

Patriot Acts

| BY JAMES OLIVER HORTON |

OUR NATIONAL UNION HAS ALWAYS BEEN fragile, held together by a belief in the ideals outlined in the Declaration of Independence: individual freedom and the opportunity for a bright future. In an era when patriotism and national security are topics of considerable debate, a true understanding of our nation's past is critical. **IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE PROMISE OF** America, rather than its historical reality, that has inspired people, and it is the precarious state of that promise that underlies much of the current political dialogue. Facing trying times and difficult choices, it is essential that we look to the experience of those for whom the promise has proved elusive: the poor, the oppressed, the newly arrived, women, and people of color. This is one of the most important roles that we, as historians, can play in a democratic society—to remind Americans of their past and the national promise as yet unfulfilled. Many Americans who sacrificed during wars and hard times—even as they and their families faced acts of injustice at the hands of the country they served—did so with faith in the national promise. **IF AMERICA'S PROMISE IS EVER TO BE** fulfilled, the nation must understand the great debt owed to those who, despite oppression, were willing to place their hope in the ideas behind the Declaration of Independence. They are the voiceless people of the American past, their stories untold. As historians, we owe it to them to educate the people, to redirect the society towards greater freedom and increased opportunity. **THE AMERICAN HISTORY TAUGHT IN INSTITUTIONS** of higher learning has changed dramatically since the 1960s. But what about elsewhere—in high schools, museums, and national parks, in the exhibits of thousands of historical societies? How is history retold in film and on TV? **TO MOST PEOPLE,** even decades-old interpretation can seem shocking and new. But there has been a great deal of scholarship in the last few decades on contemporary issues such as race in America, which remains among the nation's most contentious. Teaching history that asks difficult questions can be hazardous to your professional health, but it is essential for citizens of a democratic society. **SLAVERY AND THE CIVIL WAR REMAIN** very delicate subjects. When the superintendent at Gettysburg National Military Park suggested in a public lecture that slavery might have been one important cause of the Civil War, the Southern

Heritage Coalition deluged the Secretary of the Interior with over a thousand postcards calling for the superintendent's immediate removal. Elsewhere, there have been assertions that modern historians have it all wrong, that far from being evil and inhumane, slavery curbed racial animosity and actually fostered affection between the master and the enslaved. **WHAT IS AN ILL-INFORMED PUBLIC** to believe? Three generations of scholarship raise critical questions about slavery, but the public is largely unaware of it. Historians should support their colleagues in government, museums, schools, and historic sites to bring the best recent scholarship to the American people. **MANY VENUES ARE OPEN** to us for this effort. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Department of Education's Teaching

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American History Project, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and others sponsor seminars for history teachers on a broad range of topics. The Organization of American Historians, through its distinguished lecture series, brings the latest scholarship to local libraries and historical societies. OAH members have worked to assist with interpretation in our national parks and with museums like the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. **PRESENTING HISTORY IN A FORM THAT PEOPLE** will accept is a daunting challenge. Yet, it is one that we must undertake as a matter of public service, one that few others can render. Some might call it a matter of patriotism—a commitment to the Declaration's highest ideals and a determination that the American promise will one day become an American reality.

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