

*CBS Mornings*

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[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: What to Watch; Trump's Smithsonian Criticism]

VLADIMIR DUTHIERS: Alright, let's kick this off this morning. I want to start by talking about something President Trump is doing and that's getting a lot of attention. On social media yesterday, he sounded off on the Smithsonian Institution, which runs some of the biggest museums in D.C. We've all been to them.

GAYLE KING: Yes.

DUTHIERS: In a post, he said their portrayal of America focuses on, "how horrible our country is. How bad slavery was. Nothing about brightness. Nothing about future." His administration is conducting a review to ensure the Smithsonian is "celebrating American exceptionalism." So, this debate about how we talk about history is playing out in schools and statehouses all across the country. American exceptionalism means something different to different people. I — when I was overseas, you know I've lived abroad in Europe and Africa and Asia and I was frequently asked to defend or comment on American exceptionalism and I would always say that what sets the United States apart from other countries is not our perfection, but it's our relentless drive to reckon is imperfection. And you know, scholars of American democracy have talked about this, that the uniqueness of America is the way we continually interrogate our own history. We celebrate achievements like the Declaration of Independence, the civil rights movement, while we openly wrestle with slavery, segregation, and inequality. Alexis de Tocqueville, in 200 years ago, he talked about this. He said what makes America great is her capacity for self-correction. So, these were forms that we have had over the course of our history. Judicial review, reform movements, protests, actually enable the change. They are a force and mechanism for progress in this country.

KING: But it's all part of our history. That's what —

DUTHIERS: That's right.

KING: I think is so great about when you — when go to the Smithsonian and see these museums, you get to see our complete history, which I think is very important for everybody.

DUTHIERS: Exactly.

TONY DOKOUPIL: But I think even striving —

KING: — which even makes us stronger, by the way, what we've been through and how we've come out on the other side.

DUTHIERS: It's not — what makes America great doesn't come from claiming flawless origins.

DOKOUPIL: No, no!

DUTHIERS: We don't have flawless — so what comes from it is the opposite — the courage to expose our flaws and argue over them in the open as we have done in our history and that reckoning and striving is what makes the U.S. not just a powerful nation but a great one.

DOKOUPIL: Absolutely. American history shouldn't be a thing of reverence. The country is not above critique, but we shouldn't look at our history with contempt.

DUTHIERS: Mmmm.

DOKOUPIL: And I think there is some room for a correction back toward the middle. And, in fact, you know, Lonnie Bunch, who heads the Smithsonian —

KING: He's done an amazing job — an amazing job.

DOKOUPIL: — and Donald Trump and his administration — in a letter there — they are saying quite the same things. The mission of the Smithsonian is to forge a shared history, a shared future, not just context but hope to lead the country and communities together. That's essentially the same language that Donald Trump is offering here and I do think there's room to say in American history what you are describing — that process of a journey toward greatness is very real and we all have something to be incredibly proud of. And you talk about overseas, I think the world and its people if you ask — if you ask someone is the world and its people better off because of the existence of America and its people? To me, the answer is unquestionably yes. And I think people walking in the Smithsonian — when they walk out of it, they should get some sense of that.

DUTHIERS: We shouldn't whitewash who we are —

KING: Exactly.

DUTHIERS: — and where we came from.

DOKOUPIL: I don't think you have to.

DUTHIERS: Right.

DOKOUPIL: I don't think you have to. I think —

DUTHIERS: And — and so, that conversation needs to continuously happen so that we continuously get better.

DOKOUPIL: Yeah. I don't think it —

KING: I don't think they want to go through the exhibits and decide — I hope that they will take historians and experts who know exactly what it means because I don't think there's been an overcorrection. I think it's just putting out the history that — that's all part of who we are.

DOKOUPIL: This conversation is so healthy and so good and we're having it on the 250th anniversary of the country. It's wonderful. It's wonderful.