

Culture War by Executive Order: President Trump's Cultural Directives and the Threat to Libraries and Museums

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In the first 100 days of his second administration, President Donald Trump issued several executive orders targeting important federal cultural institutions. These included the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) (Trump 2025b), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and the Smithsonian Institution. Framed under themes like "restoring patriotism," "ending woke ideology," and "restoring American exceptionalism," these directives represent an unprecedented use of executive authority aimed at reshaping the mission, governance, and funding of America's cultural institutions, including libraries, museums, and archives.

This situation is not simply an examination of the unitary executive theory or a new form of federalism (Chrastka 2017). Instead, it is a coordinated attempt at cultural capture, a kind of deliberate effort to reconfigure public institutions to reflect and promote a fixed ideological narrative of American identity. These executive orders, especially in the context of the approaching 250th anniversary of the United States in 2026, pose a significant threat to the intellectual neutrality and civic trust that libraries, museums, and archives have maintained for a long time.

Institutional Alarm and Response

Several organizations are emerging early in this term as key voices of opposition to this shift: EveryLibrary and the EveryLibrary Institute, PEN America, and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). Each has issued clear and forceful critiques of the administration's cultural directives, identifying threats not only to funding but to foundational democratic values.

EveryLibrary condemned the reduction of IMLS to only its "statutory functions" and called out the politicization of the agency under Acting Director Keith Sonderling, who framed his appointment as an opportunity to instill patriotism and American exceptionalism into federal cultural work (2025b). The EveryLibrary Institute provided complementary policy briefs outlining the legal limits of executive overreach, affirming that Congress's appropriations to IMLS cannot be nullified by ideological fiat (2025).

PEN America has been equally vocal, warning that content-based restrictions imposed on NEA and NEH grantees constitute an unconstitutional ideological litmus test (2025). Their analysis draws parallels to historical episodes of state censorship and government propaganda, noting that the administration's actions pose a clear and present danger to artistic and intellectual freedom.

The American Alliance of Museums, representing institutions held in uniquely high regard by the public, warned that dismantling IMLS would not only defund a vital infrastructure of support but also break the centuries-long trust between cultural institutions and the communities they serve (Van Balgooy 2025). AAM's data-driven advocacy highlighted that over 90% of Americans view museums as nonpartisan educators and their status is now imperiled.

The Cultural Litmus Test in K–12 and DoDEA Schools

The executive orders affecting federal cultural institutions do not stand alone. They are part of a broader strategy that includes a March 2025 executive order requiring public K–12 schools to self-certify that they have eliminated diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs or risk losing federal funding (Schultz 2025). State education agencies and local districts were given just ten days to comply or face the loss of Title I and other essential funding streams. Though enforcement has been temporarily halted by litigation led by the NEA and the ACLU, the threat remains active and unresolved (Jotkoff 2025).

In parallel, the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) issued directives ending identity-based student clubs, canceling cultural heritage observances, and mandating the review and removal of school library materials deemed non-compliant with the administration's views on gender and race. EveryLibrary described these actions as an "unprecedented campaign of censorship," particularly alarming given their impact on military-connected youth who already experience instability and high mobility (2025a).

These developments amount to a soft censorship regime, wherein access to federal resources is conditioned upon ideological conformity. Already, federal agencies such as the NEA and IMLS have begun revising their grant guidelines to reflect the administration's priorities, disfavoring projects that center on equity, inclusion, or contested histories. If the K–12 litmus test and DoDEA models are a proving ground, then federal support for local and state libraries, museums, and archives may soon hinge on their willingness to adopt and amplify an officially sanctioned narrative of American identity. As these policies take root in K–12 education, it is reasonable to forecast their extension into higher education, libraries, and museums.

The National Archives, the Smithsonian, and the Contest for Historical Authority

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), long regarded as the impartial steward of America's documentary heritage, has not been immune to political pressure. In 2025, executive actions and administrative guidance reshaped the scope and tone of NARA's public-facing work, particularly in its exhibits, educational resources, and partnerships (Swenson and Fields 2025).

One such directive required all federal historical content, including NARA's exhibits and online materials, to reflect the triumphs of American greatness and eliminate messages

of national shame or decline that undermine patriotism. The Smithsonian Museum was the focus of an Executive Order 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” (Trump 2025c). In practical terms, this could force these institutions and others like them to remove or reframe slavery and segregation-era documents, pause or revise exhibits focusing on protest movements, civil disobedience, or critical interpretations of founding-era policies, and even mandate the religious values of actors in major American historic and cultural moments.

While some of these moves have been presented as “balanced storytelling,” critics, including former agency staff, academic historians, and advocacy organizations, warn that they constitute a narrative purge of inconvenient truths. This aligns with other agencies’ shifts toward a government-sanctioned historical orthodoxy. The executive order also instructed that all partner institutions participating in America250 programming must certify alignment with the administration’s messaging principles in order to receive grant support. This effectively imposes a compliance requirement for access to foundational documents, both digitally and through outreach exhibitions.

Orchestrating a Singular Narrative: The America 250 Executive Order and Task Force 250

On January 29, 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed Executive Order 14189, titled “Celebrating America’s 250th Birthday,” establishing the White House Task Force on Celebrating America’s 250th Birthday (Task Force 250) (2025a). This task force is charged with planning and executing a grand celebration for the 250th anniversary of American Independence on July 4, 2026. Task Force 250 is chaired by the President, with the Vice President serving as Vice Chair. The task force includes key cabinet members and agency heads, such as the Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The inclusion of leaders from cultural and educational agencies underscores the administration’s intent to align the celebration with its ideological vision.

Task Force 250 is tasked with coordinating federal agency efforts to plan, organize, and execute the 250th-anniversary celebrations. Centralized planning for the 250th anniversary, as outlined in Executive Order 14189, could lead to ideological litmus tests for federal funding of local and state archives, museums, and libraries. This centralization allows the administration to align funding priorities with its ideological objectives. For instance, the NEA has revised its grant guidelines to favor projects that celebrate the nation’s 250th anniversary, effectively sidelining initiatives aimed at underserved communities (Cascone 2025).

These actions suggest a shift towards funding criteria that prioritize alignment with a specific narrative of American history and identity. Consequently, local and state cultural institutions may find themselves required to conform to these narratives to secure federal support, thereby compromising their autonomy and the diversity of perspectives they represent. The composition and directives of Task Force 250 may lead to a homogenized portrayal of American history, sidelining diverse or contrarian perspectives, and minimize complex narratives. The centralization of planning within the executive branch raises concerns about the potential politicization of the Semiquincentennial celebrations, transforming them into vehicles for ideological messaging rather than inclusive historical reflection.

The 2026 Reauthorization of the Museum and Library Services Act

A particularly vulnerable inflection point for the American culture capture is the upcoming reauthorization of the Museum and Library Services Act (MLSA) in federal fiscal year 2026. Reauthorizations are typically procedural, reaffirming the federal role in supporting library and museum services nationwide. But under this administration and this Congress, reauthorization could become the vehicle for radical restructuring.

There are three plausible scenarios for the 2026 MLSA Reauthorization. One would be to effectively reauthorize the agency out of existence. Congress could sunset the MSLA entirely or fail to renew it in any meaningful form, effectively hollowing out IMLS. A second scenario is a statutory rollback, where the MLSA could be revised to limit IMLS to only formula-based grants, ending discretionary programs and national leadership activities. A third and necessarily more draconian model would be to use this reauthorization as a vehicle to consolidate IMLS, NEH, NEA, and others into a single federal "Cultural Authority" with the power to direct funding only to state agencies that align with the administration's ideological vision of patriotism, American identity, and historical truth.

This would not be without precedent. In the 1980s and early 2000s, efforts to politicize NEA funding were successful in narrowing its scope. The 1990s saw similar attempts to realign public broadcasting with federal messaging. President Trump's 2025 executive orders extend and formalize this strategy across sectors. To date, no major legislative proposal has been filed to restructure MLSA in this way, but the precedent and the political conditions are aligned.

Call to Action for Library, Museum, and Archives Professionals

For libraries, museums, and archives, the ramifications are significant. We cannot serve democracy by sanitizing its history. To rewrite the record is not patriotism – it is propaganda. Until very recently, libraries, museums and archives relied on the resources and partnership of federal agencies like IMLS, NEH, NEA, NARA, and others for the funding and technical assistance necessary to showcase primary sources, conduct educational programming, and host traveling exhibits. If our federal cultural agencies becomes a gatekeeper of "acceptable history," the ripple effect will reach into every institution that hopes to tell America's authentic story with complexity and care.

Library, museum, and archives professionals must approach this moment with clarity and resolve. These executive orders are not merely policy disagreements; they are attempts to repurpose public institutions as tools of ideological enforcement. Our sectors must come together in a shared discussion about the impending culture capture. Our professions must reaffirm their commitment to historical truth, free expression, and cultural pluralism. As the next phase of the administration moves toward the 250th, we must monitor federal funding guidelines, particularly through IMLS and related agencies, for signs of ideological conditioning. We should be prepared to defend the integrity of cultural agencies and oppose legislative efforts that would restructure federal cultural support along ideological lines.

The upcoming 250th anniversary of the United States should be a time to celebrate the complexity, diversity, and resilience of our national story. But that story must be told honestly, with all its contradictions and triumphs, not filtered through a singular lens of state-sanctioned virtue. The cultural institutions of the United States have long served as spaces of inquiry, refuge, and connection. Their strength lies in their independence and their

embrace of complexity. The Trump administration's 2025 executive orders seek to reverse that tradition, substituting plurality with conformity.

As professionals and as citizens, we must decide whether we will serve as stewards of culture, or as instruments of the state. The future of libraries, museums, and archives depends on our answer.

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