

## Contemporary Debates on U.S. History Education

**Background:** Over the past decade the teaching of US History has become a lightning rod for debates about American identity and the role of education in society.

Some educators and academic institutions have revisited the country's history through the lens of current political and societal debates, especially the extent to which the United States has truly been a country in which "all are created equal."

A new emphasis on diversifying and decolonizing\* history courses has left some concerned that students are now learning only the bad parts of U.S. history while undermining the nation's historical position as a leader of democracy and rights.

*\*In this context, "decolonization" means rethinking and rewriting history to include, or even center, the perspectives, experiences, and contributions of marginalized groups, rather than the traditional Eurocentric approach to history.*

**Prompt: Evaluate the role of US history education in modern U.S. American society.**

As you explore the following seven documents, think about the following:

1. What does each author believe is the purpose of learning U.S. History? How do you know what their perspectives are?
2. What do YOU believe is the purpose of learning U.S. history?
3. Pay attention to evidence or arguments that *differ* from your own opinion. Are they compelling? Do they change your perspective at all? *(Keep in mind: your opinion might shift slightly or just expand to understand more points of view, even if it doesn't completely flip.)*

Use this space to take notes as you explore the seven documents provided.

Source	Thesis (What is <u>their</u> opinion on the role of US history education?)	Notes (Do they provide compelling evidence? What thoughts do YOU have about the argument?)
Doc. 1 Silpa Kovvali, "There is no such thing as an 'unbiased' history class," 2015	"But no study of history is entirely neutral or unbiased, a mere set of facts. The very act of deeming one bit of information more relevant than another is the imposition of a narrative upon a past reality."	<i>Answers will vary</i>
Doc. 2 Introduction to <i>The 1619 Project</i> , 2019	"What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619?"	<i>Answers will vary</i>
Doc. 3 John Lewis, "Together you can redeem the soul of a nation," 2020	"You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time... The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time."	<i>Answers will vary</i>
Doc. 4 "Teaching America" by The 1776 Commission, 2021	"educators must convey a sense of enlightened patriotism that equips each generation with a knowledge of America's founding principles, a deep reverence for their liberties, and a profound love of their country. "	<i>Answers will vary</i>

<p>Doc. 5 Jack Miller, "Teaching Unbiased American History," 2022</p>	<p>"It is that unifying vision [of the ideals in the Declaration of Independence] that must be taught to our young people. After all, it will fall on their shoulders to continue the progress previous generations have made. "</p>	<p><i>Answers will vary</i></p>
<p>Doc. 6 President Trumps' Executive Order "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," 2025</p>	<p>"Rather than fostering unity and a deeper understanding of our shared past, the widespread effort to rewrite history deepens societal divides and fosters a sense of national shame, disregarding the progress America has made and the ideals that continue to inspire millions around the globe"</p>	<p><i>Answers will vary</i></p>
<p>Doc. 7 Statement on Trump's Executive Order (Doc. 6) by the Organization of American Historians, 2025</p>	<p>"The OAH remains steadfast in our defense of the right to engage with history honestly, even when that history challenges our assumptions and forces us to confront uncomfortable realities. The OAH embraces the complexity and diversity of America's past that is grounded in the documentary record and that fosters critical thinking, promotes understanding, and ultimately strengthens our nation and our world."</p>	<p><i>Answers will vary</i></p>

## Document 1

Source: *"There is no such thing as an 'unbiased' history class..." by Silpa Kowali (writer and social critic), Salon, August 2015*

Last week, the College Board announced that it had revised the AP U.S. history framework it released a year before, responding to concerns from "a wide range of stakeholders." Perhaps the most famous was GOP presidential candidate Ben Carson, who quipped last year that "most people when they finish that course, they'd be ready to sign up for ISIS." One member of the committee tasked with the redesign said, "If it felt like the way things were phrased indicated any kind of bias or slant, we tried to neutralize that bias."...

But no study of history is entirely neutral or unbiased, a mere set of facts. The very act of deeming one bit of information more relevant than another is the imposition of a narrative upon a past reality. The narrative of our current AP history curriculum is problematic in myriad ways, most only tangentially related to the recent revision. Europe and America are more important than other regions of the world, claims this narrative, and thus European and U.S. history are important subjects. African, Asian and Latin American studies are less important, and can be covered in a world history catch-all. Art history, incidentally, is overwhelmingly dedicated to works from Europe and the U.S., with a few key works from these lesser regions thrown in for good measure. Some areas of the world are civilized, this narrative says, worthy of scholarly inquiry. Others, less so. And, last but not least, a comprehensive study of the history of the land that became the United States begins in 1491...

A healthy definition of American identity in an increasingly global society does not lie in a set of traditions carved in stone or encased in glass. Strong foreign policy, and strong citizenship, must be the result of constant evolution borne out of collective personal revelations. America may be exceptional in its willingness and ability to shift its own paradigms, to foster these revelations. But faced with what is, perhaps, the only unbiased narrative that can be gleaned from the past — that education breeds empathy — we can only hope it is not.

## Document 2

[Source:](#) *Introduction to The 1619 Project by the New York Times, August 2019*

[1619.] It is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation's birth. What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619? Though the exact date has been lost to history (it has come to be observed on Aug. 20), that was when a ship arrived at Point Comfort in the British colony of Virginia, bearing a cargo of 20 to 30 enslaved Africans. Their arrival inaugurated a barbaric system of chattel slavery that would last for the next 250 years. This is sometimes referred to as the country's original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country's very origin.

Out of slavery — and the anti-black racism it required — grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional: its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence from Britain.

The goal of The 1619 Project, a major initiative from *The New York Times* that this issue of the magazine inaugurates, is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contribution of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country...

American history cannot be told truthfully without a clear vision of how inhumane and immoral the treatment of black Americans has been. By acknowledging this shameful history, by trying hard to understand its powerful influence on the present, perhaps we can prepare ourselves for a more just future. That is the hope of this project.

## Document 3

Source: Excerpts from “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation” by Civil Rights Leader and US Representative John Lewis, opinion piece published hours after his death (as he requested) on July 17, 2020

While my time here has now come to an end, I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you [young people] inspired me. You filled me with hope about the next chapter of the great American story when you used your power to make a difference in our society... That is why I had to visit Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, though I was admitted to the hospital the following day. I just had to see and feel it for myself that, after many years of silent witness, the truth is still marching on.

Emmett Till was my George Floyd... He was 14 when he was killed, and I was only 15 years old at the time. I will never ever forget the moment when it became so clear that he could easily have been me...

Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.

You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time. People on every continent have stood in your shoes, through decades and centuries before you. The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time. Continue to build union between movements stretching across the globe because we must put away our willingness to profit from the exploitation of others.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.

## Document 4

Source: *Excerpts from The 1776 Report by The President's (Trump's) Advisory 1776 Commission, January 2021*

### TEACHING AMERICA

The primary duty of schools is to teach students the basic skills needed to function in society, such as reading, writing, and mathematics. As discussed in Appendix IV, our founders also recognized a second and essential task: educators must convey a sense of enlightened patriotism that equips each generation with a knowledge of America's founding principles, a deep reverence for their liberties, and a profound love of their country.

Make no mistake: The love we are talking about is something different from romantic or familial love, something that cannot be imposed by teachers or schools or government edicts, least of all in a free country. Like any love worthy of the name, it must be embraced freely and be strong and unsentimental enough to coexist with the elements of disappointment, criticism, dissent, opposition, and even shame that come with moral maturity and open eyes. But it is love all the same, and without the deep foundation it supplies, our republic will perish.

State and local governments—not the federal government—are responsible for adopting curricula that teach children the principles that unite, inspire, and ennoble all Americans. This includes lessons on the Revolutionary War, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitutional Convention. Educators should teach an accurate history of how the permanent principles of America's founding have been challenged and preserved since 1776. By studying America's true heritage, students learn to embrace and preserve the triumphs of their forefathers while identifying and avoiding their mistakes.

States and school districts should reject any curriculum that promotes one-sided partisan opinions, activist propaganda, or factional ideologies that demean America's heritage, dishonor our heroes, or deny our principles. Any time teachers or administrators promote political agendas in the classroom, they abuse their platform and dishonor every family who trusts them with their children's education and moral development.

"Law and liberty cannot rationally become the object of our love," wrote founding father James Wilson, "unless they first become the objects of our knowledge." Students who are taught to understand America's exceptional principles and America's powerful history grow into strong citizens who respect the rule of law and protect the country they know and love.

## Document 5

Source: Excerpts from “Teaching Unbiased American History” by Jack Miller (US entrepreneur), Real Clear Education, February 16, 2022

...Thankfully, we are not in a civil war today – and, one hopes, never will be again. We are, however, in a battle for the soul of our country...

The 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis – a miscarriage of justice – was the spark that led to the popularization of critical race theory, riots and looting in many cities, and the tearing down of statues of great Americans. It also gave impetus to the 1619 Project’s skewed framing of the American Founding. All these developments have widened our divide. So has teaching young people in colleges, universities, and K-12 schools that America is systemically racist, which has angered parents across the country...

The good news is that most Americans believe in the vision of our Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and that all are entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Over the years, that vision has united us as one people, even through the most divisive debates, and has attracted millions to America’s shores.

It is that unifying vision that must be taught to our young people. After all, it will fall on their shoulders to continue the progress previous generations have made. Frederick Douglass, during the Civil War era, and Martin Luther King Jr., during the civil rights era, both invoked that vision in advocating for a colorblind society and fair play for all. We have come a long way toward achieving those goals. But teaching our young people through a lens of racial grievance and Marxist historicism corrupts and reverses that progress.

This miseducation must stop. Fortunately, now that parents and the public are becoming aware of and alarmed about the situation, change is possible. The solution is clear: it is to reintroduce and reinvigorate the teaching of both our founding principles and a well-rounded and unbiased American history in our classrooms...

That should include a solid civics education in our founding principles and our form of government, as well as our history of progress toward achieving the promise of our Declaration. Children should learn about the American culture of freedom and opportunity that enables anyone to achieve success and has made our country a magnet for people from around the world. Together, we need to continue working to achieve the vision of our Declaration.



## Document 6

Source: Excerpts from President Trump's Executive Order, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," March 27, 2025

Section 1. Purpose and Policy. Over the past decade, Americans have witnessed a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation's history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth. This revisionist movement seeks to undermine the remarkable achievements of the United States by casting its founding principles and historical milestones in a negative light. Under this historical revision, our Nation's unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness is reconstructed as inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed. Rather than fostering unity and a deeper understanding of our shared past, the widespread effort to rewrite history deepens societal divides and fosters a sense of national shame, disregarding the progress America has made and the ideals that continue to inspire millions around the globe...

It is the policy of my Administration to restore Federal sites dedicated to history, including parks and museums, to solemn and uplifting public monuments that remind Americans of our extraordinary heritage, consistent progress toward becoming a more perfect Union, and unmatched record of advancing liberty, prosperity, and human flourishing. Museums in our Nation's capital should be places where individuals go to learn — not to be subjected to ideological indoctrination or divisive narratives that distort our shared history.

To advance this policy, we will restore the Smithsonian Institution to its rightful place as a symbol of inspiration and American greatness — igniting the imagination of young minds, honoring the richness of American history and innovation, and instilling pride in the hearts of all Americans.

## Document 7

Source: Excerpts from “Statement on Executive Order ‘Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,’” by the Organization of American Historians, March 31, 2025

Together, the Smithsonian and national parks offer an evidence-based, comprehensive understanding and public presentation of the history of the United States. They are not just repositories of artifacts and memory, but essential spaces where all visitors can engage with and learn from the complexities of the American past.

These vital spaces are under assault. The recent Executive Order titled “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” represents a disturbing attack on core institutions and the public presentation of history, and indeed on historians and history itself. The directive seeks to limit the ways in which history is taught to the public and understood, especially by discouraging the incorporation of perspectives that might challenge simplified, one-dimensional, and biased views of American history. The implications of this order are far-reaching and challenge the historian’s profession to its very core. It proposes to rewrite history to reflect a glorified narrative that downplays or disappears elements of America’s history—slavery, segregation, discrimination, division—while suppressing the voices of historically excluded groups.

This is not a return to sanity. Rather, it sanitizes to destroy truth...

The Executive Order is especially insidious in that it is an attack not just on history, but on the very values of intellectual curiosity and engagement that vital democracies demand of their people. Were it to stand, it would be a grave disservice to future generations. Knowledge is power, and when that knowledge is censored or distorted, democracy itself is weakened. The Smithsonian museums and our national parks must be allowed to continue their missions without fear of political interference or ideological restriction.

In the face of these attacks, the Organization of American Historians stands firm in our support of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service and their ongoing efforts to revise and update their interpretations of the past to be more inclusive. The OAH remains steadfast in our defense of the right to engage with history honestly, even when that history challenges our assumptions and forces us to confront uncomfortable realities. The OAH embraces the complexity and diversity of America’s past that is grounded in the documentary record and that fosters critical thinking, promotes understanding, and ultimately strengthens our nation and our world.