

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

August 5, 2020

President Donald J. Trump  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington DC, 20500

The Honorable David Bernhardt  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. President and Mr. Secretary,

The Black Hills of South Dakota, where you recently spoke to the country about your view of American history, saw one of the largest gold rushes of the nineteenth century. That period of rapid westward expansion spawned an enduring mythology about the building of our country – a mythology that overlooks or even glamorizes the destruction of Native Americans. The Black Hills was also the site of the federal government breaking treaties, disenfranchising Native Peoples, and tolerating or directly sponsoring the slaughter of countless tribal members. We write today because your choice to use Mount Rushmore as a backdrop for an open appeal to white grievance politics raises larger questions about the use of taxpayer resources to represent American history and underscores the fatal shortcomings of your proposal to create a Garden of American Heroes.

Mount Rushmore is one of our nation’s most iconic monuments. Gutzon Borglum, the man who planned and oversaw its carving, is well known to have preached white supremacy and enthusiastically attended Ku Klux Klan rallies. In different ways, each of the four men honored on Mount Rushmore brings similar issues to the fore. They all held beliefs and committed acts unconscionable by today’s standards: two saw fit to own human beings, at least one saw non-white peoples as inferior, and one oversaw the largest mass execution of Native Americans in our nation’s history. All of this is a matter of public record and failing to acknowledge it does you and your administration no credit.

Your failure to note any of this during your speech was a choice that speaks to your conception of who counts as an American and whose stories you believe are worth telling. This brings us to the moment on July 4<sup>th</sup> when you announced your intent to create a Garden of American Heroes, as described in your July 3<sup>rd</sup> Executive Order entitled *Executive Order on Building and Rebuilding Monuments to American Heroes*.<sup>1</sup> As you envision it, this Garden would celebrate the lives of “historically significant Americans” who had a “substantive effect on American history.” Unfortunately, your rhetoric in office has shown that your sense of history does not reckon with complications and failures, and we believe that such a monument as you have conceived it would badly distort public awareness of our nation’s history. While you may choose to sanitize that history for political reasons, Congress will not spend public money to help you tell a fairy tale.

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<sup>1</sup> Exec. Order on Building and Rebuilding Monuments to Americans Heroes (2020) Available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-building-rebuilding-monuments-american-heroes/>

Judging by your statements, you seek to build a monument to people you consider unblemished heroes, nearly all of whom are white and male. In recent weeks you have gone so far as to emphasize your unwavering support for statues and monuments representing Confederate traitors to our Union, which were erected in an effort to intimidate Americans of color all the way from the Reconstruction Era to the present day. We must emphasize that while slave-owning traitors may fit your conception of American heroism more comfortably than any Native Americans or Latino Americans, both groups entirely left off your list of proposed “heroes,” there is little public support for your position. While it was a welcome surprise to see no Confederate generals on your proposed list of American heroes, Congress will not pay for any monument to your personal, very limited conception of who counts as an important American.

The United States is an exceptional nation that has always promised unique freedoms and opportunities, regardless of one’s origins or place of birth. We cannot live up to that promise if we cannot honestly confront our own history. Our past is not one of unmitigated success – it is rife with inhumanity, racism and needless suffering. Reckoning with that fact is often difficult and painful, and none of us can claim to do so perfectly. But by examining our failures and shortcomings as a nation and learning from them, we help to ensure a more just and equitable future for all Americans. That process is necessary, and we can no longer shy away from it.

We fully support the idea of a greater recognition of America’s past, either through the creation of a statue garden or other means, but any such process should be public, transparent, and informed by scholarship, not dictated by your personal interests. A garden of heroes should not include perpetrators of genocide or aggressors against Native People, nor should it skew so heavily toward the recent past of the conservative movement. Above all, the figures portrayed there should not be selected by a single president based on idiosyncratic notions of historical value.


If your interest in honoring our nation’s history is genuine, there are numerous existing programs you might start with before trying to execute this shoddily planned proposal. You might support the National Park Service in their work to preserve and interpret our nation’s history at 419 sites across the country. Under your administration the Park Service has faced constant budget cuts, staff reductions, hiring freezes, and efforts to limit their work. You might support full funding for the Historic Preservation Fund. Instead, your budget requests routinely ask for this important program to be slashed, limiting funding for Tribal and State Preservation Programs and grants to Historically Black Colleges and Universities. You could support the existing work done by the Task Force agencies, supporting robust funding for the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, or the Smithsonian Museums. Yet, these important programs have been consistently on the chopping block, making their work to tell a historically accurate and inclusive American story increasingly difficult. There are many better ways to honor our history, but your budgets routinely suggest they are not your priorities.

As your Executive Order rightly noted, our monuments and honors belong to past and future generations. They are part of what makes the United States of America the remarkable place that it is. Any national memorial on the scale of what you describe should be designed with the input of Congress, ideally with the benefit of the insight and support of historians, academic institutions, and the American public. This should occur through the open legislative process, not a hastily written decree.

Among the many obvious shortcomings of your proposal, we are concerned that your Executive Order fails to identify a clear funding stream and relies on the Department of the Interior to divert funds appropriated for other purposes. The Order does not point to any clear authority on the part of any agency in the Task Force to designate, design, or create statutes or monuments. It fails to clearly explain how choosing a location for such a memorial will conform with Congress' clearly established constitutional authority to oversee federal lands and national memorials. Rather than sending a carefully crafted legislative proposal to Congress with clear steps to achieve your goal, you issued an Executive Order that puts an unbearable onus on Task Force agencies to establish a "garden" of dubious legal character. For all your fearmongering about unelected bureaucrats, your recent order rests on the idea that they should wield considerable power that they do not, at present, actually have.

This rushed effort does not honor America's past. It perpetuates a problematic cult of hero worship, untethered from reality and ignorant of clear legal requirements. You should submit the report of the Task Force to this Committee and repeal or amend your Order to more accurately reflect legal reality and historical accuracy. A good first step might be to consult professional historians – the executive branch employs several of distinction – to ensure that your efforts to honor our past do not commit further violence to the cause of historic understanding.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chair  
House Committee on Natural Resources



Debra Haaland  
Vice Chair  
House Committee on Natural Resources