

“The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.”

— George Orwell

In *“The Great Forgetting: How memory, civil rights, and environmental history are being quietly erased,”* published on June 5, 2026, in The Revelator, Rick MacPherson recalls the Reagan era, when the AIDS epidemic was decimating his community while the administration maintained a determined silence: “We learned, very early on, what it meant. ‘Silence = Death’ wasn’t rhetorical flourish. It was observation.”

MacPherson writes that “the silence of the Reagan years was neglect — devastating in its indifference but defined by what was not done.” **“What we’re seeing now is more deliberate,”** he continues. **Federal agencies are being directed to reshape the narrative itself — to remove language, narrow scope, and determine whose experiences are permitted to remain visible. The effect may echo the past, but the mechanism has changed. This is not just silence. It is its construction.** He adds that **“The throughline doesn’t belong only to the LGBTQ+ community. It runs through the broader arc of civil rights in this country.”** (*emphasis added*).

The Great Forgetting

MacPherson describes the current situation in the United States under the Trump administration’s direction as “A kind of thinning. A quiet unraveling. A great forgetting. I’m watching it in civil rights language. I’m watching it in public institutions. And I’m watching it just as clearly in the environmental work I’ve spent my life in — where the stories we tell about land, water, and who belongs in them are being quietly rewritten.

“The language shifts first. What was once widely understood becomes contested again. Terms that carried hard-won meaning — equity, inclusion, justice — are recast as excess, as ideology, as something to be rolled back in the name of neutrality.”

The Erosion of History

MacPherson also details the means by which this “forgetting” is achieved. “You don’t erase history outright. You erode it. You question its premises. You remove it from curricula. You flatten it into something

unthreatening or dismiss it as irrelevant. Over time the edges blur, the urgency fades, and the lessons become optional.

“What makes this process so effective is its efficiency. Recast hard-fought struggles under a single dismissive label — “DEI” — and you don’t have to argue against their substance. You simply make them suspect. From there the cascade is predictable. Funding becomes conditional. Curricula are scrutinized. Research agendas narrow. Writing, teaching, and public engagement that reflect lived realities begin to carry professional or financial risk. Not always through explicit bans, but through signals — what is rewarded, what is questioned, what quietly disappears.

“Fear does the rest. Institutions grow cautious. Individuals self-edit. The story contracts. And over time a generation comes of age not just without the full history, but with a lingering sense that perhaps those earlier gains were excessive, that something went too far. That equality and justice themselves were the overreach.

“And alongside that, something even more unsettling: the return of silence from people who know better.”

The Choice (Our Choice)

“As Pride Month arrives,” MacPherson writes, “we’re asked — publicly, collectively — to celebrate how far things have come. And there’s been real progress worth marking. But memory doesn’t move on a calendar. **For some of us, it remains immediate, shaped by what it took to get here — the years when a ‘normal’ life was never really on offer, when the choice was to fight or risk erasure.**” *

Silence is not an option!

Resist this endless war. Resist fascism now (before it’s too late.)

New Haven Sunday Vigil for Peace and Justice: June 14, 2026

<https://newhavensundayvigil.org>

***To read the entire MacPherson article, go to <https://therevelator.org/the-great-forgetting/> (MacPherson is a recently retired ocean conservation biologist with nearly 40 years of experience advancing community-based conservation around the world. He’s now launched Ocean Hoptimism: an SF Bay Area initiative uniting ocean science, art, policy, and community over a pint to inspire resilient optimism for our blue planet.)**