of America's origins and a nonpartisan discussion of our founding ideals.

The 1776 Commission clearly faltered in conception and execution, but the basic premise of a government commission on our founding history has a long precedent. Since the 19th century, the federal government has created many such commissions, particularly regarding the American Revolution and founding era. They've expanded the focus of American history, boosted

national unity and even promoted concepts of liberty internationally. In 1924, for example, President Calvin Coolidge signed the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration Commission into existence six years before the event and sought to "ensure intellectual rigor" by incorporating historians and the American Historical Association. It led to public commemorations around the world, historians' presentations in the capital and the publication of an edited collection of Washington's letters. Taking place during the Great Depression, it roused the "whole land" "in spite of economic distress," said Commission Director Sol Bloom, and it did "more to aid in maintaining national sanity during these distressful times than anything else could possibly have done," reported the Muncie *Post-Democrat*.

In 1973, Congress created the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, which offered a chance to reengage with America's history. As President Gerald Ford said in 1976, "We Americans should pause and consider what our country means to us—and what it means to the world." In the wake of Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation (some previously accused Nixon of politicizing the commemoration), the Bicentennial, which included public events and academic components, spurred unity and inclusivity with nearly all of the population participating in some fashion combined with a major expansion in diverse public historical sites.

Celebrations of history have also been used to sow division. In 1876, during the centennial of the American Revolution in and around Boston, patriot descendants excluded African Americans, Irish Americans and female suffragists from positions of social prominence and political power. The patriots' heirs called those without the "common blood" un-American, while the minority groups labeled their accusers as "unworthy descendant[s]." This was a battle between a literal versus a symbolic inheritance of the American Revolution—could its ideals be expanded to all? It led to years of bitter social and political feuds, such as over what monuments went up, if certain types of protest were acceptable, and what political candidates properly represented the Founders' beliefs and current citizens. (Sound familiar?) Certain revolutionary era events, like the Battle of Bunker Hill, were championed by Bostonians as "a glorious act of patriots," while the Boston Massacre, where the mixed-race

Crispus Attucks was the first American killed, was remembered as a "low and disgraceful mob."

The United States is currently experiencing a "decline of historical thinking," as the *New Yorker* called it. It's evident in the bandying about of the word "patriot" in reference to those who rioted at the Capitol, in the overwhelming push toward STEM in education (accompanied by the seemingly daily closure of college history departments) and in Illinois state Rep. LaShawn K. Ford's call for the abolishment of history classes in Illinois schools to "instead devote greater attention toward civics," which confusingly can't be effectively taught without history. Similarly, there has been an unfortunate recent anti-Founders movement. When history does appear in the news, it's often been politicized.The 1776 Commission was one example, with its anachronistic references to the "Pro-Life Movement" and comparisons of American progressives to Mussolini. But the *New York Times'* "1619 Project" was also problematic—though it was journalism, not a government report. The project claims that "our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written," based on the questionably supported and readily disputable initial claim "that the colonists declared their independence from Britain ... to protect the institution of slavery in the colonies" (although the *Times*' later made a "clarification" and other alterations). Princeton historian Sean Wilentz, a critic of both projects, recently noted this connection: "[The 1776 Commission report is] the flip side of those polemics, presented as history, that charge the

nation was founded as a slavocracy. … It's basically a political document, not history."

Neither project features writing from actual early American historians (though "1619" did have fact checkers and consultants, such as Leslie M. Harris—whose advice was "ignored"). They both offer big, bold claims that leave out conflicting evidence and often ignore the wider historical record. (For instance, each omits any substantive references to Native Americans, loyalism or colonial history beyond the British 13.) They both also want to shape the future of American education.

Despite these criticisms, the "1776 Report" and the "1619 Project" each have worthwhile elements. You can't tell the story of America accurately without slavery and racism, nor can you do so without the Founders' understanding and promise of liberty. An inherent contradiction? Yes. But can either be avoided? No. Is the Declaration of Independence, flawed? Yes, but its evolution, content and impact are still important for every American to know, thus the conclusions of the "1776 Report" that "our Declaration is worth preserving, our Constitution worth defending" offer a legitimate, productive starting point for discussion. "Our history has been a constant struggle between the American ideal that we all are created equal, and the harsh, ugly reality that racism, nativism, fear and demonization have long torn us apart," Biden said on Wednesday. To understand and engage with American history, the nation must consider these legacies and many more.

That's where a new historical commission—hopefully with bipartisan support—can come in. The goal of this new commission, set up as our nation begins preparations to celebrate its 250th birthday on July 4, 2026, should be to produce a report that lays out key themes of the founding with additional suggestions for discussion questions and primary sources that offer differing perspectives. It needs to be suitable for a general reader and adaption for the classroom. It should aim for objectivity and should help establish baseline facts. It should also seek to update and expand our country's narrative and correct mistakes (especially in widely assigned textbooks).

The commission should include historians and scholars of differing opinions, K-12 teachers, and museum staff from sites such as George Washington's Mount Vernon, the Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Park Service. And it should include students of varying perspectives, races, genders and ages. It's important for educators to seek out the histories students actually want to learn to help inspire and inform future generations.

A national-level discussion will not, and should not, happen overnight and it should not be in isolation. But it should happen—for national unity, and to produce informed citizens who can protect themselves from misinformation, whether it originates from within the country or from a foreign adversary.

Whether a new commission is called or not, the politicization of history isn't going anywhere. Partisan fighting over the meaning and history of the American Revolution has existed from the start; even the Founders themselves weren't a united voice. But they were united in the belief that American ideals were important and worthy of public discourse. And we can ensure the nation gets the facts right as we continue that discussion today. By trying to find commonality in our past, we might just develop a shared appreciation for what we still can accomplish.

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