

Making History Matter: From Abstract Truth to Critical Engagement

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 Reframing
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History is currently the subject of high-profile political debate.

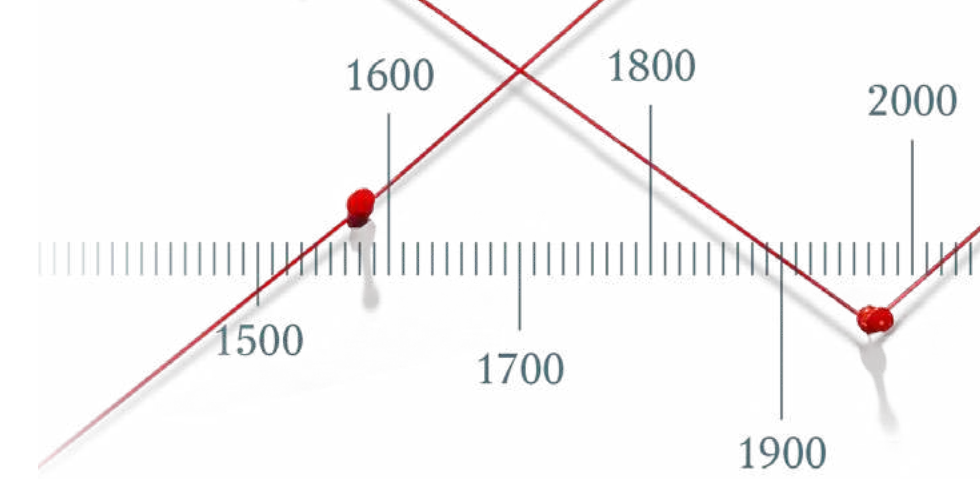
With the New York Times’ “1619 Project,” and more recently debates over “critical race theory,” history has become a lightning rod of political discourse. While scholars and advocates are making concerted efforts to make sense of and address our country’s past injustices¹, a well-organized conservative backlash against talking about these injustices is taking hold.² These conflicts have far-reaching policy implications, as the current attempt to legislate against teaching about systemic racism demonstrates.³

Debates around history are bound up with ideas about race and racism, justice, American identity, and more. They are also channeled by widely shared assumptions about history itself—what it is, how we come to understand the past, and why this is important. These debates often run aground on abstract notions of history as discovering a singular “truth” about the past that obstruct constructive engagement with history, make people suspicious of historians’ evolving work as unreliable and biased, and make it hard for people to see what inclusive history looks like. And while the ubiquity of these debates in the news and on social media can create the impression that everyone is concerned about history, the reality is that people tend to think of history as a hobby for enthusiasts rather than as something they should be concerned about.

We need a more productive public conversation about history, one that builds understanding of what inclusive history looks like—especially the histories of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and other historically oppressed groups—and of its

importance for all of us. In this report, we outline a framing strategy to get there. By adopting a critical engagement frame, communicators can overcome the polarized discussions surrounding the search for a singular “truth” of American history and engage the public in a more productive conversation about the past and the role of history in American society.

This framing strategy is the result of a two-year, deep-dive research project undertaken in partnership with the American Association for State and Local History, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization of American Historians and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In this report, we focus on the framing strategy, which includes a set of specific recommendations for communicators. This report is accompanied by an earlier report summarizing the public’s existing understandings of history,⁴ as well as a supplement that summarizes the research methods used in the project and describes the evidence behind each of the recommendations presented here.



The Framing Strategy: From Abstract Truth to Critical Engagement

The public widely assumes that making sense of the past is about finding the one objective “truth” about what happened by recording and documenting “just the facts.” This way of thinking makes it hard for people to make sense of critical debate about what happened in the past and what it means. Because what happened is assumed to be simple and straightforward, differing interpretations of the past are assumed to be illegitimate—a sign that someone is inserting subjective opinion and bias into the conversation. This thinking contributes to the currently polarized cultural climate in which ideological camps argue about who has the most authority over the “truth” about the past.

To make their way out of this endless debate, communicators need to shift the conversation from being about abstract truth to critical engagement. Adopting a critical engagement frame involves three big moves:

1. **From truth to critical thinking.** The strategy centers the conversation on critical thinking, which opens a space for people to see the complexity of historical interpretation and the importance of considering different perspectives and accounts.

2. **From abstract debate to concrete engagement.** The strategy anchors thinking about history in a grounded understanding of historical practice—what interpretation involves—and in concrete examples of inclusive history. Engaging people in concrete and grounded ways keeps them from getting stuck in abstract ideological conflicts.
3. **From winning the debate to progress toward justice.** By shifting the focus from who is right to how learning from the past can move us toward justice, the strategy can help people understand why history should matter to them.

Taken together, these framing moves add up to a big frame shift that builds understanding of what historical interpretation involves, why history matters to society, and why a more inclusive, shared history of the United States is needed.

Below, we outline specific recommendations that communicators can follow to put the critical engagement frame into practice. These recommendations explain what it means to place critical thinking at the center of how we talk about history and show how a specific metaphor and value and certain types of examples can be used to frame history effectively.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Talk about critical thinking to shift perceptions about what history involves.

How the public currently thinks

The public assumes that there is one “truth” to be found about the past. This truth is unchanging and exists “out there” in the world. This way of thinking makes it difficult for people to recognize the complexity of historical interpretation and how understandings of history necessarily do and should evolve and change over time. This way of thinking about history leads people to assume that new interpretations of history or differing opinions are nothing more than unreliable, subjective bias. Since historical truth is thought to be singular and static, once that truth has been “found,” it shouldn’t, people widely assume, need to be reconsidered or updated.

What to do

Talk about how the practice of history involves critical thinking and how learning history fosters critical thinking skills. Describe in detail how making sense of the past helps develop critical thinking skills, such as the ability to analyze and evaluate evidence and diverse accounts about the past.

This framing strategy is a productive middle path between focusing on “historical truth” or describing history as simply a set of “stories” that we tell. As we discuss above, talking about truth makes it hard for people to recognize the complexity of historical interpretation. When discussions center on “truth,” they become mired in an unresolvable debate over what’s objectively “true” or “false.” Yet simply dropping references to truth or validity and elevating the idea of history as “stories” is likely to cue the same worry, that those who tell these stories are telling biased versions

of the past that are nothing more than opinions. The idea of “critical thinking” is a way of talking about validity and evaluation of evidence that allows a place for interpretation without triggering worries about unfettered subjectivity.

How to do it

Emphasize the role of critical thinking in historical practice. Explain how the practice of history requires using critical thinking to evaluate different sources and perspectives about the past and different understandings of the significance and meaning of events and trends.

Explain how learning history builds critical thinking skills that can be used in other parts of life. This is a productive way to connect the practice of historians to public engagement with history.

Use the idea of critical thinking to anchor talk about the many stories that make up history. While it is vital to emphasize that history involves many different stories and perspectives, it is important to ground discussions of different perspectives in the idea of critical evaluation of evidence to avoid the sense that these stories are nothing more than personal opinions or perspectives.

Avoid talking about historical “truth.” This will cue unproductive thinking about truth versus bias and will lead people to assume that interpretations about the past—including those made by historians—are inherently “biased.”

What it looks like

Instead of...

Studying history is more complicated than figuring out “what really happened.” It involves piecing together many different stories to learn about the past. Each of these stories might have something different to say, and sometimes the stories might conflict. By studying history, we make sense of the past by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting these stories.

Try...

Studying history means thinking critically about the world and our place in it. It involves evaluating many different perspectives and figuring out how past events affect our lives today. By studying history, we build critical thinking skills that apply to all aspects of our lives—and we develop a deeper understanding of our society and how it came to be.

What this accomplishes and why it works

Foregrounding critical thinking as the core of history helps people to better understand what historical interpretation means, builds appreciation for its importance to individuals and to society, and generates public support for devoting greater resources to the field of history.⁵ This strategy is more effective than other frames used to describe the benefits of history, such as emphasizing the importance of history for

democratic participation or talking about how history can reduce prejudice in society.

Focusing on critical thinking helps people recognize the value of grappling with different perspectives and understandings of the past. It helps people see that history can be rigorous and grounded while admitting discussion of different ideas and reconsideration of old understandings. In other words, it provides a productive way of thinking about the validity of evidence-based interpretation that avoids cuing and reinforcing people’s unproductive assumptions about a singular historical “truth” that must simply be found and reported.

In addition, by focusing attention on the tangible skills that people gain when they learn history, this frame helps people get past the idea that history is just a hobby or vocation for particular people and instead helps them see it as something that matters to all of us. The frame enables communicators to connect the practice of history to what people gain by learning history as historians engage in critical thinking and anyone who learns history develops critical thinking skills. We suspect that this is one of the reasons why this strategy is more effective than others—it helps people recognize the links between historical practice and learning.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Compare historical interpretation to detective work to deepen understanding of historical practice.



How the public currently thinks

People generally don't have a clear sense of what historians do or what the process of historical interpretation involves. People think of historians as "journalists of the past" who document and report "just the facts" and describe events exactly "as they happened."⁶ This idea leads the public to focus on eyewitness accounts of past events as the main source of evidence and makes it hard for people to understand the ways historians use different types of historical sources and analyses and process the evidence through discussions to build academic consensus. The belief that the past can be easily and straightforwardly documented and reported on is connected to the public's belief that "one truth" about the past is out there waiting to be found.

While people tend to model historical inquiry on journalism, which they see as straightforwardly reporting on "just the facts," there is another—if less prevalent—understanding available to most people. In this alternative way of thinking, historical interpretation requires examining multiple perspectives to find out what happened in the past. This way of thinking better aligns with the actual process of historical interpretation. Effective framing pulls forward this way of thinking while pushing to the background the idea that history simply involves documenting self-explanatory facts.

What to do

Explain the process of historical inquiry and interpretation using the metaphor of detective work. Use the metaphor to explain the following key aspects of historical interpretation:

1. **The range of sources.** Historical investigation, like detective work, integrates information from a wide range of sources.
2. **The range of methods.** Just as detective work uses different tools and techniques to understand what happened in the past, historical inquiry uses a wide range of methods.
3. **The ability to update understandings.** Both detective work and historical interpretation involve the accumulation of new evidence and perspectives that lead to new, updated understandings of what happened.

How to do it

Focus on the process of historical interpretation rather than the goal of interpretation. The idea of "solving a case" can cue unproductive thinking about "finding the truth" about the past.

Talk about the practice, not the person. Compare historical investigation to detective work, not historians to detectives. Talking about detectives can activate associations with police that aren't productive.

Use the metaphor to explain how historical interpretation engages with multiple perspectives and sources of evidence. People tend to think that what happened in the past is plain to discern and can be gleaned from eyewitness accounts. Talking about how history, like detective work, requires grappling with different accounts and sources can counter these inaccurate understandings.

Emphasize that historical interpretation, like good detective work, is an ongoing process that requires updating based on the latest evidence. The metaphor can help people recognize that new interpretations can be more valid than old ways of understanding the past.

What it looks like

Instead of...

What do historians do?

Historians are like detectives, trying to figure out the truth. Both historians and detectives gather evidence from the "scene of the crime" to understand what really happened. For example, historians might rely on eyewitness accounts and gather evidence like historical letters and other written accounts. All of this evidence helps to "solve the case" and figure out the truth of what happened in the past.

Try...

What do historians do?

Historians' work to investigate the past is a lot like detective work. They gather different accounts of the past, each offering different perspectives, to get as complete an understanding as possible. Historians use many kinds of evidence, such as written records, objects, interviews, and more—just like how many kinds of evidence are used when doing detective work. They analyze this evidence using various tools and methods to see how the "clues" all fit together. Then, when new evidence comes to light, they use it to update our understanding of the past.

What this accomplishes and why it works

Metaphors provide a powerful way to shift people's understanding of how things work. Comparing a less-understood concept with something more familiar gives people a new way of understanding it. Our research found that the metaphor of detective work gives people readily accessible language for talking about the iterative, sometimes messy process of investigation and interpretation (see appendix for more information). People already recognize that detective work requires multiple sources, consideration of conflicting accounts, and updating of views, so when they map historical inquiry onto detective work, they come away with a more accurate understanding of how history works and what it involves.

The detective metaphor is highly effective in building a more accurate understanding of the process of historical interpretation. The metaphor moves people beyond the idea that history is about recording facts and dates and helps them recognize that historical interpretation requires critical engagement with different sources of evidence, conflicting accounts, and different perspectives. The metaphor also builds support for policies that would promote more inclusive, equity-based engagement with history, such as including more diverse accounts of the past from BIPOC and women in history textbooks and establishing a government commission to make sense of and reckon with the country's past injustices, especially racial injustices.

The metaphor's ability to help people recognize the need to consider multiple perspectives accounts for its success in building support for a more inclusive approach to history. Historians, like detectives, must consider many different perspectives to understand what happened; an incomplete investigation in either case can't provide a full picture.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

Emphasize how history helps us make progress toward a just world to increase recognition of history's importance.

How the public currently thinks

People recognize that learning about the past can potentially help society learn from past mistakes, and they view societal progress as an empirical process of learning from past mistakes through trial and error.⁷ Members of the public widely recognize that learning from the past is necessary to improve as a society. This is a productive starting point for deepening appreciation for history's importance. That said, what it means for society to learn from its mistakes and “move forward” varies for people and is inseparable from their diagnosis of society today. For example, people who think we have achieved racial equality assume we have already learned from and moved past racial injustice (if they believed it existed in the first place), while others recognize that taking the past seriously deepens our understanding of what we must change as a society to achieve racial justice. Moreover, the commonly used language that history helps us learn from past “mistakes” can downplay the painful past injustices of slavery and genocide that continue to inform our society today and that must be addressed in order for us to move forward.

In addition, while people recognize the need for society to learn from its past mistakes, people are sometimes fatalistic about the possibility of this happening. At times, people assume that history is doomed to repeat itself. When people think this way, they see less value in engaging with history because doing so is unlikely to make a practical difference for the future.

What to do

Make the case that history is essential for us to make progress as a country. Use the value to explicitly invoke the idea of learning from the past—from both what went right and what went wrong.

Because, as we discuss above, progress means different things to different people, it's important for communicators to be clear and specific about the goal of progress. Specifically, communicators should explicitly say, using values language, or implicitly show, using examples, that history can help us move toward justice. For example, in the context of a conversation about racism, communicators might explicitly talk about how engaging with history can help us make progress toward racial justice. Alternatively, the same idea can be communicated by providing examples of how engaging with history could help us redress the legacy of racism.

Our research suggests that the language of “justice” is not as polarizing as some might suspect—it doesn't automatically cue partisan politics or close off conversations with people on the right end of the political spectrum. We explored combining the language of “justice” with the language of “progress” in focus groups conducted in summer 2021, at the height of the debate around “critical race theory,” and found that participants did not treat the language of “justice” as ideological or partisan terminology. In other words, while terms like “social justice” have become associated

with the left in some corners of public discourse, our research suggests that the broader language of “justice” is widely usable and doesn't elicit a charged response.

That said, it is worth emphasizing that the key is communicating the concept of justice, not necessarily using the term. If communicators choose to, they can avoid the specific terminology of “justice” and get the idea across with examples of how history can help us grapple with past wrongs and critically examine the past so that we can address those wrongs and do better going forward. Communicating this idea—either explicitly or implicitly—is important to avoid conveying a triumphalist narrative of American infallibility.

How to do it

Connect progress to the idea of learning from past wrongs. This idea is already available to people and can be invoked to orient people toward the importance of critical engagement with the past.

Make clear, by showing or telling, that the goal of progress is justice. Communicators can either explicitly say that history can help us make progress toward realizing justice or, if they would rather not use this language explicitly, provide examples that show how engagement with history helps us grapple with wrongs and do better.

What it looks like

Instead of...

We believe history is worth supporting, preserving, and disseminating. Historical knowledge doesn't just honor the past, it helps us understand our present. At the Historical Society, we are committed to studying history that is relevant to our lives today.

Try...

We believe history can—and should—be used to move our country forward. Making progress means studying the past, grappling with where we've gone wrong, and learning from what we've done right. At the Historical Society, we are committed to pursuing a more just future through engaging with the past.

—or—

We believe history can—and should—be used to move us forward. At the Historical Society, we believe in providing people with opportunities to confront the painful legacy of racism, from highlighting the experiences of Chinese railroad workers to telling the often-untold story of slavery in our state. Through history, we can better understand where we have been, where we are now, and how we can do better.

What this accomplishes and why it works

This value increases people's sense that history matters for society. It also builds support for dedicating more resources—including public resources—to engage the public in historical learning (for example, through funding of museums and historical sites and funding for scholarships in history).

The value of progress, when appropriately grounded and specified, cues the productive idea that we must learn from the past—from both what we did right and what we did wrong. Connecting progress and justice, using values language or examples, orients people toward a more inclusive vision of history while boosting recognition that history matters to all of us—that it is more than just a hobby for history buffs.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Use concrete, location-specific, solutions-focused examples to build support for inclusive history.

How the public currently thinks

In our research, we found that many participants—particularly those from dominant groups (for example, white people and men)—tended to treat historical narratives that center white men as the “neutral,” depoliticized American history that should be taught in schools (for example, learning about the Founding Fathers). In this view, narratives about historically oppressed groups such as BIPOC and women are seen as “extras” that are optional and unnecessary for everyone to learn. While interview participants from historically oppressed groups typically recognized this as an unfair double standard, they expressed doubt whether this could change in a meaningful way in our school systems or society.

While people often assume that dominant groups should or inevitably will be the focus of history, at times people are able to recognize that examining the past from the perspectives of different groups makes the historical record more accurate. Relatedly, some members of the public, particularly BIPOC, recognize that the exclusion of oppressed groups from history is a way of perpetuating dominant groups’ power.⁸

It is worth noting that since we began this project in 2019, we have seen an important shift in people’s thinking about past injustices. In our research, we have seen a rise in the recognition that our country needs

to talk about painful or troubling things that have happened in the past. In 2019, many of our research participants, particularly white people, thought about past injustices such as slavery or genocide as too “unpleasant” to talk about and unnecessary to engage with because they are “in the past” and therefore irrelevant to today’s society. We also found that participants of color were hesitant to bring up these topics because they made “other people” (that is, white people) uncomfortable.⁹ Our subsequent research in 2020–2021 has found that members of the public are more commonly critiquing this “ignorance is bliss” way of thinking. Interview participants from diverse backgrounds, including some white people, were more likely to recognize that past injustices need to be talked about and remembered in order to make sense of current problems in society, such as racial inequality and police brutality. Other FrameWorks research conducted over the past year has found an increase in systemic thinking about racism since the uprisings of summer 2020, and while these trends appear to be more prevalent among younger people and Democrats,¹⁰ it is notable that people across racial and ethnic backgrounds appear to be recognizing the need to talk about and make sense of society’s past wrongs rather than brushing over them.

What to do

Examples are a powerful strategy for helping people recognize the need to include the perspectives and experiences of historically oppressed groups in our accounts of the past. The right kinds of examples activate the existing recognition that multiple perspectives improve the accuracy of history while also defusing the sources of backlash to inclusive history.

There are three features of examples that make them especially effective:

1. **Specificity.** Examples are more effective if they’re specific. For example, rather than mentioning museums as an important place for inclusive historical learning, invoke specific museums and exhibits and explain how they enable people to engage with multiple accounts of the past and the perspectives of historically oppressed groups.
2. **Connected to place.** Connecting examples to a local context or physical site not only adds to their specificity but also helps people see the value of confronting historical injustices. For example, you might mention the Manzanar National Historic Site when talking about Japanese internment during World War II.
3. **Solutions focus.** Rather than focusing on the problems with current approaches toward history and their failure to be inclusive, you should highlight examples of successful inclusive history—examples that illustrate how we can solve the problem of a lack of inclusive history.

How to do it

Integrate examples with the other recommended frames. When people process examples, there’s a danger they get focused on the details of the cases and lose the forest for the trees. Using the other frames described above to articulate general takeaways about history can help people move from the specific case to the bigger picture.

Go local. Local examples bring inclusive history home and help ward off abstract worries about the “liberal agenda” of distant elites being imposed at home. Using local museums, historical sites, or events to show what it means to engage with different perspectives and sources of history can help people see the value in this approach.



How to talk about “diversity & inclusion”

While people are familiar with the terms “diversity and inclusion,” most members of the general public don’t have a clear sense of what these concepts mean or why they’re relevant to today’s society. The terms simply don’t have the currency with the public that they have with many activists, scholars, and other history and museum professionals. For most people, these terms don’t carry the deeper equity-related meanings they do in the field.

This means that these terms can’t carry too much weight in a message. When using these terms, make sure you’re clearly explaining what they mean and connect them to concrete examples. Concrete, solutions-focused examples are the best way to build an understanding of what it means to include diverse perspectives in history and why this is so important.

What it looks like

Instead of...

Historic sites offer a special opportunity to engage with the past. Too often, though, that past is exclusionary and leaves out the stories of people who were not white and wealthy. The way we interpret history at historical sites needs to change in order to provide the diverse and inclusive history visitors deserve.

Try...

Historic sites offer a special opportunity to encounter the past—especially when they give visitors a chance to grapple with our country's historic injustices. For example, the Whitney Plantation Museum in Edgard, Louisiana, focuses on the history of the enslaved people who were held there. We need more historical sites that tell the stories of people from historically oppressed groups and more opportunities for visitors to confront painful legacies such as slavery. Making progress toward a more just society requires this sort of deep engagement and reckoning with the past.

What this accomplishes and why it works

Specific, solutions-focused examples help people imagine what a shared, inclusive history of the United States looks like in practice and create a sense that this approach to history is truly possible. Focusing examples on how we can do better—on solutions, not just existing problems—helps to overcome fatalism about the possibility of decentering dominant groups in our collective recollection of the past. These examples help people think about what it means to critically engage with the experiences of people who are different from them, which helps build understanding that it is possible to learn about the past from the perspectives of other groups.

Grounding examples in specific places and cases makes it harder for people to deny the value of confronting historical injustices because they are confronted with a particular case from the past and would have to deny the value of learning about that case and the perspectives of particular excluded groups. By connecting inclusive learning to specific sites and places, examples can make it harder for people to escape into general worries about “bias” or national pride.

The debate over “critical race theory”

The recent backlash against “critical race theory” (that is, teaching about systemic racism in schools and universities) is grounded in the assumption that when it comes to history, what matters and counts is the history of white people. This can be seen in arguments that “straight, white people—including children” need to be “protected” from learning about systemic racism in our country's past and present.¹¹ These arguments assume that the perspectives of dominant groups are the ones that matter, and that history that centers the perspectives and experiences of Black and brown people should be treated as peripheral. At most, this is—according to this way of thinking—history that only people of color should learn.

By assuming that white people need not learn about the past from the perspectives of people who aren't like them, this thinking reinforces white supremacist logic. Because dominant groups' perspectives are equated with history itself, the attempt to give the perspectives of historically oppressed groups equal standing with the perspectives of dominant groups is seen as a threat to proper, “objective” history.

While this way of thinking is obviously present in our current discourse, it is important to underline that people generally, across racial and ideological lines, are able to think in more productive ways about the importance of grappling with past injustices. As we note above, people widely recognize that history involves learning from our mistakes so that we can move forward. Providing specific examples of shared, inclusive history that show how particular institutions help us reckon with past injustices activates and expands this way of thinking and pushes into the background the idea that what matters is the history of dominant groups.

In addition, moving away from abstract debate over “the truth” about our history and our country and grounding conversations in specifics and the idea of critical engagement can make it harder for people to challenge the value of inclusive history. Showing people what it looks like in practice to center the perspectives and experiences of historically oppressed groups preempts abstract worries about bias and engages people constructively around the practice and purpose of inclusive history.

In recent focus groups that were specifically focused on the debate around “critical race theory,” which FrameWorks conducted for partners who engage in anti-racist education work, we confirmed that the above framing strategies are productive ways of intervening in this debate.¹² Participants widely agreed that in order to address racism, we must know our past. Clarifying how history can help us grapple with injustice and move beyond it—that is, how history helps us make progress toward justice—proved particularly effective with Republicans. These sessions also confirmed the importance of shifting from talking about “the truth” to talking about critical evaluation of evidence.



Conclusion

History is at the center of our public conversations, but right now these conversations are generating more heat than light. Too frequently they get stuck in abstract debates over truth and worries about “bias,” as misunderstandings of what historical interpretation involves short-circuit hard conversations about confronting past injustices.

The *critical engagement* frame can productively disrupt this cycle. Shifting the conversation away from abstract truth and toward grounded, critical engagement can help us build understanding of historical interpretation and the value of inclusive history. Tapping into the existing recognition that we must learn from the past—what we have done right and wrong—can help people see the need to confront injustice in order to make progress going forward.

Identifying a frame with the potential to change the conversation is a promising start, but this potential will only be realized if we find ways of getting the frame into public discourse. The next step will be to develop a strategy for getting the frame out—through different channels, from different people and organizations—so that, over time, our conversation about history begins to shift in productive ways.

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