



January 21, 2020

The Honorable David S. Ferriero
Archivist of the United States
700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20408

Dear Mr. Ferriero,

We are writing concerning the controversy over the use of an altered photo of the 2017 Women's March on Washington in NARA's new exhibition, "Rightfully Hers: American Women and the Vote." While the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is to be commended for admitting and quickly rectifying this mistake, questions remain as to how this could have occurred in the first place.

As you know, the National Coalition for History (NCH) represents many diverse constituencies besides historians. NCH comprises archivists, federal historians, genealogists, researchers, teachers, students, documentary editors, political scientists, museum professionals and other stakeholders. This incident, however, transcends the diverse interests of those that we represent. The possibility that those charged with preserving and maintaining the historic record of our nation can alter a representation of the past, such as a photograph, diminishes trust in both the National Archives and the federal government. You have a duty to preserve and maintain the public record for all citizens. Every record and photograph NARA holds, no matter how inconsequential it might seem, is a piece of the mosaic that tells our nation's story.

Our nation's history is by its nature messy. Our democracy has survived 240 years of heated debate, violence and even war in trying to create "a more perfect union." Trying to make history more palatable is unnecessary and neither your role nor that of our government. In seeking to avoid controversy by being cautious, NARA created it.

To that end, we urge you to review NARA policies and procedures that allowed this incident to occur. More importantly, you need to take the necessary steps to ensure this does not reoccur.

Archivists are professionals who are bound by a *Code of Ethics* that includes the following statement about authenticity: "Archivists insure the authenticity and continuing usability of records in their care. They document and protect the unique archival characteristics of records and strive to protect the records' intellectual and physical integrity from tampering or corruption. Archivists may not willfully alter, manipulate or destroy data or records to conceal facts or distort evidence. They thoroughly document any actions that may cause changes to the records in their care or raise questions about the records' authenticity." We believe that this statement covers treatment of documents from other sources or repositories approved for use by NARA, such as the photographs in question, as well as those materials in NARA's holdings.

The doctored photograph not only violate the archivists' responsibility to be objective (and to follow professional values and best practices), but this alteration is fraudulent and deceptive. Rare among government agencies, NARA has long maintained a reputation as a non-partisan and neutral steward of our historic record. The historical and archival communities that NCH represents stand ready to assist you in the effort to reestablish the public trust in the National Archives.

Sincerely,



Alan Kraut, Ph.D
President



Lee White
Executive Director