

AHA Condemns Report of the Advisory 1776 Commission

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The just-released “1776 Report” claims that common understanding of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution can unify all Americans in the love of country. The product of “The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission,” the report focuses on these founding documents in an apparent attempt to reject recent efforts to understand the multiple ways the institution of slavery shaped our nation’s history. The authors call for a form of government indoctrination of American students, and in the process elevate ignorance about the past to a civic virtue.

The report actually 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, presented largely as a series of caricatures, using single examples (most notably the “1619 Project”) to represent broader historiographical trends.

The sections on the founders envision godlike men who crafted documents that asserted “universal and eternal principles of justice and political legitimacy.” Ironically, the report erases whole swaths of the American population—enslaved people, Indigenous communities, and women—the way the founders excluded those groups from the body politic in a wide variety of founding documents as well as actual public practice. In listing threats to the ideals of the nation, the report ignores the Confederate States of America, whose leaders, many clearly guilty of treason, initiated a civil war that claimed more than 700,000 lives—more American lives than all other conflicts in the history of the country combined. Instead, the authors focus on early 20th-century Progressive reformers and bizarrely suggest they were similar to Mussolini and other World War II European fascists. Of particular note is the implied condemnation of Progressive Era legislation—workplace health and safety legislation, regulation of the production of food and drugs, the elimination of child labor, and other social goods we take for granted today.

The report concludes with a full-throated assault on American universities, which, the authors claim, have produced what they call “deliberately destructive scholarship.” This scholarship is described as the “intellectual force behind so much of the violence in our cities,” including the “defamation of our treasured national statues.” The vast majority of targeted statues, as the [AHA has noted before](#), honor either men who committed treason by violating oaths of office and taking up arms against the United States government, or whose main historical significance lay in their defense of slavery or other forms of white supremacy.

Written hastily in one month after two desultory and tendentious “hearings,” without any consultation with professional historians of the United States, the report fails to engage a rich and vibrant body of scholarship that has evolved over the last seven decades. Americans across the nation, perhaps

including some of the commissioners, have encountered this history not only in books and classrooms, but also at museums, in national parks, and even in their homes as they watch documentaries.

Though it extols (narrowly defined) family and faith as the ultimate forces for good, the “1776 Report” also observes that the “bedrock upon which the American political system is built is the rule of law.” Yet its condemnation of contemporary social movements ignores recent efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the very institutions enshrined in the Constitution itself.