

IDEAS

Telling — and defending — the full story of America

Trump and his acolytes demean the last few decades of scholarship in US history. It's actually been a golden age of insight.

By Megan Marshall Updated February 22, 2026, 3:00 a.m.

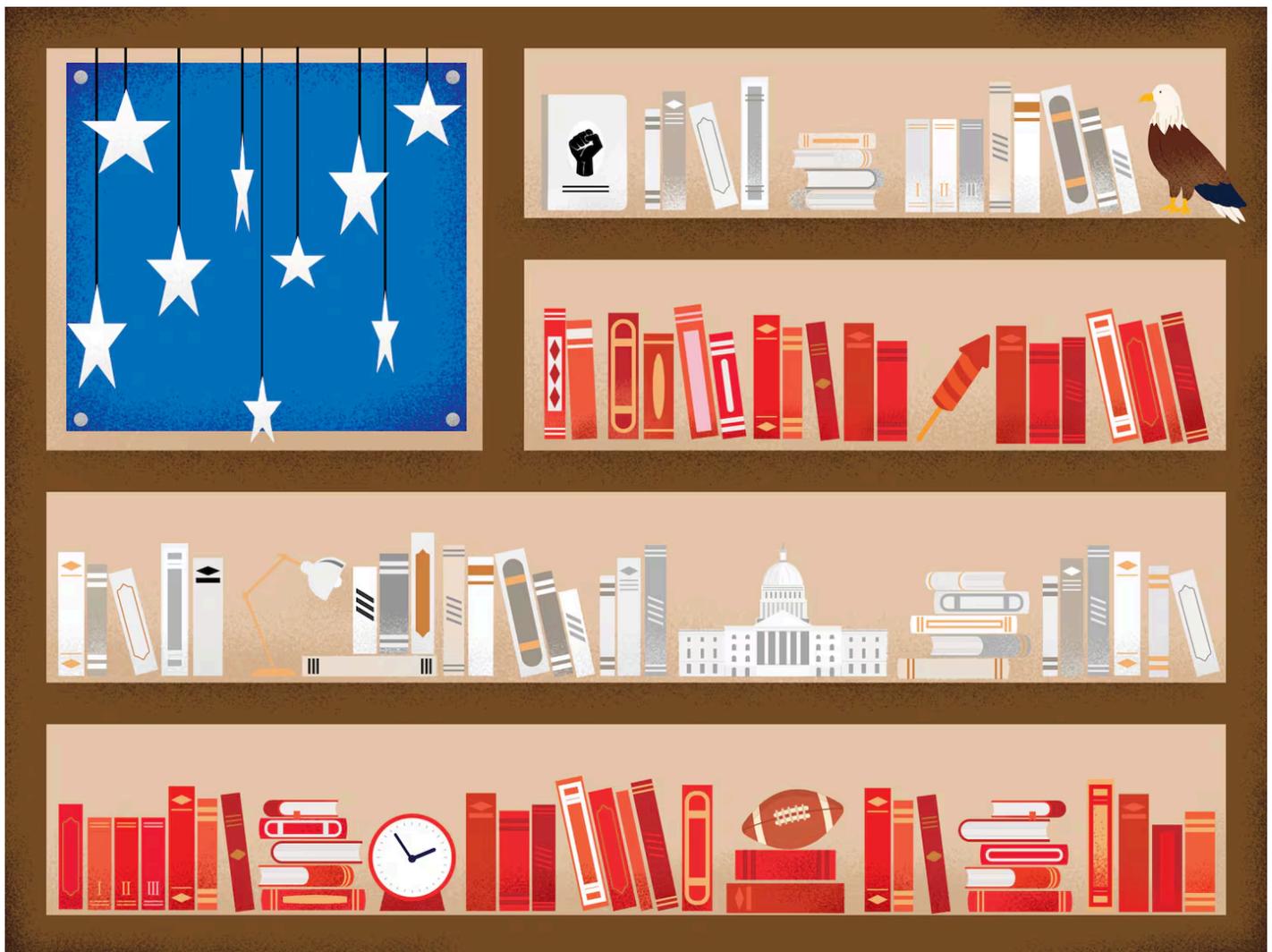


ILLUSTRATION BY LUIS G. RENDON/GLOBE STAFF; ADOBE

Megan Marshall is a past president of the Society of American Historians and a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Her most recent book is “After Lives: On Biography and the Mysteries of the Human Heart.”

So much of the time I’m afraid to find out how far the Trump administration has gone toward its goal of jettisoning the careful work of professional historians in favor of flag-hugging, Bible-thumping pabulum. ([Trump’s Bible](#) may soon be found in every public school classroom in Oklahoma.) I tell myself that carrying on my work as a biographer and doing what I can to draw attention to the important contributions of other historians is the best way to fight back, and fight back the fear.

But the drumbeat of Trump’s America at 250 is hard to ignore. Much of the schedule is set:

May 17: “Day of Prayer” on the [National Mall](#). Trump says he will “rededicate our country as One Nation Under God. We’re not changing that.”

June 14, Flag Day: Trump hosts a “one-of-a-kind” Ultimate Fighting Championship event at the White House.

July 4: A military flyover of the White House, even more “spectacular” than last year’s.

The president who told us the Continental Army “[took over the airports](#)” during the American Revolution doesn’t seem to care much for celebrating the actual events that took place a quarter of a millennium ago.

Who’s taking up the slack? One major player is the [America 250 Civics Education Coalition](#), a consortium of more than 50 right-wing organizations under the leadership of Department of Education Secretary Linda McMahon, the wrestling industry billionaire who shares Trump’s desire to shutter the department, established in 1980 to guarantee an egalitarian curriculum in the post-Jim Crow United States. McMahon and her cohorts from the likes of the Heritage Foundation, the Goldwater Institute, Hillsdale College, and Priests for Life promise 100 “commemorative” events throughout this year, designed to teach American citizens they live in “the most wonderful country on the face of the earth” and to celebrate the nation’s founding principles of “liberty, justice, and self-governance.” (Perhaps I should not have been shocked to find “for all” dropped from the conventional encomium and replaced with “self-governance.” But I was.)

Evangelical Hillsdale College is also the source of a series of 10-minute historical videos titled “The Story of America,” available on [the White House’s America 250 website](#). In the introductory segment, Hillsdale’s president, Larry Arn, tells us ruefully that Donald Trump can’t fairly be compared to founding president George Washington. But Trump is every bit the equal of Abraham Lincoln! Both men pledged to restore the founders’ principles and make America great “again.” Yeah, right.

Arn hands off the microphone to Hillsdale College history professor Wilfred McClay, author of “Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story,” to narrate the remaining episodes. McClay’s book, published by right-wing Encounter Books, is touted by its partisans as “the most cheerful and inspiring history of America written so far this century” and lauded for emphasizing “optimism and achievement” over “fragmentation and oppression.” Needless to say, McClay’s account of the American Revolution has little in common with Ken Burns’s. We don’t learn, for example, about the sainted George Washington’s land grabs in Indian territory during the years leading up to the war, defying peace treaties made by the British and stirring up anti-Crown sentiment among his fellow acquisitive Virginian land- (and slave-) holders.

I forced myself to look into the Trump administration’s plans for America’s 250th because the 200th had been so formative for me. Fifty years ago, the Bicentennial inspired my first historical writing, in the form of song lyrics. I’d dropped out of Bennington College midway through my junior year and moved to Cambridge, where I began to write poetry, supporting myself with a series of odd jobs. My Bennington boyfriend, Steve Riffkin, a jazz musician, followed, and our friend James Levin, an aspiring novelist, joined us for the summer of 1975. The Vietnam War had scarcely ended, the Watergate hearings of 1973 still rang in our heads, and Boston’s busing conflict raged across the Charles River. As 1976 neared we asked ourselves, what’s the cause for celebration? Then, more pointedly, whom should we celebrate?



Steve Riffkin, Megan Marshall, and Jon Hendricks (with his back to the camera) in front of the chorus at a 1976 performance of "Let the Knowing Speak: A Suite for the Bicentennial." COURTESY OF MEGAN MARSHALL

Together we wrote and produced "Let the Knowing Speak: A Suite for the Bicentennial," which premiered at Jordan Hall and Sanders Theatre in November 1975 to enthusiastic audiences and positive reviews in the *Globe* and the *Herald*. My boyfriend had persuaded trombonist Phil Wilson, conductor of New England Conservatory's jazz ensemble, the Uptown Dues Band, to lead the big band accompaniments. We auditioned vocal soloists recommended by Wilson and assembled a volunteer chorus by postering at NEC.

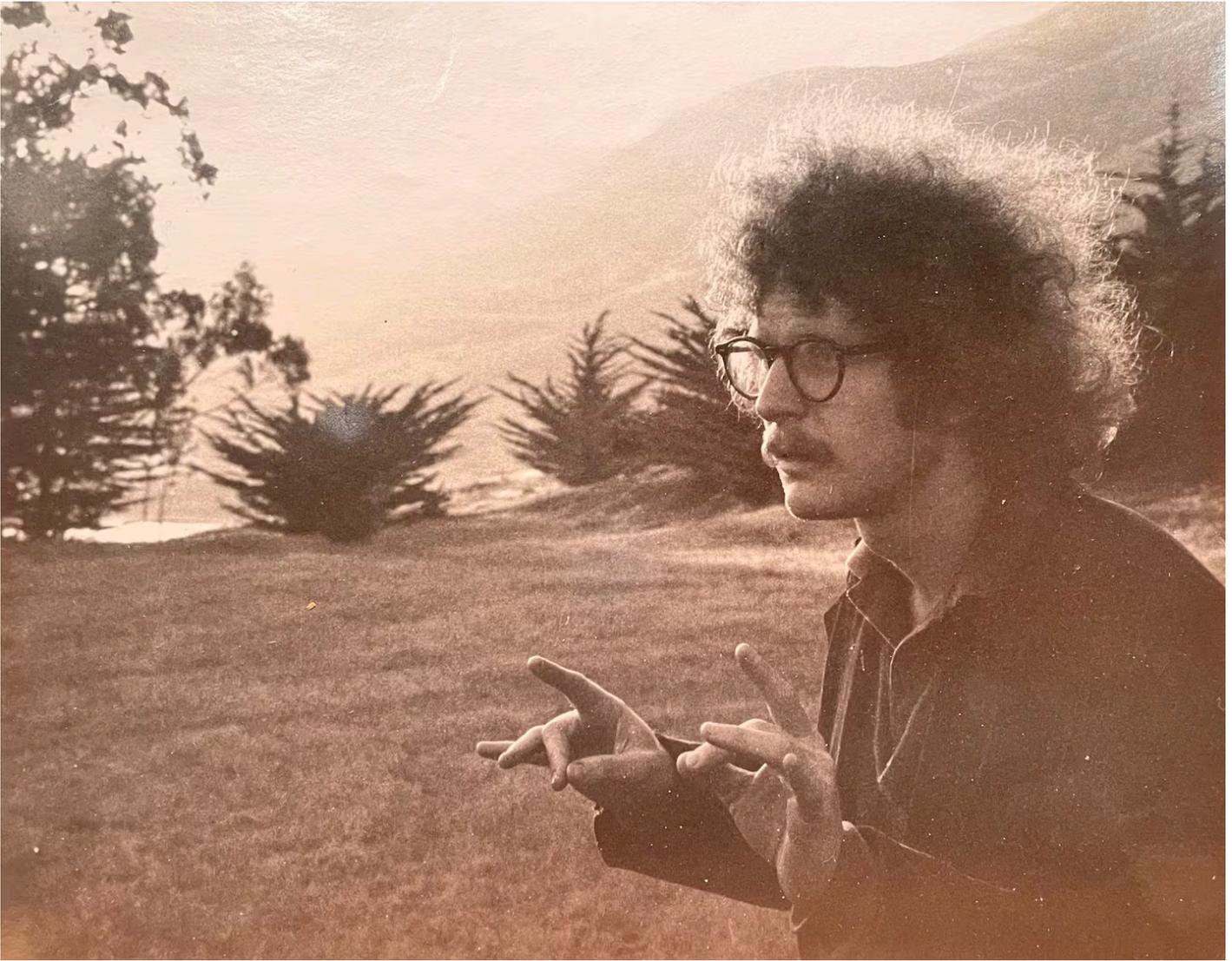
I sang soprano in the chorus, wrote lyrics for half the songs, and came up with the suite's title, borrowed from the opening lines of Harlem Renaissance poet Charles Enoch

Wheeler's "Adjuration": "Let the knowing speak. / Let the oppressed tell of their sorrows, / Of their salt and boundless grief." Each of the suite's 10 songs narrated an episode in American history. In a few cases we mocked the prominent, but mostly we wrote from the perspectives of ordinary people — "for all."

"Let the Knowing Speak: A Suite for the Bicentennial"



Far in advance of "Hamilton," we cast a Black gospel singer, John West, then a keyboard studies grad student at NEC, as a swaggering Thomas Jefferson in a song that revealed the president's covert sexual relationship with his enslaved servant Sally Hemings. "Thomas Jefferson" segued into "The Ballad of Joe Bolin," with West switching roles to play the enslaved Bolin. The character pleaded with First Lady Dolley Madison, Bolin's enslaver, to "think of me" as the White House burned during the War of 1812 and release him from duty rescuing her belongings from the flames. In other songs, women of "The Wild West" and workers on the "Production Line" sang of their plights.



Steve Riffkin at the Marin Headlands in California in 1976. COURTESY OF MEGAN MARSHALL

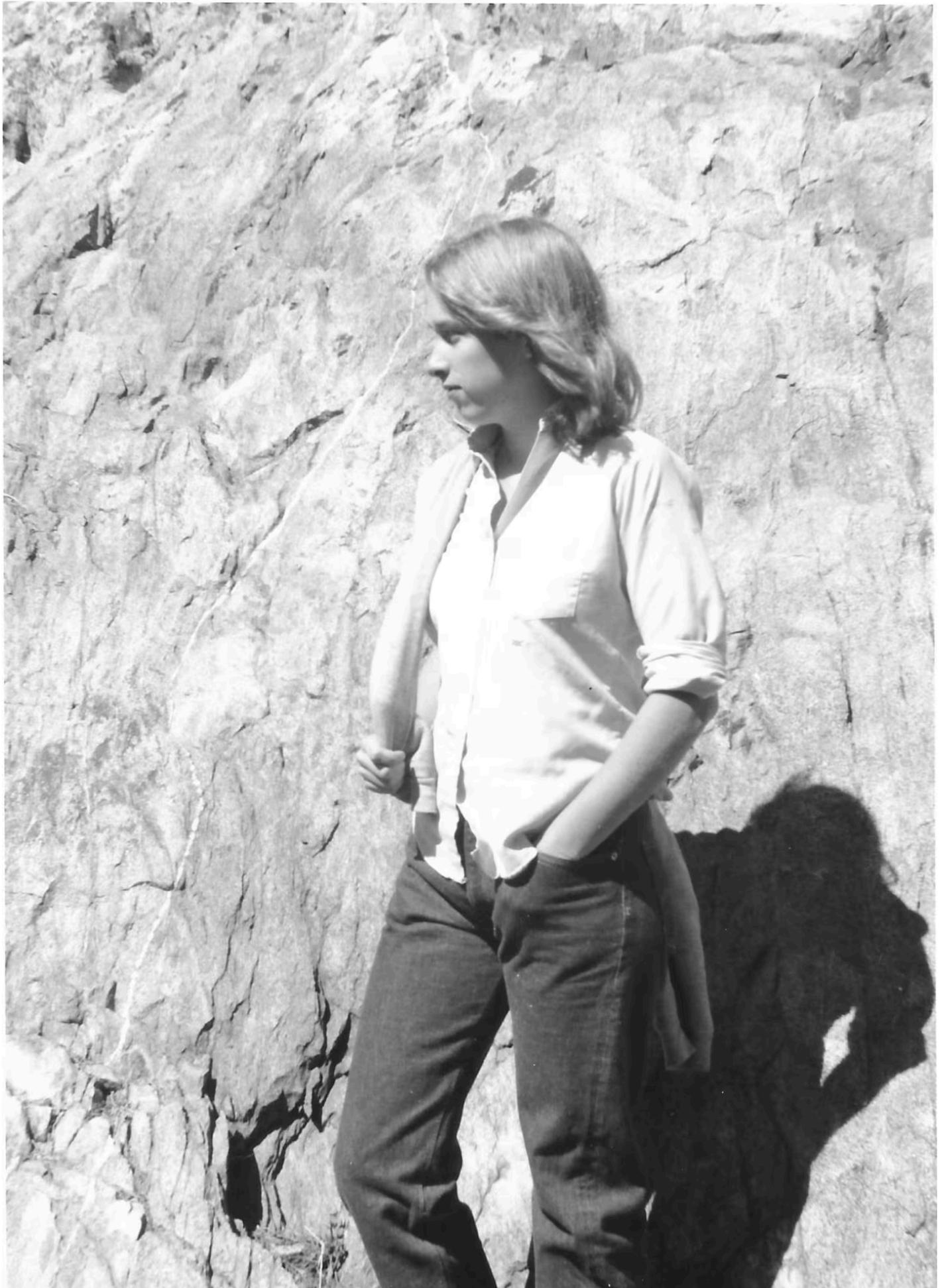
Somehow it all added up to what Joe Kornfeld described in his Herald review as “an ironic and irreverent romp through American history” and Ernie Santosuosso in the Globe as “a concert of lasting consequence.” We pulled it off one more time on the weekend before July 4, 1976, in my home state, California, in an outdoor concert on the Marin Headlands overlooking San Francisco Bay, with celebrated jazz vocalist [Jon Hendricks](#) headlining as Thomas Jefferson/Joe Bolin.



Jon Hendricks at Lincoln Center in New York in 1996. NYT

Neither James Levin nor I can remember now the sources we used in selecting the vignettes and researching the details that filled out our lyrics. Maybe an encyclopedia, he thinks, or fuzzy recollections from AP US history class. We were writing in the spirit of Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States," but the book wasn't published yet. We were at the start of our careers: Levin went on to become a social justice lawyer and founded an experimental theater in his hometown, Cleveland; Riffkin settled in California where he taught music and drama and codirected "Peace Child," a musical exchange program for schoolchildren from the United States and the Soviet Union; I stayed in Massachusetts, started writing biographies of New England women in the mid-1980s, and haven't stopped.

At a press conference announcing her 100 America at 250 commemorative events, Education Secretary McMahon claimed that “over the past 60 to 70 years” American education has been “overtaken by those who teach hatred for America, false revisionist history and division.” I’d call the same period a golden age.





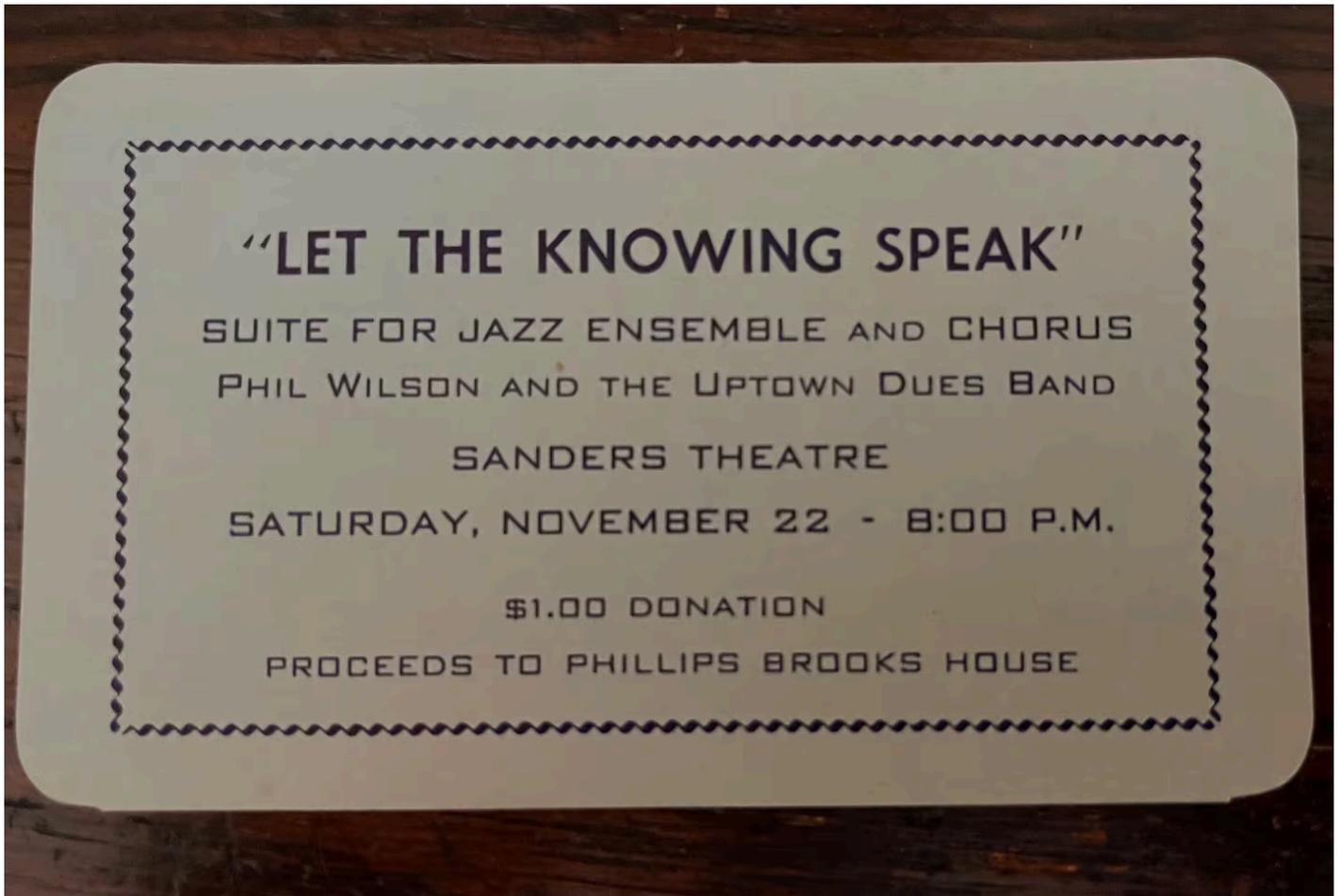
The author in the summer of 1975. COURTESY OF MEGAN MARSHALL

With Jim Crow laws repealed, Black historians could mine archives in the South, many of which had previously excluded them, to expand and revise, not falsely, the centuries-long story of American enslavement. These were the years when, to give just one example, Annette Gordon-Reed pored over the extensive Jefferson family papers to write her Pulitzer Prize-winning “The Hemingses of Monticello,” giving the fullest possible account of the relationship my friends and I had only guessed at in our song.

In the half-century since our seat-of-the-pants historical project, tens of thousands of books and articles have been published, bringing new information to readers and supporting well-researched historical works in the arts like “Hamilton” and the more recent “[Suffs](#).” But as Yale historian David Blight has said of this “explosion” of new research and writing since the Bicentennial: “We were not prepared to defend it.” We never thought we’d have to.

At the time of our jazz suite’s premiere, I was back in school, attending Harvard as a transfer student. I could reserve Sanders Theatre for a Saturday night performance of our “ironic and irreverent romp” at no cost, simply by gaining the sponsorship of Phillips Brooks House, the student-run campus center for community outreach and volunteer activity. There are a thousand reasons this couldn’t happen so easily today, and surely one of them is Trump’s vendetta against Harvard.

Urgent as our mission felt back then, we’re in much greater trouble now. Donald Trump continues to emulate global tyrants like “fantastic” Viktor Orbán of Hungary, who has closed down a university and withdrawn funding for art forms he deems threatening to the state, like modern dance. Orbán has successfully intimidated private donors who would make up the difference, a tactic American philanthropists and nonprofits fear Trump will imitate through targeted IRS audits.



A ticket to a 1975 performance of "Let the Knowing Speak: A Suite for the Bicentennial." MEGAN MARSHALL

Last November, to mark the 50th anniversary of our jazz suite's debut, I attended the premiere of "The Fire Within Her," an original folk opera based on the lives of three American women activists: Anne Hutchinson, Susan B. Anthony, and Betty Friedan. The event, staged in the social hall of First Church Cambridge, was produced by [The Pandora Consort](#), an all-female early music group known for its performances of works by the 12th-century religious mystic Hildegard of Bingen. Pandora founding member Kendra Comstock, who wrote the script, selected songs from contemporary sources, and sang in the program, told me that after Trump's 2025 inauguration, the group had "leaned in" to the 250th. They wanted to celebrate "the cycle of revolution — how someone might work for change her whole life and never see the results but hand off the torch" to the next generation.

Comstock was new to researching American history, but she had more to work with than I had in 1975: the fruits of that explosion of research, much of it currently available on

the internet, from scans of original manuscripts to rare out-of-print books, and recent scholarship allowing her to make sense of both. The new knowledge of the past, and of the past's remnants, is there for us all to learn and take inspiration from, try as Trump and McMahon may to suppress them. "Desire for justice burns from a sacred fire / The sweetest tune sung in the dark / A great blaze born from a little spark," the women sang that November night in Cambridge.

On the national arts scene, some of the most visible signs of protest have been cancellations at the Kennedy Center, the venerable institution Trump has defaced by attaching his name to the building's facade — a move that [could be overturned](#) by Congress or in court. In apparent response, Trump has announced plans to shutter the center for two years of renovation and further rebranding. His closing date? July 4.

In bowing out of a scheduled New Year's Eve performance late last year, the jazz supergroup Cooper declined to state outright its opposition to Trump's takeover but posted this statement on its website: "Jazz was born from struggle and from a relentless insistence on freedom: freedom of thought, of expression, and of the full human voice."

We can hope that the Trump administration's assault on the practice of history, science, medicine, the arts — on truth itself — will in the end have the effect of highlighting the work of truth-tellers in all fields of knowledge and performance, spurring us on. Certainly it gives new meaning to the exhortation that guided my small band of rebels in 1975: *Let the knowing speak*.

This story was updated on Feb. 22 to correct the date of the prayer event on the National Mall.

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