

Truth, History, and the American Way
History Museums in the United States

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“The history of African Americans must be told, as part of American history. It will not be put in some dark corner, or put off to the side, or swept under a rug. There is still a great deal of pain and hurt in America because of our legacy of slavery, segregation and racial discrimination. This museum can be the building of a community, a beloved community, a truly interracial democracy in America.”¹

Since his election to Congress in 1986, Representative John Lewis (D-Ga.) has campaigned for a national museum of African American history. If President Bush signs the legislation passed this week by Congress, that museum will become a reality. It faces a long, difficult road, however. Even after a site is chosen, a building is designed and built, and staff is hired—a process sure to take many years—the objects the museum will display and the story it will tell will be the subject of intense debate. Museums that want to explore history—especially history that might be seen as controversial—always have a long haul and many battles to fight.

American history museums often find themselves at a crossroads. With their history of exhibiting in a commemorative or celebratory style, finding a way to analyze the past can be difficult. The United States is not alone in this: The world is full of celebratory and nationalistic institutions. In France, for example, Versailles contains the Gallery of Battles, commemorating Napoleon’s victories. In eastern Europe, many new museums have sections “devoted to military history and the glories of communist uprisings.”² In Washington, the Smithsonian’s National Air Museum’s mission as signed into law in 1946 was “to memorialize the national development of aviation.” When “Space” was added in 1966, the mission became “to memorialize the development of air

¹ Rep. John Lewis, quoted in Trescott, Jacqueline, “Congress Salutes Lewis’s Drive for Museum,” *The Washington Post* (November 22, 2003), p. C02.

² Alexander, Edward P., *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), p. 81.

and space flight.”³ These museums use their exhibits to celebrate—not analyze or question—a nation’s or an industry’s history.

Breaking away from that tradition can look unpatriotic—or worse, subversive. Yet many museums and exhibits have succeeded in doing so. This paper will examine history museums, particularly in America, and look at some of the exhibit and history controversies that have occurred in the recent decades. It looks at museums that have succeeded in challenging accepted doctrine—and some that have failed. There is no one indicator of success or failure, but funding and historical context—that is, the time, place, and players behind controversies—seem to play the greatest roles.

Perhaps the most famous exhibition controversy in recent years was that over the planned exhibit for the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum. Much has been written about the furor that erupted when the script—already accepted by a large committee of reviewers—was leaked, and the Air Force Association condemned the museum for its treatment of the airplane. The exhibit was eventually cancelled, and a section of the plane displayed with minimal interpretation. In its new space at the Udvar-Hazy Center, the entire plane is on display—again with minimal interpretation, as petitions from historians and museum professionals to address the more complete story of its use were denied.

Edward Linenthal has written, “...the *Enola Gay* could not help but transform exhibit space into commemorative space, where unambiguous narratives recalling the

³ National Air and Space Museum, www.nasm.edu/nasm.

sacrifices of Americans at war could be expected to prevail, especially on the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end."⁴ He continues:

Consequently, when it was decided that the proposed exhibit would focus on the difficult story of the bomb as both savior and destroyer, some people saw this as an offense to the heroic memory of the war and reacted as follows: they insisted that any ambiguous feelings about the mission of the *Enola Gay* were rooted in the subversive cultural impulses of the post-Vietnam left—located mainly in academia and among museum curators; they wanted to remove the aircraft lest it be symbolically soiled; they wished to punish those responsible both for the exhibit and for altering the celebratory nature of the National Air and Space Museum; and they desired to expunge the exhibit script of anything that might faintly offend American commemorative sensibilities.⁵

Other scholars have suggested the political climate of the 1990s, the financial connection between the Air Force Association and the museum, and fear of further controversy aided the collapse of the intended exhibit. Indeed, a number of circumstances came together at the time to create a climate where outside groups, the public, the press, and the federal government could exert pressure on the museum and on the Smithsonian. Richard Kohn, U.S. Air Force chief of air force history from 1981 to 1991, attributes it to five separate “stories.” He suggests that the museum’s celebratory nature made it difficult for the staff, who wanted to “apply professional, scholarly standards” and that there was already an “uneasy relationship” between the museum and the military aviation community; he also attributes it to the “culture wars” already raging in the country and to shifts in political power in Congress; and to the appointment of a new institution secretary.⁶

⁴ Linenthal, Edward T., “Anatomy of a Controversy,” Linenthal and Tom Englehardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), p. 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kohn, Richard H., “History at Risk: The Case of the *Enola Gay*,” in Linenthal, *History Wars*, p. 142.

Whatever the reason, it set a dangerous precedent: Outside forces could influence museum exhibitions to a degree previously not seen. Indeed, while I. Michael Heyman was still Secretary of the Smithsonian, he went so far as to suggest that the institution “should perhaps eschew such controversial exhibitions and that its exhibitions cannot combine commemoration and celebration with scholarship.”⁷ According to Kohn, Heyman even promised to redo some exhibits that were upsetting to visitors, in particular those that seemed “to disparage American character, society, or behavior.”⁸ If Kohn was right, Heyman was on the verge of crossing the line between keeping the visitors’ needs in mind and censoring on behalf of them.

This seems to be one of the greatest dangers museums face in the new century. “Political censorship,” as many scholars have termed it, can prevent museums from putting on truly scholarly exhibits. It’s not just history museums, of course, bearing the brunt of controversy. Art museums have certainly had their share of controversial exhibits and events. Science museums can also come under attack.

Before it had even opened, for instance, the new Mammals hall at the National Museum of Natural History was questioned by creationist groups such as Answers in Genesis. According to a press release from the organization (dated November 4, 2003), whose mission is “to help the church to counteract the virulent anti-biblical propaganda of powerhouses like the Smithsonian,” the new exhibit makes multiple assumptions to “reconstruct the past on skimpy evidence.”⁹ It is hardly surprising that groups devoted to upholding biblical history would be upset at the Mammals hall, which makes no efforts to address those who don’t believe in evolution. The Smithsonian might not feel the need to

⁷ Kohn, “History at Risk,” p. 141.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Matthews, Michael, “Mozart—made in a rat’s image?” Answers in Genesis press release, 4 Nov 2003.

include faith and creation—and indeed, it is hard to see how these ideas could be incorporated into the Mammals hall—but the institution should be aware of the other viewpoints and prepared to deal with them when necessary.

One of the most common attacks on evolution from creationists is that ideas are “assumed” rather than proven. Most scientists don’t need citations of proof to understand the Mammals hall, and indeed the majority of visitors won’t either. But as in other exhibits, it would be beneficial to the public, and for public relations, for the museum to list the names of those involved in putting on the exhibit. An exhibit is not a textbook, so including sources, or letting visitors know where to go for further information, can be helpful. At the very least, museums should be prepared to counteract accusations.

In addition, letting visitors “in on” the process could make a world of difference. Going in to an exhibit with the understanding that they are going to see a viewpoint—or a number of viewpoints—rather than “the” viewpoint can prepare visitors to look at the exhibit as something to discuss rather than accept. When visitors or outside forces (like Congress) believe they are meant to accept and believe whatever a museum says, controversies can easily arise.

But where does this controversy come from? Outsiders often blame museums for conspiring to create problems, for deliberately being controversial. This is rarely—if ever—the case. As Neil Harris has written, “...controversy often lies outside an institution’s control...; it is frequently produced by reactions rather than intentions.”¹⁰ Yet, while a museum may not foresee potential controversy in a proposed exhibit, the staff should always be prepared—just in case.

¹⁰ Harris, Neil, “Museums and Controversy: Some Introductory Reflections,” *The Journal of American History* (December 1995), p. 1102.

Due to issues of funding, in particular, as well as a rise in conservatism, museums should always be prepared to find some part of the public at odds with even the least controversial-seeming topic. Had the National Air and Space Museum been prepared to support their exhibit, with press releases, positive media coverage, and the verbal and written support of sponsors, curators, scholars, and even the pilot of the *Enola Gay*, who had originally been happy with the exhibit, perhaps things would have turned out differently. As it was, the museum seemed blindsided by the attention. The director was forced to step down, curators were furious, the media had a field day, and the public lost out on an educational event—although some would say that bringing the controversy into the public eye probably enlightened the public quite a bit as well.

How is it that controversies can arise so easily? For exhibits like the *Enola Gay*, it seems obvious in hindsight that the staff should have predicted problems. But for other exhibits, the criticism may be unexpected. The most well-researched, accurate, and balanced interpretations can still appear biased. Questions of decency, authenticity, and patriotism—and even whether an exhibit is uplifting—can all be raised by any group that doesn't like what it sees.¹¹ “Angry reactions... [are] about attitudes toward social reality, toward national character, official values, progress, and standards of life. They [are] about expectations.”¹² The public expects something from museums. “Museums [are] expected to set standards, to confer status, and to reflect accepted truth.”¹³ So the public usually expects truth—but whose truth? The answer to that is hard to find.

History in museums is history through the eyes of curators and researchers, based on varied sources—in other words, already a degree or two removed from published

¹¹ Harris, “Museums and Controversy,” p. 1104.

¹² Harris, “Museums and Controversy,” p. 1105.

¹³ Harris, “Museums and Controversy,” p. 1104.

texts. The texts themselves are a “construct” removed from the actual events by space, time, viewpoint, ideology, and voice. So whose history is told—whose story, and whose truth—can be difficult to gauge. And since museum exhibits don’t have bibliographies, citations, or research credits, visitors don’t have the benefit of furthering their interest as they would from a history book. “History” therefore becomes something quite different in the public eye.

History Wars—Searching for the “Right” Truth

“History museums too often still follow the conventional anecdotal, great-men, great-events approach to history instead of considering economic, social, and cultural factors.”¹⁴

“Americans like to think that they are capable of looking at their own history soberly, that they have avoided the snares of trivializing, sanitizing, and sanctifying the past into which other nations have fallen. Our own recent history wars, however, reveal otherwise.”¹⁵

It often seems as though certain conservative factions choose to believe only one version of American history—the one they were taught in school. In 1994 when the National History Standards were about to be printed, Lynne Cheney—who had hired the historians to write the standards—preemptively lashed out at the standards and accused them of being anti-American and disrespectful to Western civilization. Without reading them, the conservative media quickly threw its support behind Cheney and others who condemned the standards. The “history wars” had begun. What was at stake for Cheney was her political future: With a Democrat in the White House and elections coming up—elections

¹⁴ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, p. 94.

¹⁵ Linenthal, Edward T., and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), p. 7.

that would produce a Republican Congress—she needed a strong platform around which to rally the nation.

It worked—but at the cost of school history. In spite of the changes to history textbooks over the years—they now include a more in-depth discussion of slavery and of Native Americans, women, and labor, for instance—conservatives want the focus to be on progressive, celebratory lists of facts. A recent example from pop culture can illustrate this claim: This year, a miniseries about former president Ronald Reagan was pulled from the CBS lineup after pressure from high-level Republicans. They complained that too much license had been taken and that Reagan was portrayed in too negative a manner. Like many Americans, these Reagan backers could not support challenges to the past president’s legacy. Waving the flag against “historical revisionism,” supporters have filled Internet chat rooms with discussions of “the elite liberal media” and calls of winning “one for the Gipper.” Their opponents, who either support the film’s accuracy or simply believe television movies aren’t meant to teach history, are embarrassed that CBS gave in to demands rather than standing by their film.¹⁶

The uproar aimed at both CBS and those who were angry about the television movie addressed many issues—including the fear that outside interests will begin to wield control over the entertainment industry. If my research on related stories is any indication, television is indeed in great danger of being beaten into submission by those who can’t tolerate, don’t understand, and certainly don’t appreciate either poetic license or historical accuracy at the expense of American heroism. “The Internet has empowered the American heartland,” posted one observer. “And now no longer will ordinary

¹⁶ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2003/11/5/45410/1837>

grassroots Americans tolerate having media depictions of the world arbitrarily mediated (and distorted) by an arrogant, unaccountable liberal media elite.”¹⁷

This view is reminiscent of the backlash against museum exhibits that attempt to look more objectively at American history, rather than supporting the myths and mythology of heroic, unblemished commemoration. Historian Joan Scott has written, “There can be no democracy worthy of the name that does not entertain criticism, that suppresses disagreement, that refuses to acknowledge difference as inevitably disruptive of consensus, and that vilifies the search for new knowledge.”¹⁸

Museums have a unique place in American culture. “Challenging sacred historical narrative” may be a “thankless task,” but museums have the ability—and perhaps a duty—to “bring to the surface conflicting readings of our national stories.”¹⁹ Tension is naturally going to exist between the commemorative voice and the analytical historical voice, but museums can use that tension to bring all sides of the story to the visitor. With an explanation that the museum is giving an interpretation, rather than the interpretation, museums give visitors the chance to learn. And why not allow the public the chance to have their say? Give them a voice by asking for their input at the end of exhibits. Museums can learn how visitors feel about those “challenges” to the national narrative.

All museums face the challenge of interpreting history. It is difficult to produce interpretive exhibits that are meaningful and accurate and yet nonjudgmental and acceptable to the public. Some museums have successfully faced that challenge by

¹⁷ <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1014631/posts>

¹⁸ Nash, Gary B., Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 127.

¹⁹ Linenthal and Engelhardt, *History Wars*, pp. 5-6.

purposefully incorporating controversy into their interpretation. One such institution is the Mission Houses Museum in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Hawaii's unique history posed a challenge to the traditional historic house museum. Nearly two centuries have passed since missionaries began arriving on the islands, but their legacy remains. The Mission Houses Museum chose to address that legacy—one greatly criticized by island residents—by directly confronting the “stereotypes, misinformation, and social conflict”²⁰ inherent in the history.

Founded in 1851, the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society had since 1910 attempted to “memorialize the sacrifices and contributions of the missionaries.”²¹ Over the next several decades, the Society created a museum in three historic buildings. It only opened occasionally, and was more or less a “quiet memorial” and the setting for a genealogical club. By 1979, however, when the museum administration undertook a significant reinterpretation, viewpoints towards the activities of the original missionaries had changed.

The missionaries, on the one hand, had “converted the kingdom to Christianity, introduced a written language, began schools and healthcare, codified laws, and helped the small kingdom deal with the mercantile interests of competing Western nations.”²² On the other hand, they were accused of “destroying a native culture, meddling in the politics of an independent nation, and controlling the economy to their own advantage.”²³

²⁰ Herbst, John A., “Historic Houses,” in Leon, Warren and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 106.

²¹ Herbst, “Historic Houses,” p. 107.

²² Herbst, “Historic Houses,” p. 106.

²³ Herbst, “Historic Houses,” p. 107.

At the time when the museum was attempting to restructure, many island residents believed the missionaries were to blame for “the disappearance of a race.”²⁴

The museum confronted these issues head-on, addressing cultural clashes in addition to the missionaries’ viewpoints and native customs. Rather than avoiding the difficulties of interpreting conflicting histories, the museum discusses them. And, through programming, visitors have the opportunity to respond. The society also looks to modern scholarship for its interpretation programs, which “honestly address the social tensions” and “deal directly” with all aspects of Hawaiian history.²⁵ By all accounts, the Mission Houses Museum’s experiment has succeeded, bringing in larger audiences, improving the society’s public image, and educating its visitors about history as well as controversy.

Another historic site, probably more well known than Hawaii’s Mission Houses Museum, has also recently succeeded in addressing tensions. Known for decades as Custer Battlefield National Monument, the park was a “shrine to Custer” and the Seventh Cavalry. Interpretation labels, ignoring the fact that Native Americans had fought and died (or survived) at the site, read “there were no survivors.”²⁶ In 1991, however, by an act of Congress, the National Park Service changed the site’s name to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. Following a congressional mandate to give a more balanced interpretation, the park constructed a monument to the Native Americans, and gave the context of the battle. No longer an “on this day this happened” site, Little Bighorn was successfully reinterpreted. After years of consciously avoiding controversy, NPS determined that the parks need not only be about “feeling good.”²⁷ Indeed, in the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Herbst, “Historic Houses,” p. 108.

²⁶ Pitcaithley, Dwight, NPS Chief Historian, Classroom Lecture, October 1, 2003.

²⁷ Pitcaithley, Classroom Lecture.

past decade, NPS has created or reinterpreted a series of sites to address contentious issues and give differing perspectives.

Topics now addressed at such sites as Manzanar, a Japanese-American internment camp in California, and Louisiana's Cane River Creole National Historic Park have appeared in museums, notably "A More Perfect Union" and "From Field to Factory" at the National Museum of American History. These exhibits were not produced without their share of controversy, however. Indeed, Robert McCormick Adams, Smithsonian Secretary from 1984 to 1994, said during his tenure that "one role of the Smithsonian... was to 'put on exhibits that make people uncomfortable.'"²⁸ These exhibits, along with art exhibit "The West as America," which confronted stereotypes in art, were criticized because they challenged the conventional, heroic American narrative.

"The West as America," which opened in 1991 at the National Museum of American Art, in particular drew the wrath of many, including some senators, who threatened to cut funding, and the librarian of Congress, who called the exhibit "perverse" and "destructive."²⁹ These critics were upset that the exhibit's curators had "pointed out elements of nationalism, racism, and imperialism... in the painters' representations of the frontier."³⁰ In spite of the controversies, these exhibits—with occasional minor changes to labels—went on as planned. "The West as America" was highly successful, doubling attendance at the American Art museum. It didn't become a traveling exhibit, however—the two cities signed up to host it cancelled because of the

²⁸ Kohn, "History at Risk," p. 143.

²⁹ Nash et al., *History on Trial*, p. 124. Nash also reminds readers that Boorstin had published a book on U.S. history that "neatly elided all mention of slavery."

³⁰ *Ibid.*

fight over the text, even after “white privilege,” for instance, was removed.³¹ In retrospect, this was certainly a precursor to the events three years later that shut down the *Enola Gay* exhibit.

Tackling African American History

Within “America on the Move,” the new transportation exhibit at the National Museum of American History, curators have tackled some difficult topics, and done so in a way that makes visitors think and question. They address issues of racial segregation in the transportation industries, for example, telling visitors the true story of an African American woman who was forced out of her seat on a train. Hearing that woman’s voice will more than likely make visitors pause and reflect. In the rapid transit car from 1950s Chicago, however, the “film” clip shows blacks and whites seated together in the front of the car. The transit system may have been more “democratic,” as one curator said on the History Channel special about the exhibit, but would a black woman have been permitted to sit in that seat in the 1950s? The system’s apparent inclusiveness can make visitors wonder about both the exhibit’s historical accuracy³² and America’s history of segregation.

When it comes to African American history and its presentation in museums, the Smithsonian has attempted to improve. For the past decade or two, American blacks have been included in exhibits that in the past might have excluded them. “From Field to Factory” is an entire exhibit devoted to the history of African Americans during and after the Civil War. And since 1967 the Smithsonian has supported the Anacostia

³¹ Wallach, Alan, *Exhibiting Controversy* (Amherst, MA: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 109.

³² It certainly made me wonder about it. I’ve been doing some research on it, and the Supreme Court ruled on this issue in about 1956. NMAH probably wouldn’t have done it if it weren’t potentially possible.

Neighborhood Museum, which—although perceived as an “experimental facility”³³ for the community—has developed into a center for African American history and art. The museum is located far from the central Mall in Northwest Washington, however, and over the years some viewed the Smithsonian as “shunting the responsibility [for presenting black culture] off to Anacostia.”³⁴ Indeed, twenty years ago, before “From Field to Factory” was developed, many critics believed that the Smithsonian was sanctioning a “segregation of culture.”³⁵

In spite of this feeling that the Smithsonian was avoiding topics of black history and culture on the mall, in general the Anacostia Museum is perceived as a success. In more than 30 years’ worth of *Washington Post* articles about or referencing the museum, there has been very little criticism directed at the museum itself. Museum scholar Edward Alexander suggests that the museum’s independence—and its status as a neighborhood institution—contributed to its success. Organizations such as the Anacostia Museum, New York’s El Museo del Barrio, and other “ethnic minority neighborhood museums,” he writes, “are fiercely independent.”³⁶ He continues:

... They will accept financing, materials, and technical help from large, well-established museums, but they insist on developing their own programs and doing their own thing. They often are headed by charismatic leaders... The neighborhood centers are financed chiefly by grants from urban-improvement programs, the National Endowments, and private foundations...³⁷

Perhaps this is the key. With strong leadership, a commitment to independence, and a reliance not on the federal government but on programs that want to help and

³³ Thompson, Vernon C., “Anacostia Museum Seeks New Status From Smithsonian,” *The Washington Post* (March 6, 1980), p. DC1.

³⁴ Latimer, Leah Y., “Anacostia Museum: A Mixture of City, National Culture,” *The Washington Post* (September 22, 1982), p. DC3.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Alexander, Edward P., *Museums in Motion* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), p. 226.

³⁷ Ibid.

contribute, but not control them, neighborhood museums can have the freedom to operate as they wish. And they can address topics that many larger museums—especially those with federal financing or conservative constituents—have difficulties addressing. The federal government still has its own agenda, its own story to tell; this may be why the Smithsonian, at least, has encountered problems.

About that money...

Controversy often appears where money is concerned, on the financial side of exhibitions. Where funding comes from plays an increasing role in the perception of museums as possible “tools” of powerful donor corporations (or individual donors). Of “America on the Move,” for example, *Washington Post* writer Bob Thompson has asked, “Would the bankrolling of the show by the world’s largest automobile manufacturer [General Motors] influence the way the Smithsonian presented transportation history?”³⁸ The museum insists that General Motors had no say in the content of the exhibit, although the company did ask for more GM cars in the exhibition—a request the museum denied. The Smithsonian has acknowledged, however, that “with GM’s name going over the door ... the perception problem was a serious one.”³⁹

How the public sees “the commercial branding of public space”⁴⁰ is difficult to gauge. In an America familiar and comfortable with corporate sponsorship in so many parts of everyday life, the General Motors Hall of Transportation may seem as normal as FedEx Field and Paramount’s King Dominion. Yet to many in the museum profession,

³⁸ Thompson, Bob, “The Wheel Thing: Smithsonian’s Massive Transportation Show Keeps to the Highway,” *The Washington Post* (November 22, 2003), p. C01.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

questions of integrity and influence often arise. In the years since the Catherine Reynolds debacle at the Smithsonian, when she withdrew her sizable donation after curators clashed with her ideas about the content of a planned exhibition, it has become common for curators especially to ask how much influence a prominent donor might have. Even the sponsor might be placed “in the uncomfortable position of apparently endorsing or withdrawing from a specific argument.”⁴¹

When the money comes from the federal government, on the other hand, the government, and the public, tend to be much more concerned about how that money is used and whether an exhibit using that funding is appropriate or not. The strong reaction to “The West as America” wouldn’t have involved senators if the Smithsonian were not receiving federal funds. The critics of the *Enola Gay* exhibit were powerful for that same reason. Congress sees history as a “march of progress.”⁴² As citizens of the country that “conquered the wilderness” and “expanded democracy,” congressmen often want everything to have patriotic overtones.⁴³ If they are allowed to be, they can be a serious impediment to Smithsonian exhibits. Threatening to withhold funding and support, Congress can affect the National Museums’ ability to produce challenging, controversial exhibits.

Nigel Briggs, a designer at NMAH, once quoted a teacher as saying, “Good history can’t be written until all the participants have died.”⁴⁴ While the National Air and Space

⁴¹ Harris, “Museums and Controversy,” p. 1110.

⁴² Craig, Bruce, National Coalition for History, Classroom Lecture, October 29, 2003.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Briggs, Nigel, NMAH Designer, Classroom lecture, November 12, 2003.

Museum may have been shocked into believing this nearly a decade ago, it doesn't have to be true. With a little common sense and a lot of preparation—and a great deal of thought and hard work—museums can, and should, tackle any history they choose. They shouldn't be afraid to go after all the stories of American history, be they good, bad, nice, or ugly. As Lisa Simpson explained to her brother Bart on a recent episode of TV's "The Simpsons," "You can't whitewash history."

I began with a quotation about building an African American history museum and turning it into a community and a site for an interracial democracy. With "a larger mandate than simply education and recognition,"⁴⁵ the new museum will undoubtedly attempt to address very difficult issues. Indeed, Kansas senator Sam Brownback has said it "will be a catalyst for racial reconciliation and healing" and will probe and "celebrate" an incredibly diverse, "difficult, rich and magnificent history, troubling history."⁴⁶

Museums wage a constant struggle for interpreting history—some have succeeded, and some have failed. Only time will tell if the Smithsonian's planned National Museum of African American History and Culture will win that struggle, and become a place of openness, accuracy, and—truly—truthful history.

⁴⁵ Trescott, Jacqueline, "Congress Salutes Lewis's Drive for Museum," *The Washington Post* (November 22, 2003), p. C02

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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