

Trump annoyed the Smithsonian isn't promoting discredited racial ideas

New executive order slams museum for recognizing "race is not a biological reality."

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The exterior of the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum. Credit: Douglas Rissing

 TEXT SETTINGS

On Thursday, the Trump administration issued an executive order that took aim at one of the US's foremost cultural and scientific institutions: the Smithsonian. Upset by exhibits that reference the role of racism, sexism, and more in the nation's complicated past, the order tasks the vice president and a former insurance lawyer (?) with ensuring that the Smithsonian Institution is a "symbol of inspiration and American greatness"—a command that specifically includes the National Zoo.

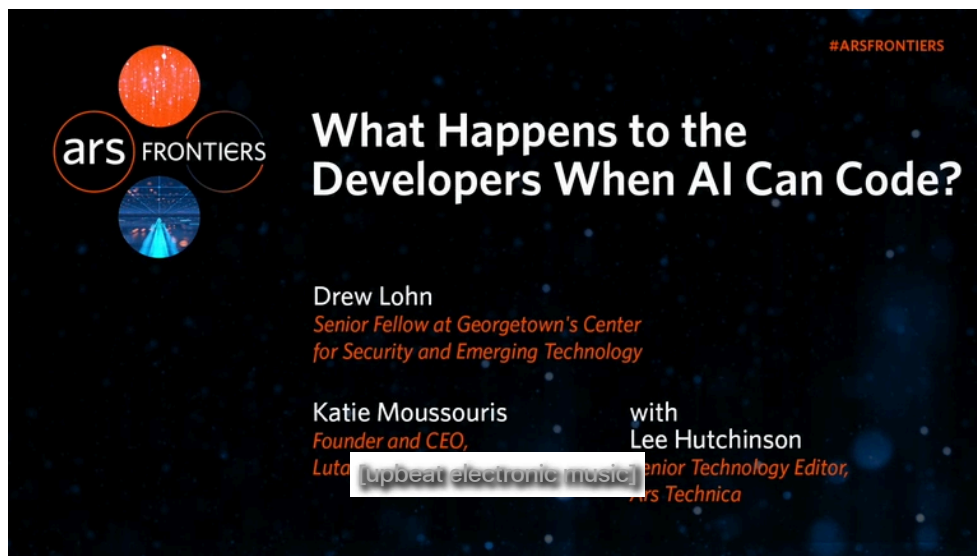
But in the process of airing the administration's grievances, the document specifically calls out a Smithsonian display for accurately describing our current scientific understanding of race. That raises the prospect that the vice president will ultimately demand that the Smithsonian display scientifically inaccurate information.

Grievance vs. science

The executive order, entitled "Restoring Truth And Sanity To American History," is filled with what has become a standard grievance: the accusation that, by recognizing the many cases where the US has not lived up to its founding ideals, institutions are attempting to "rewrite our nation's history." It specifically calls out discussions of historic racism, sexism, and oppression as undercutting the US's "unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness."

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Even if you move past the obvious tension between a legacy of advancing liberty and the perpetuation of slavery in the US's founding documents, there are other ironies here. For example, the order slams the Department of the Interior's role in implementing changes that "inappropriately minimize the value of certain historical events or figures" at the same time that the administration's policies have led to the removal of references to transgender individuals and minorities and women.

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But buried within the list of issues is a reference to a display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The display, the executive order complains, "claims that 'sculpture has been a powerful tool in promoting scientific racism' and promotes the view that race is not a biological reality but a social construct." That wording is denounced as an example of "divisive, race-centered ideology." But the Smithsonian's text is entirely accurate.

In 2023, the National Academies of Science issued a report intended to get the scientific community to recognize cases where it was using unscientific thinking about race. And the report's language couldn't be more clear about rejecting the complaint found in the executive order:

In humans, race is a socially constructed designation, a misleading and harmful surrogate for population genetic differences, and has a long history of being incorrectly identified as the major genetic reason for phenotypic differences between groups.

So, indeed, race is not a biological reality but rather a social construct. The Smithsonian had it exactly right. And now, the administration wants it changed.

Obviously, changing some text on a single sculpture exhibit won't precipitate a major crisis. But the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History includes an extensive anthropology collection and supports research programs. So there's potential for the vice president to inject discredited, eugenics-adjacent ideas into the Smithsonian's research programs if he follows through on the language of this executive order.



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 **318 COMMENTS**
