LATER LIFE LEARNING TORONTO

FA26-B361: THE U.S.A.: 250 YEARS LATER

DETAILED SUMMARY — Lecture 1: 1776-2026: THE IMPOSSIBLE COMMEMORATION?

I. Course Introduction

Two hundred and fifty years after its founding, the United States faces a moment of sharp polarization and institutional strain that invites comparison with earlier crises in its history. From the Civil War to Watergate, from racial conflict to cultural battles, American democracy has repeatedly been tested — yet it has also shown a striking capacity for reinvention.

This course explores the tension between fragility and resilience. Beginning with this year's contested anniversary, it traces the republic's origins, constitutional framework, expansion, and deepest contradictions. It will then follow the nation through the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Cold War state, the long struggle for voting rights, and the late-20th-century erosion of public trust.

The course will conclude by examining the pressures facing the American model in a multipolar world and the challenges posed by contemporary populism. **Across ten weeks, we will trace how the United States has continually renegotiated its democratic experiment — and what its 250th year reveals about its future.**

This broader frame prepares the audience for Lecture 1, where the crisis of commemoration becomes the lens through which we first examine the American democratic story.

II. Introduction — Lecture 1

We began our journey through 250 years of American democracy by examining a paradox: the United States, a nation built on civic ideals and revolutionary memory, has reached an anniversary it had a hard time celebrating with unity.

Preparations for the 250th anniversary began a decade ago. In 2016, Congress created a **36-member bipartisan commission**, symbolically led by **George W. Bush and Barack Obama**, to ensure political diversity and prevent partisan appropriation. Its stated purpose was to reflect on the core principles of the Declaration of Independence and to guarantee that the 250th anniversary would be a moment of national unity.

Yet as 2026 approached, the country found itself more polarized than at any point in a generation.

This lecture traced how Americans have commemorated their Revolution across time — from the solemn jubilee of 1826, to the grand expositions of 1876 and 1926, to the contested bicentennial of 1976, when women, African Americans, and Indigenous peoples insisted on being written back into the national story.

We then turned to 2026, when Donald Trump transformed the celebrations into a personal spectacle: triumphal arches, military parades, and a sanitized narrative that erased decades of inclusive historical work. The result was a commemoration that revealed not unity, but fracture — a nation unable to agree on the meaning of its own founding.

Question: what happens when a country can no longer commemorate itself? And what does that tell us about the state of American democracy at 250 years?

III. The Impossible Commemoration

The lecture told the story of American commemorations from 1826 to 2026, showing how each anniversary reflects the nation's evolving political identity — and why the 250th anniversary became a moment of crisis.

1. Early Commemorations (1826–1926)

- **1826:** The deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson on July 4 created a mythic aura around the Founders.
- **La Fayette's visit** two years earlier reaffirmed "the right of all men, without exception, to liberty."
- **1876:** The Centennial Exposition celebrated industrial progress but also saw women's rights activism, including Susan B. Anthony's *Declaration of Women's Rights*.
- **African American activism:** The Negro Declaration of Independence signaled African Americans' claim to the national story.
- **1926:** The 250th anniversary repeated the patriotic pageantry of 1876.

2. The Bicentennial (1976)

A turning point. The bicentennial was marked by protest, contestation, and demands for inclusion. The slides showed anti-Nixon protests, anti-corporate demonstrations, and the People's Bicentennial Commission — all challenging sanitized narratives. From this moment onward, the Revolution was no longer the exclusive property of the Founders.

3. Fifty Years Later — A Divided Nation (2026)

Where did the United States stand fifty years later? The answer: deeply polarized.

- The **1619 Project** reframed the national origin story around slavery.
- Donald Trump countered with the **1776 Commission**, promoting "patriotic education."
- Since Trump's return to power, historical sanitization has intensified.
- Historians protested federal censorship, insisting on "honoring the integrity of the historical record."

4. Trump's Vision for the 250th anniversary

How Trump transformed the commemoration into a personal spectacle:

- A massive rally on the Mall
- "The biggest fireworks show in history"
- A triumphal arch "more magnificent and larger than the Arc de Triomphe"
- A redesigned Washington symbolic landscape
- Removal of slavery-related materials at Ford's Theatre
- A sports competition and combat-sports championship at the White House

The result was a blurring of patriotism with presidential self-celebration.

5. Public Reaction — A Nation in Turmoil

The commemorations opened in a climate of tension and distrust:

- **92% of Republican voters** were "very proud to be American."
- Only **36% of Democratic voters** felt the same — the lowest level in 25 years.

On **24 June 2026**, Trump kicked off the festivities at a rally that "closely resembled a campaign event."

The 250th anniversary was no longer a national celebration — it had become a partisan spectacle.

IV. Closing Summary: a Note of Resilience

Despite the tensions surrounding the 250th anniversary, the American story remains one of remarkable reinvention. Every generation has confronted the contradictions of the Revolution — and every generation has expanded the meaning of liberty, citizenship, and belonging.

The protests of 1876, the activism of 1926, the demands for inclusion in 1976, and the debates of 2026 all point to the same truth: **Americans continue to argue about their past because they continue to care about their future.**

The 250th anniversary may have been fraught, but it also revealed a civic energy that refuses to disappear. Historians, educators, activists, and ordinary citizens pushed back against distortion and insisted on a fuller, more honest national narrative.

The impossible commemoration is, in its own way, a sign of democratic vitality. A nation that debates its founding is a nation still engaged in the work of defining itself. And that ongoing struggle — messy, passionate, and often uncomfortable — is part of what has allowed the United States to endure, adapt, and reinvent its democratic experiment for 250 years.