

Who Owns the American Past? Historical Memory, History Education, and the Struggle over the Meaning of National Identity in Contemporary America

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Abstract

This study examines the contemporary struggle over the representation of the American past as a conflict that extends beyond disagreements over the interpretation of historical events to encompass competition over who has the authority to define the national past, what should be remembered, what may be marginalized or reinterpreted, and who has the right to appear as a central actor in the American narrative. The study proceeds from the premise that, in the United States, history functions not merely as a record of the past but also as a cultural and political resource used to produce national identity and define the boundaries of belonging to the political community. Accordingly, history education, school curricula, museums, national commemorations, public memory, memorial sites, and digital platforms have become interconnected arenas in which the meaning of “America” is negotiated. The study adopts a historical-analytical approach that brings together collective memory studies, the analysis of national discourse, and the study of the politics of history education, drawing on a number of recent studies published in specialized academic journals, as well as institutional materials associated with the 250th anniversary of American independence in 2026. It argues that the current conflict cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between “national history” and “critical history,” because both sides participate in an attempt to determine what makes the past relevant to the present. The study proposes the concept of civic historical pluralism as an analytical and ethical framework that reconciles the need for evidence-based historical knowledge with recognition of the plurality of experiences and memories that shape American society. This framework rests on four interrelated principles: evidentiary accountability, narrative pluralism, recognition of historical contradiction, and civic openness. The study concludes that the future of American national identity does not depend on producing a single narrative of the past, but on the capacity of a democratic society to transform disagreement over the past from a tool of political exclusion into a space for historical reflection and civic debate.

Keywords: American civilization, historical memory, national identity, history education, public memory, curricula, political culture, civic historical pluralism, United States.

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1. Introduction

Who owns the past? At first glance, this may appear to be a historical question, but in the American context it quickly becomes a political and cultural question concerning the present and the future. Societies do not remember their past in the same way that they preserve an archive of documents. Rather, they select figures, events, symbols, and values from that archive and rearrange them into narratives that give meaning to the present and shape the community's image of itself. The struggle over the past is therefore not merely a struggle over what happened, but also over what what happened ought to mean.

This issue assumes particular importance in the United States because of the complex nature of the American experience. The modern republic emerged within a context that combined a discourse of freedom and equality on the one hand with institutions of slavery, racial exclusion, and political marginalization on the other. Its history has also witnessed territorial expansion, mass immigration, civil wars, struggles for civil rights, and transformations in the meaning of citizenship and belonging. It is therefore difficult to reduce American history to a continuous progressive narrative, just as it is difficult to reduce it to a narrative of uninterrupted decline. The American past consists of promises and contradictions, achievements and exclusions, and the expansion of rights alongside the persistence of various forms of inequality.

This complexity has become more visible in recent decades with the intensification of disputes over what should be taught in schools and universities and how slavery, the Civil War, colonialism, the civil rights movement, immigration, race relations, and the settler colonialism experienced by Indigenous peoples should be presented. In this context, curricula have become a direct political issue. Recent studies show that disagreement over history education is no longer a specialized debate among historians and educators but has become part of broader cultural conflicts in the United States. The *Journal of American History*, for example, devoted a group of articles in its March 2026 issue to examining "history wars" and the contemporary politics of history teaching, revealing the centrality of this issue in current academic debate (Kryczka et al., 2026; Schultz, 2026; Sipress, 2026).

These debates are taking place at a moment of profound symbolic significance. On July 4, 2026, the United States commemorated the 250th anniversary of its independence. The anniversary was not merely a celebratory occasion; it also became an opportunity to re-present American history and determine which figures, events, and stories should form part of national memory. The Library of Congress established a digital archive dedicated to "America250" that brings together materials from federal, local, cultural, and community initiatives associated with the anniversary. This provides a clear example of the multiplicity of actors involved in producing and preserving national memory.

Against this background, the present study proceeds from a central question:

Who has the right to determine the American past, and how does the struggle over its representation shape contemporary American national identity?

This question gives rise to several subsidiary questions: How has history moved from a field of academic knowledge into a field of political and cultural conflict? What role does the school play in constructing national memory? Why have issues of race, slavery, and civil rights become central to disputes over curricula? How does official memory intersect with multiple collective memories? And is it possible to construct a conception of national identity that does not require agreement on a single historical narrative?

The study argues that the struggle over American history is not merely a disagreement over curriculum content but reveals a deeper competition over symbolic authority to define the nation itself. The choice of what is taught, what is commemorated, and what is ignored contributes to determining who appears at the center of the national story and who remains at its margins. Conversely, expanding the historical field to include voices and experiences that were previously marginalized does not necessarily entail rejecting national identity; rather, it may represent an attempt to redefine that identity on a more pluralistic basis.

2. History and Memory: From Recording the Past to Producing National Meaning

Distinguishing between history and memory requires a degree of caution. Academic history seeks, in principle, to reconstruct the past on the basis of evidence, criticism, comparison, and verification, whereas collective memory refers to the ways in which groups remember their past and assign meaning to it in the present. Yet the two domains do not exist in complete separation. Historical knowledge enters public memory, while memory, in turn, influences the questions historians ask and the subjects that receive public attention.

For this reason, national memory cannot be understood as a simplified version of academic history. Memory selects and condenses, assigning some events a symbolic value greater than their value in purely historical analysis. A particular historical figure may become a national symbol that transcends the complexities of that person's life, just as a historical event may become a point of reference used to interpret contemporary political issues.

In the United States, this is particularly evident in the treatment of the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the Civil War, the Second World War, and the civil rights movement. These events are not merely facts from the past; they have become elements of the political and cultural language through which the United States understands itself.

This indicates that the question of memory is not solely a question about the past, but also about the present that chooses the past it wishes to remember. For this reason, the study of historical memory helps explain why past events return to political debate at moments of contemporary crisis.

This idea becomes even more significant when it concerns experiences that have been unequally represented in national narratives. Recent studies have shown that the representation of race in historical memory influences the way the history of American democracy is understood. Perez et al. (2026) argue that ignoring the long history of racism can lead to an uncritical conception of American democracy because narrating the past as a continuous story of freedom and progress obscures the forms of exclusion that accompanied the development of political institutions.

Here a fundamental problem emerges: If national memory selects elements from the past, who makes the selection? Who determines the criterion of significance? And is the importance of an event measured by the extent of its impact on state institutions, or by the extent of its impact on the lives of different groups?

Answering these questions leads directly to the issue of power.

3. The School as an Institution for Producing National Memory

The school represents one of the most important institutions through which historical knowledge is transmitted to new generations. Its function is not limited to providing information about the past; it also contributes to shaping students' understanding of the society to which they belong. Thus, the question "What should we teach in history?" implicitly contains another question: "What kind of society do we want students to recognize as their own?"

Historically, the teaching of American history has been connected to the project of forming citizens. Schools presented major national events as milestones in the development of the republic and linked them to the values of freedom, democracy, and national unity. However, this educational function has become more complex as recognition of the plurality of experiences within American society has expanded.

A narrative that places the state and political institutions at the center of history is no longer sufficient to explain the American experience in its entirety. The social histories of workers, women, African Americans, Indigenous peoples, immigrants, Latino and Asian Americans, and different religious groups raise questions that cannot be answered through the history of official institutions alone.

Recent scholarship indicates that the problem lies not only in adding new names and events to textbooks, but also in reconsidering the structure through which the historical narrative itself is constructed. Toney and Brooms (2026) found that a number of Black students expressed a lack of confidence in American history curricula when they felt that these curricula did not provide "the full story," did not adequately represent

Black experiences, or presented the history of racism separately from the broader structure of American history.

This finding is important because it reveals that the representation of the past is not merely an academic issue. Students do not necessarily approach the curriculum as an entirely neutral body of material. Rather, they may interpret what appears in the textbook, and what is absent from it, as an indication of the status that the state or educational institution accords their group within the national story.

From this perspective, curricula become a form of symbolic recognition. The historical representation of a group as an actor, a resister, a creator, and a contributor to the construction of society is fundamentally different from representing that group merely as a source of problems or as a marginal presence in someone else's story.

The teaching of Black history has been particularly connected to this issue. Lewis and Tirado (2025) explain that Black history education emerged within a context of resistance to attempts to reduce the American experience or present it from a single perspective, and that the recovery of historical knowledge became part of developing Black historical consciousness and confronting attempts to restrict the teaching of race and history.

The question, therefore, is no longer whether Black history should be taught, but rather the more profound question: **Can American history be presented in its entirety without reconsidering the position occupied by Black history within it?**

4. Race and the Problem of “the Full Story”

One of the most sensitive manifestations of the struggle over American history concerns race. This is because race was not a marginal element in American history; rather, it was connected to the formation of fundamental economic, political, and social institutions, from slavery and colonialism to segregation and discrimination laws, and subsequently to the civil rights movement and its aftermath.

Nevertheless, the representation of this history remains contested. One position holds that focusing on racism may lead to a negative and fragmented portrayal of the United States, while another maintains that avoiding these issues produces an incomplete picture of the past.

Yet the binary opposition between “positive national history” and “negative critical history” may be misleading. Critical history does not necessarily mean rejecting American society, just as national history should not mean concealing its failures and exclusions. The real problem arises when patriotism becomes a criterion that prevents the inclusion of events that conflict with the idealized image of the nation.

Sipress (2026) discusses the growing emphasis on what is referred to as “patriotic education” in the context of contemporary conflicts over the professional independence of historians and educational curricula. The article connects these trends with legislation restricting the teaching of issues related to race and inequality, demonstrating that the struggle over history has become directly connected to educational policy.

The opposite danger, however, lies in turning history into a tool for condemning the present rather than understanding it. If the past becomes merely a list of injustices used to issue direct moral judgments on every period of history, we may lose the ability to explain the contexts that produced different institutions, ideas, and practices.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between historical criticism and reductive condemnation. Historical criticism asks about contexts, forces, interests, consequences, and contradictions, whereas reductive condemnation reduces the past to a single moral judgment.

This issue presents a particular challenge for history education. The aim is neither for students to emerge believing that their country was always right nor to emerge believing that its history consists solely of injustice. The more important objective is for them to become capable of engaging with the past as a field of contradiction, interpretation, and evidence.

5. When Politics Enters the Classroom

Curricula in the United States are no longer merely an internal educational concern. They have become a direct subject of competition among local governments, political currents, educational institutions, and civic groups.

This is partly because the United States does not have a single centralized system for determining all the details of history education in public schools. Consequently, states and school districts play an important role in establishing standards and determining subjects and content.

Jackson (2026) points to the substantial expansion of state curriculum standards since the 1980s and notes that these standards have become an essential component of American education. At the same time, he advocates a more limited model of standards so that they do not become an instrument for detailed control over what teachers should teach and how they should teach it.

A significant paradox emerges here. On the one hand, democratic societies need a certain degree of shared historical knowledge in order to conduct public debate on the basis of common knowledge. On the other hand, this shared knowledge can become a rigid official narrative if the state itself determines in detail what may and may not be said.

The problem, therefore, does not lie in the existence of shared standards as such, but in the degree of authority that the state grants itself over the interpretation of history.

In this context, the articles published in the *Journal of American History* in 2026 can be understood as part of a broader debate over the limits of political authority in history education. Alongside Sipress, Schultz (2026) advocates teaching multiple historical perspectives in order to develop students' capacity for thinking, while Jackson (2026) focuses on reducing normative control over the educational process.

Despite their differences, these approaches converge on a fundamental point: history that is imposed as a complete national truth loses part of its educational function.

The purpose of studying history is not to memorize the official narrative, but to learn how to formulate questions, examine evidence, compare interpretations, understand context, and distinguish historical fact from political interpretation.

6. Public Memory Beyond the School

If the school is a central institution in the production of memory, it is not the only one. Museums, memorials, historical parks, official commemorations, films, literature, the media, and digital platforms all participate in determining how the past appears before the public.

National memory is therefore not produced in a single place. It is formed through a broad network of institutions and practices. For some citizens, a museum may have a greater influence on public memory than a textbook, while for others, a historical film or television series may be a more influential source.

This plurality makes complete control over memory difficult. If one institution attempts to impose a particular narrative, alternative narratives can emerge elsewhere.

The 250th anniversary of American independence provides a contemporary example of this plurality. The Library of Congress not only preserves official materials associated with the occasion but also brings together, within its digital archive, websites and materials representing diverse federal, state, local, cultural, professional, and community initiatives. The Library explicitly indicates that the archive preserves content reflecting celebrations, historical interpretations, and community experiences associated with the occasion.

This initiative has analytical value because it reveals that American national memory in the twenty-first century is no longer constructed solely through central governmental institutions. Local communities, cultural organizations, professional groups, educational institutions, and digital platforms have all become producers of memory.

Plurality, however, does not necessarily mean equality. Some narratives possess greater media and institutional resources than others, and some voices receive greater public space than others. Accordingly, the study of memory should not ask only, “What narratives exist?” It should also ask: **Who possesses the capacity to disseminate them and make them visible?**

7. From Memory to “Historical Ownership”

In light of the foregoing, the central question of the study can be reformulated. The issue is not who legally owns the past, but rather who possesses the symbolic authority to determine its meaning.

This authority operates at four interconnected levels.

First, there is the authority of selection: determining which events and figures deserve to be present.

Second, there is the authority of arrangement: determining which events are placed at the center of the narrative and which are presented as marginal.

Third, there is the authority of interpretation: determining what a historical event means in relation to national identity.

Fourth, there is the authority of distribution: determining where and how this interpretation reaches the public, whether through the school, the museum, the media, the national commemoration, or the digital platform.

From this perspective, the concept of “historical ownership” is useful for understanding the contemporary conflict. Groups are not merely demanding the addition of a chapter about their history; they sometimes demand a reconsideration of the national story itself so that their experience becomes part of the definition of “who we are.”

Through a study of memory, race, and engagement with the past in the American South, Hortenstine and Bohan (2025) demonstrate how literature, images, correspondence, and cultural representations can become means of reconsidering the past and confronting narratives such as the “Lost Cause” narrative associated with the Civil War and the American South.

This means that memory is not fixed. It is an ongoing process of renegotiation.

A society that changes what it places in a museum, memorial, or textbook does not change the past; rather, it changes its relationship with the past.

8. Toward Civic Historical Pluralism

If the struggle over the past cannot be resolved by eliminating one narrative in favor of another, there is a need for a framework that permits disagreement without abandoning historical standards.

For this purpose, this study proposes the concept of civic historical pluralism. The concept is not presented as a fully developed theory or an established school of thought, but rather as an analytical framework through which the relationship between historical knowledge and democratic pluralism can be considered.

This framework rests on four main principles.

8.1 Evidentiary Accountability

Pluralism does not mean that every narrative about the past is equally valid. The existence of multiple perspectives does not eliminate the importance of evidence. Documents, sources, comparison among evidence, and historical contexts must remain the basis of any responsible historical knowledge.

Here, it is necessary to distinguish between “plurality of interpretation” and “relativism of truth.” Different interpretations of the same event may exist, but this does not mean that all claims concerning that event are equally supported by evidence.

8.2 Narrative Pluralism

A diverse society such as the United States cannot reduce its history to the experience of a single group. Education and public memory should therefore allow multiple experiences to emerge.

Narrative pluralism, however, does not mean turning history into a collection of separate stories. The aim is to incorporate these experiences into an interpretive relationship that reveals how groups influenced one another and how conflicts among them contributed to the formation of American institutions.

8.3 Recognition of Historical Contradiction

Contradiction should be part of the understanding of American history, not a problem that must be concealed.

The United States developed a powerful discourse of freedom while slavery was still in existence. It gradually expanded political participation while forms of exclusion continued. It adopted broad legal principles while discriminatory practices persisted.

These contradictions do not render American history meaningless; rather, they make it more intelligible.

A democratic nation does not need a history without mistakes in order to preserve its legitimacy. It may instead derive part of its civic strength from its capacity to examine its mistakes and contradictions without allowing this examination to become either a complete denial of its values or their uncritical glorification.

8.4 Civic Openness

The fourth principle is that the study of the past should open space for civic participation rather than close it.

If students learn that history consists of a set of final answers that cannot be questioned, they will not learn historical thinking. If, however, they learn that evidence can be examined and interpretations can be debated, they acquire a skill that extends beyond history itself: the ability to participate more responsibly in public debate.

From this perspective, history education becomes part of democratic education.

9. Does America Need a Single National Narrative?

The idea of a single national narrative may appear attractive because it provides a sense of unity. Political unity, however, does not necessarily require unity of memory.

Citizens may agree on the importance of democracy, the Constitution, and civil rights while differing in their interpretations of many historical events. One citizen may view the American Revolution as a foundational moment of freedom, while another may focus on the limits of that freedom for women, enslaved people, and Indigenous peoples. The existence of these two perspectives does not mean that one must eliminate the other.

The problem begins when citizens are required to agree not only on shared political principles but also on a single interpretation of the past.

In this context, a distinction can be made between two forms of unity:

Narrative unity rests on agreement about a single national story.

Civic unity, by contrast, rests on agreement about the rules of political participation and mutual recognition of citizens' right to disagree.

The latter appears more appropriate for a diverse society such as the United States.

Democracy does not necessarily require an identical memory, but it does require institutions that allow different groups to express and negotiate their memories without turning disagreement into exclusion.

10. America at 250: Commemoration as a Historical Question

The year 2026 gives this issue exceptional significance. The 250th anniversary of independence is not merely a chronological commemoration but a moment in which the United States is reconsidering its image of itself.

The Library of Congress has made 2026 an occasion for engagement with American history through programs, exhibitions, archival materials, and research resources under the slogan “America 250: It’s Your Story.” The Library of Congress also maintains a digital archive containing diverse initiatives associated with the occasion.

From the perspective of American civilization, the significance of this anniversary lies in the question it imposes on society: What does it mean to celebrate a history spanning 250 years?

Does commemoration mean restoring an idealized image of the past? Or can it provide an opportunity to examine the experience with all its achievements and contradictions?

A national commemoration can serve an exclusionary function if it presents the nation as a complete entity from the beginning. It can, however, serve a civic function if it is presented as an opportunity to understand how the republic has changed, how the scope of rights and participation has expanded, and how, at the same time, struggles that have not been definitively resolved have persisted.

National commemoration can therefore be redefined. Rather than serving as an affirmation that the past was always right, commemoration can become an occasion to ask **how America became what it is, who participated in shaping it, who was excluded, and how the standards of belonging and rights changed over time.**

11. Between “National History” and “Critical History”: Moving Beyond the Binary

One of the problems with the current debate lies in its tendency to produce sharp binaries: conservative versus liberal, national versus critical, traditional versus progressive. Yet these binaries may conceal greater diversity within each orientation.

Schultz (2026) reflected this complexity when he called for presenting multiple historical perspectives in order to encourage students to think about interpretive differences rather than presenting a single history as the only truth. Likewise, the collection of articles published in the same issue of the *Journal of American History* reveals that the debate over history education encompasses questions concerning standards, historical professionalism, academic freedom, and the educational purpose of studying the past.

Therefore, the alternative to a monolithic national narrative is not necessarily a monolithic critical narrative in its own right.

A more productive alternative is a history that is multi-sourced, multi-perspectival, and evidence-based.

This model does not ask students to choose between loving their country and criticizing it. Rather, it teaches them that civic belonging can coexist with the capacity to critique history.

Indeed, it can be argued that the ability to confront the past without fear may be a sign of the strength of a democratic society rather than a threat to it.

12. From “Who Owns the Past?” to “How Do We Share the Past?”

The preceding analysis leads us to reformulate the central question. Perhaps the more productive question is not, “Who owns the American past?” because the answer may lead to a zero-sum conflict in which ownership of the past implies that the narrative of one group must replace that of another.

The alternative question is: How can a diverse society share a past that it does not remember in the same way?

This shift is important because it moves the debate from ownership to responsibility.

If the past is public property in terms of its impact on society, responsibility toward it requires protecting it from excessive politicization, simplification, and exclusion. It also requires recognizing that American society consists of multiple groups, each with its own experiences and memories, while integrating these experiences into a shared historical framework grounded in evidence.

This approach offers a middle ground between two dangers.

The first danger is closed official history, which transforms the past into a national creed that does not accept revision.

The second danger is fragmented history, which turns society into a collection of separate memories lacking a shared historical framework.

Civic historical pluralism seeks to bring together shared knowledge and multiple interpretations.

13. Discussion

The study reveals that the conflict over contemporary American history should be understood as a struggle over the production of national meaning. The school curriculum does not merely determine what students know about the past; it also influences their understanding of the political community to which they belong. Museums, commemorations, and memorials do not merely preserve the past; they also produce forms of public memory that determine what society considers worthy of remembrance.

Recent scholarship demonstrates particularly clearly that issues of race have become a testing ground for this process. When students feel that the history of their groups is inadequately represented, the problem concerns not only the content of historical knowledge but may also affect their relationship with the institutions that present that content. Toney and Brooms (2026) provide a clear example of this issue through their study of Black students' distrust of history curricula that they perceived as failing to present the full story.

At the same time, recognition of pluralism should not be transformed into the abandonment of historical standards. Historical knowledge requires evidence, analysis, and comparison among sources. Therefore, the most balanced position does not consist in choosing between "truth" and "multiple narratives," but in recognizing that shared evidence can allow for multiple interpretations without making all claims equally valid.

Here, the importance of civic historical pluralism emerges as a framework that brings together the epistemic and civic dimensions. It does not assume that the past is entirely relative, nor does it assume, conversely, that it has one final national interpretation.

This framework also helps move beyond the idea that recognizing the history of slavery and racism necessarily entails condemning the United States as a whole. Serious historical study can acknowledge violence and exclusion while simultaneously examining processes of reform, resistance, and the expansion of rights. In this way, history becomes more complex, but it also becomes more truthful.

14. Conclusion

The question "Who owns the American past?" extends beyond the boundaries of historians, schools, and curricula. It concerns the way the United States understands itself. Every society that reconsiders its past, in one way or another, also redefines its present.

The study has demonstrated that the contemporary conflict over American history concerns not only which events should be taught, but also the authority that determines the meaning of those events, who appears within the national story, and who remains outside it. Disputes over curricula, public memory, race, and national commemorations reveal that the American past has become one of the most important arenas of conflict over political and cultural identity.

Yet this conflict should not lead to the belief that the solution lies in imposing a single national narrative. American society is sufficiently diverse to make such a project vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. At the same time, the idea of shared historical knowledge cannot be abandoned in favor of separate narratives that lack a common evidentiary standard.

The study therefore proposes the concept of civic historical pluralism as a third possibility. It rests on evidentiary accountability, narrative pluralism, recognition of historical contradiction, and civic openness. According to this conception, the goal of history education is neither to produce citizens who repeat a ready-made national narrative nor to produce citizens who see the American past merely as a record of failure. Rather, it is to develop citizens capable of examining evidence, understanding contradictions, listening to different memories, and participating in public debate without abandoning critical thinking.

On the 250th anniversary of American independence, this task appears more important than ever. Commemorating the past can be an opportunity to freeze it in an idealized image, but it can also provide an occasion to rethink it. If the United States has spent centuries expanding the definition of who belongs to the nation, one of the challenges of the twenty-first century is to expand the definition of who has the right to be part of its historical story.

Accordingly, the most important question is ultimately not: “Who owns the American past?” but: “Can the United States make its past a shared space for criticism, remembrance, and learning, rather than turning it into a weapon in the struggle over the present?”

If it can, history may become a source of civic cohesion, not because it provides Americans with a single story, but because it gives them the capacity to live with multiple stories within a shared political framework.

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