



NSA museum covered plaques honoring women and people of color, provoking an uproar

UPDATED FEBRUARY 5, 2025 · 7:10 PM ET ⓘ

HEARD ON [MORNING EDITION](#)



Frank Langfitt



Last week, the National Cryptologic Museum in Fort Meade, Md., papered over plaques devoted to women and people of color who served the National Security Agency. The museum uncovered the exhibits on Sunday amid an uproar from former NSA staffers.

Frank Langfitt/NPR

FORT MEADE, Md. — Late last week, a national museum literally papered over history.

Responding to President Trump's order that terminated diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across the federal government, the [National Cryptologic Museum](#) taped sheets of paper over plaques that celebrate women and people of color who had served the [National Security Agency](#), which intercepts overseas conversations and breaks foreign government codes.

The honorees are described as "Trailblazers in U.S. Cryptologic History," and the plaques hang in the museum's Hall of Honor.

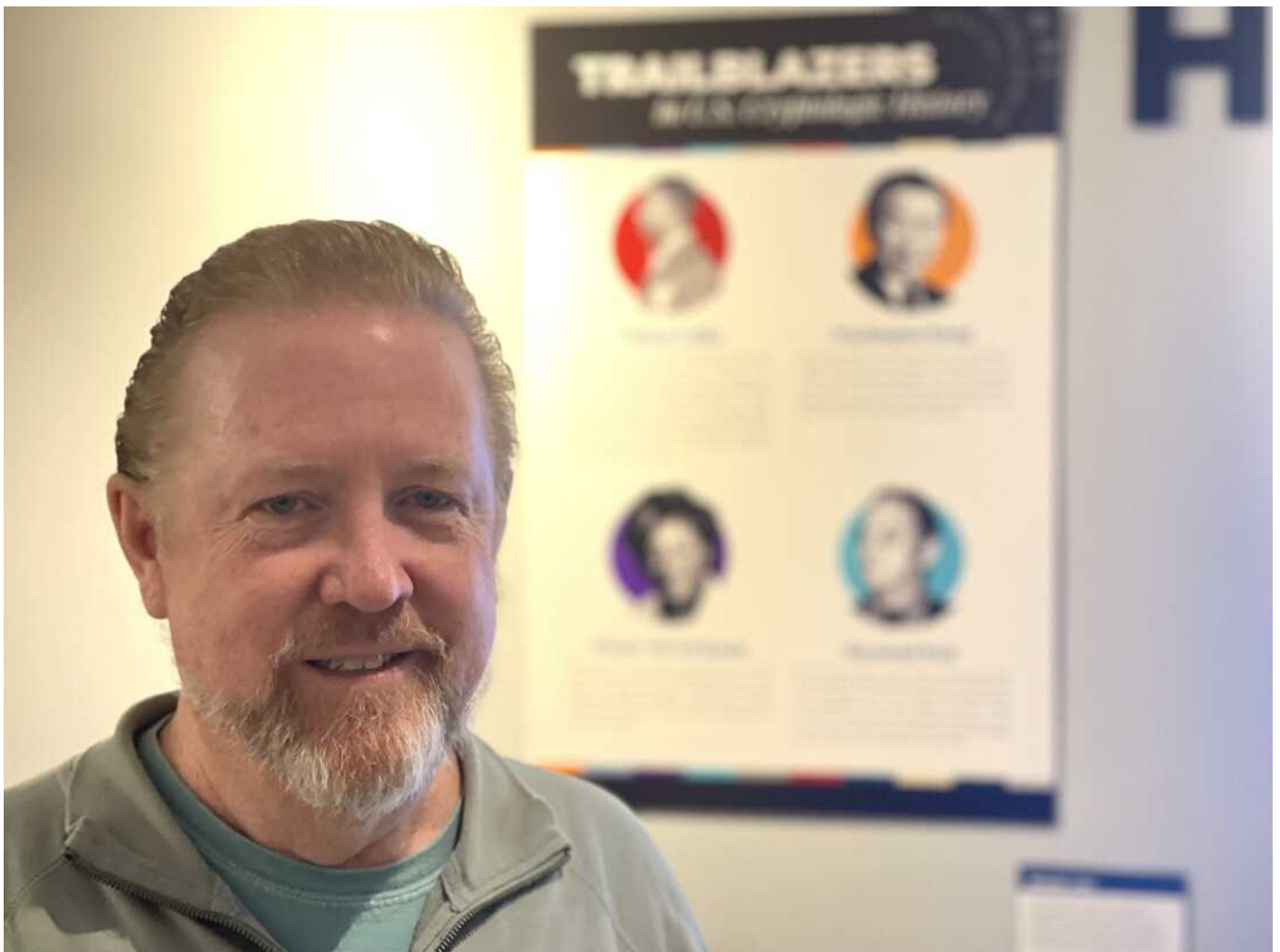


BUSINESS

Trump calls DEI programs 'illegal.' He plans to end them in the federal government

When Larry Pfeiffer, who spent two decades at the NSA, saw an image online showing the plaques covered with brown paper, he was stunned.

"My jaw dropped, my eyes bulged," said Pfeiffer, "like one of those Warner Brothers' cartoons."



Larry Pfeiffer, who spent two decades at the NSA, said he was astonished someone would cover up plaques, including the one in the background, that honored women and people of color who were trailblazers at the agency.

He [reposted the picture](#), as did retired Gen. Michael Hayden, who had served as NSA director for six years under presidents of both parties.

Many former NSA workers were furious. The museum uncovered the plaques and said Sunday on X that it had made a mistake.

But Pfeiffer and dozens of NSA retirees weren't satisfied. On Monday morning, they went to the museum outside Washington, D.C., to find out what had happened. Rob Johnson, who said he had worked for the agency for more than half a century, told the public relations staff at the museum that he was appalled.

"As much as this administration eschews truth and honesty, it is important that we not allow it to erase history," Johnson said.

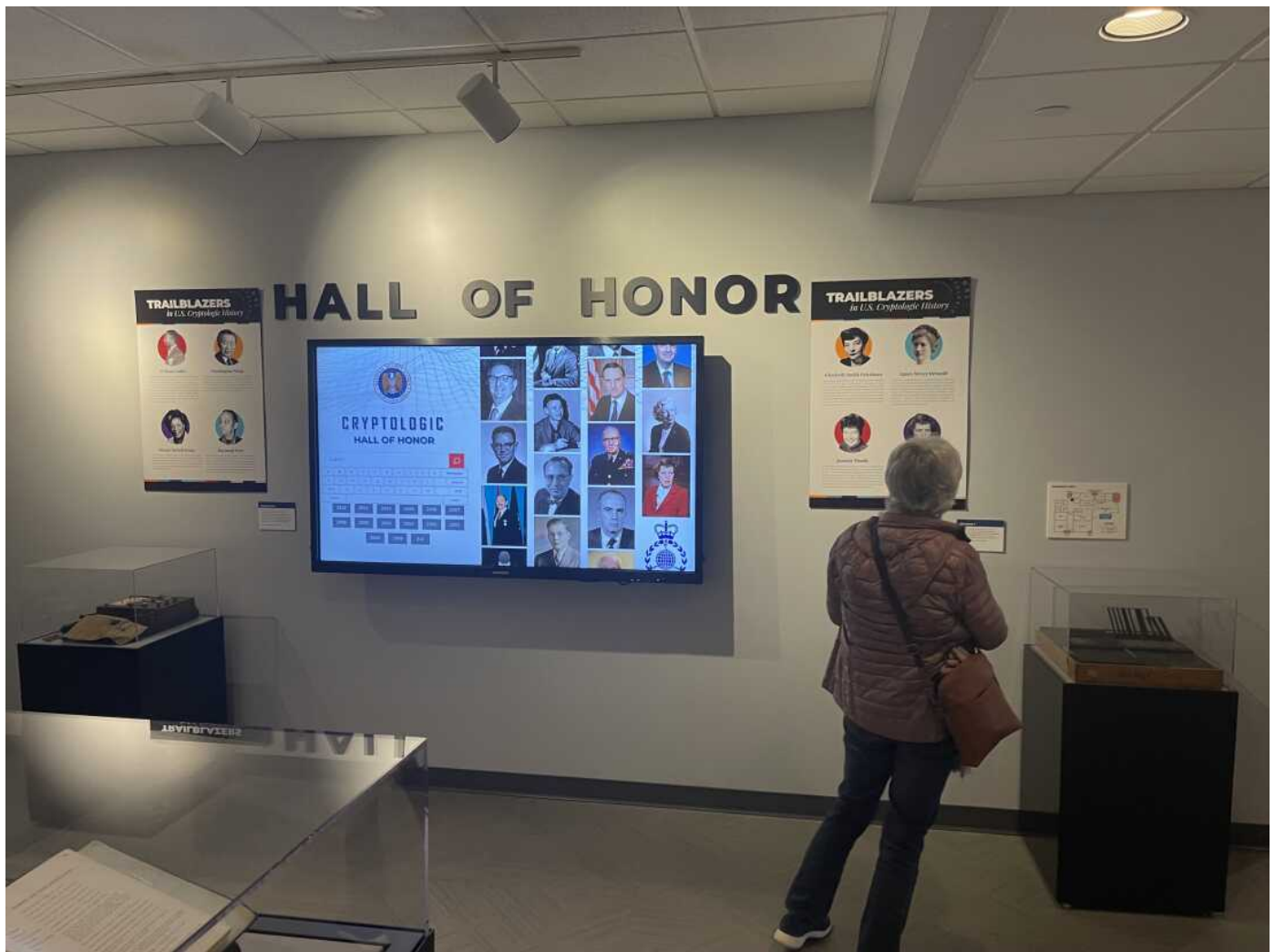
Helen Adams was angry, too.

"Didn't somebody say, 'Oh my God, that's wrong?' " she asked.

Adams' late husband, Ralph, was executive director of the NSA. [Ralph Adams](#) was also Black. Although his face wasn't among those obscured, Helen Adams took the decision to cover up other NSA honorees personally.

In a phone interview, NSA Executive Director [Sheila Thomas](#) — the No. 3 person in the agency — told NPR that papering over the exhibits was a mistake.

"There was absolutely never an intention to cover up parts of our history," said Thomas, who was at the museum to greet the retirees and has worked at the NSA for just over four decades. "As soon as we became aware [of it], we said, 'Oh, that was not what was intended.' "



NSA retirees went on-line to criticize the covering up of the exhibit and the agency quickly uncovered the plaques and said it had made a mistake.

Frank Langfit/NPR

Thomas said NSA leadership had not provided enough guidance as staff tried to implement President Trump's [order terminating diversity, equity and inclusion](#) in the federal government. She also said that it had been challenging to respond to the administration's flood of executive orders, including ones with tight deadlines.

The former NSA workers are glad the museum uncovered the exhibits, but they're still unsettled that it happened in the first place. Pfeiffer, who runs the [Michael V. Hayden Center for Intelligence, Policy and International Security](#) at George Mason University, suspects that someone told museum staff to cover up the plaques for fear of what would happen if they didn't. Indeed, one of the plaques contains the words diversity, equality and inclusion.

Pfeiffer says it's a sign of the climate of fear right now in the nation's capital as the Trump administration targets federal agencies [such as USAID](#) and the [Department of Education](#).

"We have appointees to this administration who have said that they intend to traumatize the federal employee workforce," Pfeiffer said. "We have seen people put on administrative leave with the threat that they're going to be fired."

He says this episode holds lessons for those who want to protect the U.S. civil service from partisanship.

"There may be small bites at the apple here that we can all take to push back against this attack on the federal workforce," Pfeiffer said. "You don't have to try to take it all on. Maybe you focus on what you're an expert in."

As for Thomas, the NSA's executive director, she requested some grace as her agency works through rapid requests from the new administration. And she encouraged people to come see the museum.

[nsa](#)[dei](#)[diversity, equity and inclusion](#)[gen. michael hayden](#)

READ & LISTEN

[Home](#)[News](#)[Culture](#)[Music](#)[Podcasts & Shows](#)

CONNECT

[Newsletters](#)[Facebook](#)[Instagram](#)[Press](#)[Public Editor](#)[Corrections](#)[Contact & Help](#)

ABOUT NPR

Overview

Diversity

NPR Network

Accessibility

Ethics

Finances

GET INVOLVED

Support Public Radio

Sponsor NPR

NPR Careers

NPR Shop

NPR Events

NPR Extra

terms of use

privacy

your privacy choices

text only