



The People's Capital

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At the end of July, I attended a leadership conference in Washington, DC. As part of the pre-conference offerings, the event organizers scheduled museum trips. I signed up for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, where I spent a day four years ago but was unable to completely engage with all the exhibits. Fortunately, that excursion reached capacity, and I attended the National Museum of the American Indian instead. Stunning architecture and thriving green spaces greeted us upon arrival. The interior structure also stunned visitors with an open central atrium with light streaming in from symbolically placed and designed windows open to all floors.

Throughout the museum, artifacts, short documentaries, music, and historical markers told the story of the Americas, particularly of the geographical territory defined as the United States of America, through the lens of the people indigenous to this continent, also known as "Turtle Island." I confess that I was particularly attentive to how the story was being told. I feared that the less favorable history from the US government perspective might be literally "white-washed." The current administration has been openly hostile to the Smithsonian Museums and their preservation and articulation of the full American story. Based on my experience, the museum has held firm to conveying truth through their exhibits. The museum trip, as well as a later event at the National Archives that houses the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution among other critical and foundational documents, served as highlights of my time in Washington, DC in the month marking the 250th year



since the Declaration of Independence was adopted.

By contrast, my experience of the city itself, particularly around the center of the federal government, proved disheartening. I have traveled to the nation's capital at least once a year for five or six years, and the changes were apparent. The National Guard patrolled the streets. An unusual amount of in-process construction projects and fencing, even unrelated to those projects or any apparent security concern, permeate the streets. That does not even include the damage to the Reflecting Pool and the former East Wing of the White House. Most disturbing, on the buildings housing the Departments of Labor and Justice, banners of the sitting president were prominently displayed in a manner reminiscent of North Korean dictators.

One of the nation's founders, Benjamin Franklin, responded to the question posed by Elizabeth Willing Powel: "Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" His answer has become more famous than the question, "A republic if we can keep it." A form of government that vests power in the people, he understood, would require ongoing commitment, vigilance, and organized work to maintain.

As the country commemorates 250 years of that struggle, history invites us to remember that the capital city is more than a geographical location. It most accurately reflects the gathering of the diverse peoples who have become known as Americans. In that museum visit, the first exhibit I encountered was entitled, "The Americans," in recognition of the first peoples who occupied the land. Since that time, European settlers, enslaved Africans, and immigrants from every inhabited continent have claimed this nation, and its capital, as their own. We, of this generation, have been particularly and urgently called to keep it.

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