

SMH Council Statement

The Society for Military History is, first and foremost, a wide-ranging group of individuals united by their interest in military history and their fundamental belief that its study is essential for an informed public and a democratic society. In the past few weeks, we have engaged in collective discussions about who we are, the challenges we face, and the kind of society we aspire to be.

These discussions started when several members raised the possibility of the Society relocating the 2022 annual meeting scheduled for Fort Worth, Texas, in response to Texas Senate Bill 8, which bans abortion after six weeks, and other recently passed state laws. That query sparked related questions about whether and when the Society makes public statements on contemporary issues. On September 14, the SMH President, Pete Mansoor, issued a personal statement highlighting existing, Council-approved policy and expressing his viewpoint that it should remain in place. He had notified the Council of his intent and asked for feedback, some of which he incorporated. That letter sparked a public debate about Society governance, transparency, and inclusivity.

On September 21, the Council sent out a follow-up letter with a link to a Google form soliciting anonymous member feedback. As of this writing, the Society has received 287 responses through the Google form and an additional 55 emails sent to the SMH central office. Responses ran the gamut on many topics, revealing strong and fundamental disagreements among our members on many topics. But a clear trend that emerged from member comments was the need for the SMH to engage in reflective conversation at every level about what the Society is and how it can best reflect the needs of its members. The Council welcomes these discussions. Only through self-reflection can we grow, and only through respectful discourse can we further our primary mission.

The Council acknowledges that discussions such as these are never easy. SMH members come from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, and they work in a range of educational settings and public history venues, both military and civilian, within and outside of the United States. Some are drawn to the Society simply because of their interest in the subject. Many of our members are federal employees, while others are active duty or retired military personnel. Some are nearing the end of long careers and others are just embarking on their historical journey. Each of us has deeply held ideological and political beliefs that inform our work, our study, and our perspectives on the present. At times, that diversity makes our discussions difficult, but it also makes our self-reflection essential.

The SMH Council recognizes and values the many questions that members have raised about the upcoming 2022 Annual Meeting, the Society's policy on making public statements, its organizational governance, transparency, and inclusion. We issue this statement following our October 11, 2022, meeting to inform the membership of our decisions, to clarify some questions, and to chart an initial path forward.

After extensive discussion, the Council affirmed that it will hold the 2022 Annual Meeting in Fort Worth. Following past practice, the Council signed a contract with the hotel in 2019, three years in advance of the conference. Penalties for moving at this late date would be considerable—approximately \$221,000, a quarter of the SMH’s entire financial reserve—and would limit the Society’s ability to continue its work in other ways. Moreover, when the Council investigated the possibility of moving the conference, we found the short timeline made it impossible to find an alternate venue acceptable in price, accessibility, quality, and local amenities.

Second, the Council recognizes the incredible complexity of the issues at hand and reaffirms the SMH’s commitment to non-partisanship. While we acknowledge the specific concerns that set SB8 apart from other controversial pieces of legislation, we also need to acknowledge the impossibility of finding a venue situated in a city and state where all SMH members would endorse all local laws and regulations. Since 2017, following the Council’s endorsement of the American Historical Association’s statement condemning President Trump’s immigration ban, the SMH policy has been “to issue or endorse public statements only under exceptional circumstances as determined by the elected Board of Trustees, and only when such circumstances impinge upon the mission of the Society.”

The Council also recognizes, however, that a non-partisan educational organization devoted to the study of history is an entity made up of political actors. By definition, the study of war in all of its facets—politics, institutions, diplomacy, technology, logistics, families, citizens, individuals, and all of their interwoven relationships—is the study of power. Moreover, the problems historians identify, the research questions they choose to ask, the methods they employ to interrogate their sources, and the reasoned conclusions they draw are all political. These dynamics exist alongside the SMH’s institutional commitment to non-partisanship.

To that end, the Council recognizes that individual members may not wish or be able to travel to Texas for a variety of reasons, ranging from personal objection to SB8 and other legislation to health concerns in the midst of an ongoing pandemic to the realities of a large financial outlay. In recognition of these concerns, the 2022 SMH Annual Meeting in Fort Worth will be completely hybrid, as it was in 2021. The hybrid format, as well as planned Covid protocols similar to those we successfully employed in Norfolk in 2021, will allow members uncomfortable with traveling to Texas for any reason to participate. Additionally, the hybrid format allows us to reach a broader audience internationally, and among K-12 faculty, graduate students, and others who may be constrained financially, by work, by public health concerns, or by family responsibilities. Due to the significant IT costs incurred in hybrid meetings, we expect the registration fee for in-person and online registrants to be the same.

Finally, the Council appreciates the many broader concerns that members have raised regarding organizational governance, transparency, and inclusion. We recognize that we have much work to do to clearly and fully communicate with and educate the membership, and we have much work to do to recruit a more diverse membership, demographically, geographically, and intellectually.

Therefore, we reiterate our call for panel proposals for the 2022 Annual Meeting on topics related to the contemporary issues that sparked concerns from many of our members: reproduction, voting rights, pandemics, and health care, viewed broadly through the lens of military history. Military historians have written much about the intersection of each of these topics with militaries and societies around the world, in all time periods. We welcome proposals that draw our attention to those intersections, and the program committee will waive dual participation rules for participants in panels on these topics.

We also announce the creation of several panels for the upcoming meeting. In response to member requests, the Presidential Panel will focus on matters of societal governance and transparency. The Graduate Student panel “What the SMH Does for You” will feature discussions on mentorship, SMH awards, and discussions about navigating contemporary issues as a professional historian. A newly instated Board of Trustees’ Panel will welcome members to think collectively about “Planning for the SMH’s Future.”

Beyond the 2022 annual conference, the Council continues to discuss ways to hear and respond to members’ concerns. Later this week we will open a permanent feedback portal for members to provide anonymous suggestions and feedback on issues of concern. We will issue a member survey soon to solicit information and feedback, and we are examining the social media policy and its enforcement. Additionally, we will consider launching a fundraising drive to sponsor additional grants to support attendance at the Annual Meeting by those for whom attendance is prohibitive. This will be in addition to our commitment to geographically rotate the location of the meeting annually.

In closing, the SMH Council thanks our members for their deliberation and their commitment to the Society. While disagreements can be difficult, even painful, they are essential to our growth. Thank you for helping us to see where we need to improve, even for shining a light on our flaws. We look forward to continuing our work together.