



Archivist of the  
United States

October 1, 2021

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Grassley:

Thank you for your recent letter expressing your concerns over the potentially “harmful content” disclaimer on the web page for the National Archives Catalog. This disclaimer is not meant to apply to our Nation’s foundational documents or to any specific records. It automatically appears as a generic header on every page of the searchable online National Archives Catalog (<https://catalog.archives.gov/>).

In your letter, you asked the following specific questions, which I am happy to answer.

## **1. What was the rationale for making this decision?**

The records in the National Archives span the history of the United States, and it is our charge to preserve and make these records available to the public. Some of the materials presented in the online Catalog show or describe violent or graphic events, or use outdated, racist, biased, and offensive language. We do not alter or censor original documents. Examples of difficult content include photographs of dead soldiers; piles of bodies in concentration camps; victims of lynchings and other violent acts; and autopsies and other medical procedures. There are also textual records that contain language that is disparaging, demeaning, and dehumanizing in the way it refers to African Americans, Native Americans, women, certain immigrant groups, and others. Accordingly, like many of our peer institutions, we have placed an alert in the Catalog so that researchers are not surprised if they encounter such content.

### **1a. Who was involved in the decision to put this warning on the website?**

Following the issuance of the Archivist’s Task Force on Racism’s report, the decision was made by several senior agency officials, with final approval from me.

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**2. Was it considered that putting a "Harmful Language" warning on America's founding documents would be seen as demeaning or undermining them?**

The "potentially harmful content" disclaimer is not meant to apply to any one particular document. It is a header that appears on our online catalog pages and it must be clicked on to read. With over 140 million (and growing) digitized images of original records in the Catalog, it is not feasible to apply disclaimers to specific records. Nor do we believe it is the role of the National Archives to pass value judgments on which records may or may not offend or harm individuals. At the same time, we recognize that some of the records may indeed have a negative impact on viewers because of their graphic nature or problematic language. That is why we chose to place a global disclaimer at the top of the Catalog pages. We are, however, exploring ways to adjust the disclaimer so that it is not wrongly understood to apply to any particular document that is viewed in our online catalog.

**3. Is it true that members of the National Archives' Task Force on Racism recommended ending the use of "charters of freedom" to describe the Founding Documents?**

One of the recommendations of the Task Force is to either retire the expression 'Charters of Freedom' or expand its meaning to encompass additional documents (like the Reconstruction Amendments, 19th Amendment, and Civil and Voting Rights Acts) and display them with equal honor and reverence." We are taking this recommendation under consideration, but have not made any decision.

**3a. Please list any recommendations that have been made by members of the Task Force on Racism. Please list any decisions to implement or reject each of these recommendations.**

A3a: The full report, with its recommendations, is publicly available at:

<https://www.archives.gov/files/news/archivists-task-force-on-racism-report.pdf>

The process of considering the recommendations and what actions we might take to address them remains ongoing. For additional information about the the Task Force and the steps we are taking, please visit

<https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/recommendations-from-internal-task-force-on-racism>

**4. In 2009, shortly after you became the National Archivist, your strategic plan said that "we see the soul of America in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights." Do you still believe this is the case? Do you agree with reported recommendations that the rotunda be "reimagined" to counteract racism?**

I have never wavered in my belief that our foundational documents -- the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights -- reflect the soul of America. I first swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution when I enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served in the Vietnam War, and again when I became the Archivist of the United States. I take enormous pride in knowing that over one million visitors annually stand in line at the National Archives to view the documents that underpin our democracy. In regard to the Task Force's recommendation to make the Archives Rotunda a more inclusive and historically accurate tribute to the Nation's founding, suggestions included updating exhibit labels, planning a new exhibit to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, and commissioning a series of temporary sculptures or art installations for the Rotunda's empty niches. We have begun exploring how to make the exhibit area more inclusive for all of our visitors and I have asked our private non-profit partner, the Foundation for the National Archives, to consider funding this initial work.

To learn more about the alert that appears when using our Catalog, please go to <https://www.archives.gov/research/reparative-description/harmful-content>

For a list of other organizations' statements regarding bias in library and archives descriptions, please go to <https://cataloginglab.org/list-of-statements-on-bias-in-library-and-archives-description>

I hope I have addressed your concerns, and if you have any further questions, please contact NARA's Director of Congressional Affairs, John Hamilton, at [john.hamilton@nara.gov](mailto:john.hamilton@nara.gov).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "David S. Ferriero", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

DAVID S. FERRIERO  
Archivist of the United States