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Public History Wars, the "One Nation/One People" Consensus, and the Continuing Search for a Usable Past

In July 2012 I visited Independence Hall and other sites associated with the historic events of the birth of the United States in Philadelphia. The National Park Service offered a patriotic story of the location and era, complete with re-creations of the reading of the Declaration of Independence from 1776 and debates over the Constitution in 1787. Skilled interpreters wearing historic costumes illuminated the time and place and broadened the audience's understanding of the experiences. The statement by Daniel Webster in 1837 emblazoned on the wall of the National Constitution Center, "One country, one Constitution, one destiny," celebrates the creation story of the United States of America, one that values the Declaration of Independence as "American Scripture" and the Constitution as the product of essentially a "miracle" in Philadelphia (1).

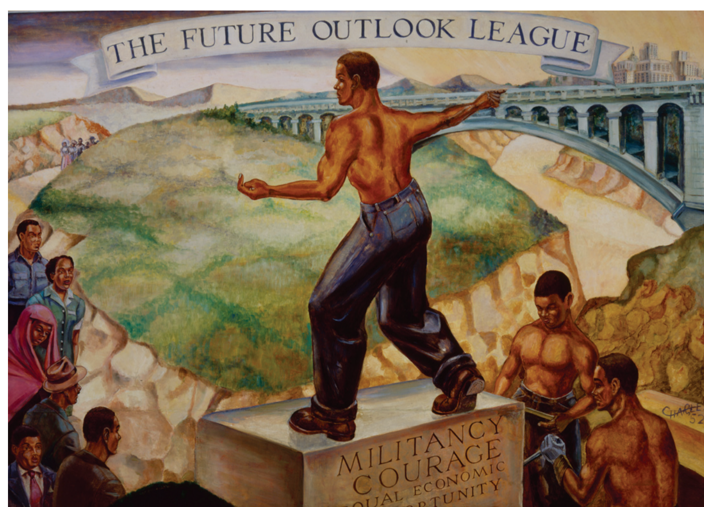

Figure 1. This mural appeared in "Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915–1940," an exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History between 1986 and 2006 that described the movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urbanized North in search of better jobs in the first half of the twentieth century. It was commissioned by the Future Outlook League and was painted by Charles in 1952. Originally displayed on the wall of a barbershop in the Cedar Central neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio, the mural depicts African Americans moving to cities and taking industrial work. (Courtesy of The Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio)

Much of what is presented in this setting, as well as in many others seeking to interpret the American past at museums and historic sites around the country, is built around a theme of "one nation, one people"; everyone coming together in a grand consensus of the American past that is exceptionalistic, nationalistic, and triumphant. The setting offers a celebration of the long tradition of shared American ideals and values that made the United States somehow different from other nations. In such a setting William Faulkner's adroit statement—"The past is never dead. It's not even past"—might be an understatement (2). This emphasis on consensus represents a continuing search for a usable past that helps us understand who we are and how we reached our current state. Such a goal aims toward the use of history—achievements and regrets; pride and disappointment—to affect decisions that may help create a better world. This quest for a usable past becomes both an expression of present communal understanding and future objectives (3).

The emphasis on consensus in U.S. national history has been present from the nation's beginnings, and there is, of course, considerable value in emphasizing the ideals that have brought Americans together as a people rather than focusing on the divisiveness in society. History might be viewed largely as a lesson in civics and a means of instilling in the nation's citizenry a sense of awe and reverence for the nation-state and its system of governance. The rise of the "new social history" in the 1960s, with its emphasis on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and the way groups have wielded power throughout the nation's past, offered a powerful counterweight to the consensus interpretation (4). In American history museums, and certainly in the Smithsonian Institution, that trend was manifested effectively in several exhibitions in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In one, "Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915–1940," at the National Museum of American History, curators interpreted the complexities and effects of the movement of more than one million African Americans from the rural South to metropolises in the North in search of a better life (Figure 1). "Legend, Memory, and the Great War in the Air" at the National Air and Space Museum focused on the mythology of aerial combat versus its reality, especially regarding the long shadow

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of strategic bombing that has dominated warfare since the early Cold War (5). Likewise, the interpretation of many Civil War sites by the National Park Service, which featured more discussion about race and slavery, secession, and sectional tensions, offered a responsible counter to "Lost Cause" sentimentality and valor that clouded understanding of this history (6).

The transition from shrine to forum suggested by these examples has been significant, but it has not been accomplished without controversy. Each of these examples has brought a response, sometimes an overpowering one, seeking to turn the story back to one of consensus and triumph. Opponents of this more questioning approach invariably challenge the necessity of considering other ways of seeing the past, of reexamining traditional interpretations, and of exploring more multicultural, relativistic, and conflict-oriented aspects of the national story. It has become a truism in these controversies that "revisionist history" entered the lexicon as a term of derision, as if our understanding of the past could never be altered in any way (7).

Such debates represent a battle for control of the national memory. Will it be one that is unified—one people, one nation—or one that is fragmented and personal? This important issue is worthy of consideration in the marketplace of ideas. Critics of so-called revisionist history believe they have to prevail in these settings for the good of the nation. Their efforts become something of a crusade, but not one orchestrated from the top down via some master plan. Instead, as individual issues arise, the cultural Right joins the fray to defeat what they view as a damaging, unusable version of the American past. Broad initiatives to control the telling of the past in the public sphere reach a wide audience through avenues such as television, museums, and secondary schools. Some of these efforts are subtle, but others are heavy-handed. At the same time the "feel-good" experience celebrating the origins of "one nation, one people" in the nation's founding, so prevalent in the National Park Service historic sites in Philadelphia, is appropriately complicated when those sites invite visitors to consider the great national scar of racism and slavery and the place of those issues in public life and private virtue during the revolutionary era. How did those who founded the United States, a nation "conceived in liberty," not only accept chattel slavery in their midst but also personally hold other people in bondage? Leading lights of the Revolution Thomas Jefferson and George Washington may have propagated "liberty," but they were slaveholders who claimed liberty for themselves while denying it for others (8). The irony inherent in the nation's founding is too great to ignore, and leads one to question the paradoxes of the founding of the United States and the contradictions in the values of the founders (9).

The famous Liberty Bell in Philadelphia and the story it tells about the origins and evolution of the United States provides another telling example (10). An iconic symbol of American independence, the bell summoned lawmakers to legislative sessions and alerted citizens to public events in Philadelphia's Independence Hall. The bell also carried an inscription from Leviticus 25:10: "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." In popular memory it rang when the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence and at the public reading of the document. Correspondingly, the bell represents for many the independence of the United States and the freedoms guaranteed by the founding documents. That story may well be incorrect, since it was cracked and not of much use as a bell. The bell *did* become a symbol of abolitionism in the 1830s, though, as those engaged in combating slavery used its biblical verse to recall the irony of liberty in a land where slavery existed. The National Park Service's Liberty Bell Center, where the bell is displayed, complicates the object's simple Revolutionary War story, and its place in the founding events of the American nation by also emphasizing its role as a continuing rallying point for the cause of social justice in the United States. Calling attention to bell's use in the antislavery crusade, as well as in the fights for the civil, women's, and Native American rights movements bring home the place of the Liberty Bell in the never-ending quest for equality in a nation founded on the principle of liberty and justice for all (11). Yet the bell exhibit does not shy away from the evolving meaning of its centerpiece and its enduring message that the quest for freedom did not end in 1776 (Figure 2).

Finally, the long-standing constitutional provision for the separation of church and state was not as simple a matter at the nation's founding as some would believe today. Some Americans have argued that the United States was founded as an overtly "Christian nation" even as the first president wrestled with how to ensure religious liberty for all. This complexity is demonstrated in a temporary exhibit (2012–2013) at the National Museum of American Jewish History, "To Bigotry No Sanction: George Washington and Religious Freedom." The exhibition made clear that the argument that the United States was founded as a "Christian nation" by "Founding Fathers" (patriarchs) serving as divinely inspired prophets leading Americans, like Moses, to a promised land, rests on shaky historical foundations (12). Featuring correspondence of Washington and Jefferson with various religious groups, it shows unmistakably that these two founders believed that the only means of ensuring religious liberty for all was to guarantee that no one religion was privileged in American public life. For example, as

Figure 2. The Liberty Bell, housed in Philadelphia, is an iconic symbol of early American patriotism and values. Its history, however, did not end in 1776. It has become a symbol for many social justice causes, such as the abolitionist movement, serving as a reminder that all Americans deserve liberty even though not everyone achieved it in the American Revolution. (Courtesy of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)

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president, Washington responded to a letter from a Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790 assuring all that their freedom of religion would be protected. "The Government of the United States," Washington wrote, "gives to bigotry no sanction . . . every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid" (13). While some might be lulled into self-satisfied complacency by such reassurances, the exhibit added complexity to the story by displaying an 1818 letter from Jefferson. In it, he cautioned about "the universal spirit of religious intolerance inherent in every sect, disclaimed by all while feeble, and practiced by all when in power." American religious liberty required legal bulwarks, he insisted, and national "laws have applied the only antidote to this vice, protecting our religious, as they do our civil rights by putting all on an equal footing, but more remains to be done" (14).

The story of the birth of the United States presented in the plethora of museums, historic sites, and other public fora is mirrored in popular writings on the subject but often lacking the attendant complicating factors that offer a usable past for Americans as they consider the world in terms more complex than simplistic black/white, good/evil dichotomies. "It's not coincidental that this vogue arose now," commented the historian H. W. Brands: "When the country is divided along cultural, economic and partisan grounds, people look for a time when we were all together" (15). For example, Richard Brookhiser's biography of George Washington and his other works on the founders emphasize a moral and spiritual center for these individuals (16). A neoconservative associated with the *National Review,* Brookhiser has made clear that his objective was to highlight Washington's "public career and . . . his character. . . . You know, I'm not interested in details, if they don't relate directly to that" (17). Brookhiser's selective retelling of the story of George Washington, as well as related efforts on other founders, represents an attempt to turn history into civics. His Washington study is essentially a modern attempt to replicate the moral lessons of Mason Weems's *The Life of Washington* (1800)—but without knowingly fabricating any of the tales included—even as it offers a sophomoric rendering of American history and its founders, even though the reality was so much more complex and sophisticated (18).

The same strategy is used by many others who seek to use American history for imparting moral and civics lessons to future generations. Recently, for example, the Tea Party political movement has sought to appropriate the story of the nation's founding for its own purposes. Its name harkens back to a defining moment in the march toward independence; according to the historian Jill Lepore, the American Revolution "conferred upon a scattered, diffuse, and confused movement a degree of legitimacy and the appearance, almost, of coherence." The Tea Party embraces, she continues, "a set of assumptions about the relationships between the past and the present that was both broadly anti-intellectual and, quite specifically, anti-historical, not least because it defies chronology, the logic of time" (19). With arguments lacking any complexity or ambiguity, many members of the Tea Party subscribe to a strident form of "historical fundamentalism" that eschews any uncertainty whatsoever in favor of a conflation of constitutional originalism, evangelicalism, and easy answers drawn from uncomplicated heritage tourism. The founding of the United States has been simplified into a narrowly defined set of maxims considered timeless, sacred, and deserving of worship. These "truths" have also been defined in a way that omits inconvenient issues, such as the allowance of slavery by virtually all of the so-called founders. This has allowed such Tea Party darlings as Representative Michelle Bachmann (R-MN) to announce that "the very founders that wrote those documents worked tirelessly until slavery was no more in the United States" while ignoring the fact that many of the most celebrated founders were slaveholders who ensconced the institution in the U.S. Constitution (20) (Figure 3).

Unlike in the content of Philadelphia's exhibitry on the birth of the republic, these simplistic attempts to draw lessons from the past suggest that there is a nostalgia for a less complex past in which we were all one. The disjointed nature of modern society fractured along cultural, economic, social, ethnic, racial, and partisan lines suggests to many that what was good and just in America has been hijacked by multicultural elements seeking to remake society in a way they believe is inappropriate. These efforts to evoke a "simpler" past essentially represent a crusade to channel national memory toward a unified "one nation/one people" ideal rather than the overtly complex and fractured present. The 1950s, for example, have been shrouded in a nostalgic glow for over a decade now—a nostalgia that celebrates American affluence, dominance abroad, and domestic order rather than acknowledging labor struggles, the beginning of the civil rights movement, the red scare, and the Korean War. This represents a disservice to all; ignoring the complexity of the past fails to prepare Americans to face future crises. In this debate, how might those engaged in historical investigation best serve future generations by offering a complex story, such as that in the National Park Service's exhibits in Philadelphia, which helps enable a usable past?

Part of the struggle to provide an appropriate answer is caused by the never-ending conflation of history with memory, and heritage with nostalgia. This practice has become an epidemic in American society in the last thirty years, resulting in a battle over the shape of teachings about the past. As Ira Berlin has commented: "If history is skeptical, contested, and universal, memory is certain, incontestable, and personal. If, at its best, history is a detached and disinterested weighing of all the evidence, memory is a selective recall of a portion of the past that makes no pretense of universality" (21). History remains a continuing debate about the past, especially about its meaning to the present age. "By definition," concludes Berlin, "the reconstructed past is contested terrain. The reconstruction proceeds with great skepticism. Nothing is taken for granted. Everything is contingent; the presumption is that everyone lied" (22). Those seeking to offer this complexity to society have always faced a struggle.

This challenge is revealed in the public arena. A great many of the predominant public school curricula, museum exhibits, films, and popular historical writings and presentations celebrate a "one nation/one people" story to the exclusion of the many countervailing influences necessary to understand our culture. These manifestations of history seek to offer a usable past to the nation as a whole, but as they do so they subsume important aspects of the national past under the larger story of American consensus. In this sense, most historical presentations have major elements of mythology; the historian Alex Roland remarked that this is essentially "tribal rituals, meant to comfort the old and indoctrinate the young" (23).

What then should be the history presented in the public arena? Should it be one that is unified—"one people/one nation"—or one that is fragmented and personal? It is, of course, both. Advocates of the "one nation/one people" story criticize history that emphasizes conflict as a corrosive version of the American past that does not serve the future well because it questions national institutions and policies. For example, should an exhibit on the story of capitalism in American life celebrate "captains of industry" and innovators absent discussion of the pursuit of wealth unfettered by regulation; labor unrest and its oppression by force; but omit other less savory aspects of our economic system? This topic is presently being developed for an exhibit at the National Museum of American History entitled "American Enterprise." The challenges are enormous, especially when the president of the Mars candy company, who donated $5 million toward the exhibition, said "it will be an exhibit that honors the innovation of businesses and entrepreneurs." He said the company wanted to support

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Figure 3. The Tea Party movement, a recent product of American political history, emerged in 2009 to challenge the traditional political system. Its adherents emphasize that they feel that they are losing control of their lives, their livelihoods, and their future. A major source of their discontent is a belief that the moral foundation of society is collapsing around them and government, from the federal to the local level, is not responsive to the needs of society. They want to buttress traditional values and return to principles of honor and authority. A nostalgia for the so-called true American values held by the Founding Fathers permeates the movement. Here, supporters in Washington, D.C., protest and use traditional American symbols, such as the flag and Uncle Sam's hat, to characterize themselves as "real" Americans. (Courtesy of Freedom Fan)

an exhibit that would show how "U.S. companies and individuals have 'fundamentally, and positively, changed the way the world works'" (24). Questions of balance are paramount at the Smithsonian Institution, as curators, historians, and others wrestle with how best to interpret this important theme in American history. Of course, telling the story of how the United States became a modern, industrial, capitalistic society is a worthy goal. That the United States has long been a place where all may excel in their business of choice regardless of where they came from is a powerful statement of an ideal. This ideal, however, is only the beginning point of a narrative more valuable for the future: one in which the nation has both succeeded and failed in the past.

Another manifestation of this clash between consensus and more complex historical interpretation was the mid-1990s controversy involving the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum over its aborted exhibit about the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, "The Last Act," which featured a portion of the *Enola Gay* B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima (25). Curator Tom D. Crouch asked exhibit decision makers a fundamental either/or question in a 1993 memorandum as the controversy was just beginning over how to interpret the decision to bomb Japan: "Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to talk about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan. Frankly, I don't think we can do both" (26). The controversy over the exhibit became so desperate that it led to public humiliation for the Smithsonian Institution in 1995, an overturning of a planned complex exhibit in favor of a simple presentation of the aircraft, a legacy of self-censorship among the museum's staff, and the resignation of the museum's director. Would Americans have been better served by pondering the consequences of dropping the atomic bomb or by celebrating American victory? The resolution of these kinds of debates will significantly shape future conceptions of these issues in the American past and affect ideas about them going forward.

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Figure 4. "The Price of Freedom: Americans at War," an exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History that opened in 2004, has been highly controversial because it emphasizes the centrality of the military for American freedom and liberty. (Courtesy of bridgeandtunnelclub.com)

The relatively straightforward consensus view of American history propagated in the exhibition on the *Enola Gay* and the dropping of the atomic bomb, and perhaps in "American Enterprise" if corporate sponsors have their way, offers an important lesson in how not to approach the telling of the American past. Teachers, curators, and exhibit designers might choose "safe" subjects from history that avoid controversy and public debate but moving beyond those uncontroversial themes to embrace the contradictions and difficulties inherent in the evolution of a people represents a higher calling and a service to those who will lead the nation into the future. We should not portray a serene yesterday; nor should we neglect the social realities of the present (Figure 4).

A simplistic understanding of the past creates an unfair and impossible totem against which to judge current leaders, thereby further distorting a perception that modern society is unable to cope with its ills. "What would George Washington do?" is a common meme, but does it offer a useful perspective? Controversy-free history proves less a selective acceptance of facts than a willful denial of that which does not fit into the "one nation/one people" interpretation. Ignoring the complexity of the past, with all of its positive and negative aspects, does a disservice to Americans of all stripes.

Let me suggest three points to consider when tackling the interpretation of historical events, people, and arcs of time in our search for a usable past:

- **Meanings:** History is anything but names, dates, and events. Americans tend toward historylessness because the past that survives in the present is too often little more than either moral lessons or a tapestry of injustices. One reinforces a false perception of the past as "perfect" and its actors as wise and righteous in all instances; the other finds nothing of value in the national story. In both cases it leads to false impressions. With the full understanding that "progress" is a relative term, the historian Eric Rauchway has commented that the "public past is a liberal past, a past of progress—progress against real obstacles, to be sure, but progress nevertheless." What has gone before is intrinsically tied to everything that has followed. Accentuate connections of both the positive and the negative; the American story is "not over, but propelled by this sense of a shared past" (27).
- **Nuance:** In 1918 the historian Van Wyck Brooks first called for the development of an American usable past. His comments are still

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germane as we seek to apprehend an American history that is complex and conflicted rather than heroic and homogenized. "We want bold ideas, and we have nuances. We want courage, and we have universal fear," he wrote, "We want vitality, and we have intellectualism. . . . We want expansion of soul, and we have an elephantiasis of the vocal organs. Why? Because . . . the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value" (28). Nuance is the essence both of history and of life.

- **Communicate:** An important element of practicing history is the marshalling of resources of historical scholarship for public understanding. The past only becomes usable for the public when historians, teachers, curators, and others effectively communicate it. This requires study above all, of course, but it also necessitates serious efforts to reach audiences through multiple paths such as innovative curricula for students of all ages and projects ranging from "National History Day" to local community initiatives. In more than one neighborhood, teenagers have acted as historians by interviewing elders about their experiences and collecting information about the community's recent past. Students might even incorporate informal education—such as displays, videos, and even dramatic reenactments—into everything from the local historical society to the community shopping mall. Such possibilities are endless and all relate to how historical perspectives might become more a part of everyone's everyday lives.

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Endnotes

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