

Roger R. Trask Award Lecture, 2009

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by the SHFG to honor the memory and distinguished career of the late SHFG President and longtime federal history pioneer and mentor Roger R. Trask. The award is presented to persons whose careers and achievements reflect a commitment to, and an understanding of, the unique importance of federal history work and the SHFG's mission. Roger D. Launius, Senior Curator in the Space History Division of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum and SHFG President from 2003 to 2004, delivered the inaugural Trask Lecture at the Society's annual conference at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, March 19, 2009.

Federal History and National Identity: Reflections from the Trenches*

Roger D. Launius

There is no question that the American public has an unabashed appetite for history, not only the history of all eras but also history of a specific type. The emphasis on a “consensus” view of national history is present everywhere, and certainly so in the context of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum (NASM). There is an inside joke that NASM is intensely interested in everything from the bottom of the airplane up but completely disinterested in anything from the bottom of the airplane to the ground. This has enabled the institution’s directors to concentrate on non-contentious themes in a museum that is viewed reverentially, even as sacred space, by many of the individuals and organizations long associated with flight. This is demonstrated everywhere at NASM, and although historians might appropriately think that the discourse presented there is too often simplistic and stilted, efforts to move in a different direction have thus far been difficult. This presentation explores a few of the issues affecting the presentation of aerospace history in a museum setting. These thoughts are tentative and speculative, but hopefully stimulating and worthy of further consideration for the broader sphere of federal history work.

There are several core questions worth considering:

- Why has there been so much controversy over history, particularly in education and public history work, in the last few years?
- How and why have history wars been waged?
- What is the appropriate role of the federal historian in these debates?

The discussion that follows explores these issues.

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Consensus History or Not?

It may be that we are living at a time when Americans are seeking to reassert a national and cultural identity that seemed in jeopardy in the aftermath of the cold war. Throughout most of American history, many Americans' conceptions of their past has been informed by views of nationalism, exceptionalism, and triumphalism. During the earliest years of struggle with the Soviet Union after 1945, historians increasingly emphasized an exceptionalistic interpretation of the American past. Richard Hofstadter, the foremost historian of the consensus school, noted that as many people rethought America's past after World War II, Nazi extermination camps, and totalitarianism of all stripes, they came to "a revival of the old feeling that the United States is better and different." In such a context, he asserted, emphasis on conflict in American history seemed quite out of touch with the issues of concern to those seeking to understand the past as an entrée to dealing with present situations.

That consensus interpretation celebrated the long tradition of shared American ideals and values while de-emphasizing conflict, and that made the United States and its people somehow more socially advanced. Its advocates questioned the ideas and people who challenged those cherished principles, seeing in many of them strains of authoritarianism, anarchy, and narrow- and simple-mindedness of all varieties. Much of this approach, advocated a pragmatic liberalism that many believed was in constant jeopardy from forces of fear, anti-intellectualism, and authoritarianism.

But that master narrative of American history began to break down with the rise of the new social history of the 1960s. As Peter Charles Hoffer commented in *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud—American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin* (2004):

Outraged by the Viet Nam War and inspired by the civil rights movement, this new generation of professional historians set themselves the task of dismantling consensus history. Some of them were political radicals, and they gave renewed life to the progressive critique of consensus. Others were more concerned with black history and women's history and were determined to move the story of these groups to center stage.

By the 1980s, the consensus, exceptionalistic perspective on the American past had crumbled throughout academia, but it had not done so among the broader public and in the cultural institutions that sought to speak to the public. Those sectors represented a collective memory of the American past that was largely comforting and emphasized the idea of one people, one nation.

This shift of academic history from an emphasis on broad social unity to a multicultural, in some cases divisive, perspective on the past deeply troubled some elements of society. These traditionally minded groups viewed history as largely a civics lesson 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. They questioned the necessity of alternate views of seeing the past, the reexamination of traditional interpretations, and the more multicultural, relativistic, and conflict-oriented approach to historical inquiry. It was during this era that "revisionist history" first entered the lexicon as

a term of derision, as if understanding of the past could never be altered in any way. Numerous castings of aspersions on the academic approach to history, the fruits of professors' historical research, and professional historians as a group emerged from the 1980s on and accelerated as the century came to a close.

This debate represented a battle for control of the national memory. Would that vision be one that is unified—one people, one nation—or one that is fragmented and personal? Having lost this battle in higher education, or perhaps not even fully joining it, the forces of consensus and continuity struggled to control the far more significant and broader reach of history outside the colleges and universities. Critics believed that they had to prevail in those settings for the good of the nation as a whole. The effort became something of a crusade, but not one orchestrated from the top down via some master plan. Instead, as individual issues arose the cultural right joined the fray to defeat what they viewed as a damaging, unusable version of the American past.

Attacks on the “new social history” abounded in the 1990s, such as the conflict over the National History Standards. Lynne Cheney, who had actually overseen the beginning of the effort as director of the National Endowment of the Humanities in 1992, led an attack on the National History Standards being created for K-12 educators beginning in 1994, and it did not abate for over a year. She, as well as many other conservatives, took aim at the National History Standards as representative of the perspective of academic historians and one that failed to buttress the nation-state. It presented, in her estimation, a “grim and gloomy” perspective on the American past that was far too representative of political correctness. As columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote at the time of the debate, “The whole document strains to promote the achievements and highlight the victimization of the country’s preferred minorities, while straining equally to degrade the achievements and highlight the flaws of the white males who ran the country for its first two centuries.” In the end the conservative assault succeeded in forcing a major revision of the standards and the wholesale jettisoning of the teaching examples that had engendered the most serious criticism.

These efforts to control the telling of the past in the public sphere reached a broad audience through many avenues such as television, museums, and the elementary and secondary schools. Some of those efforts were subtle, but others have been heavy-handed. For example, as recently as June 2006 Florida Governor Jeb Bush signed the “A++” law aimed at reforming K-12 education in his state. A small but significant part of this legislation dealt with the teaching of history. Among other things, it mandated that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.” It also directed a “character-development curriculum [that] shall stress the qualities of patriotism, responsibility, citizenship, kindness, respect for authority, life, liberty, and personal property, honesty, charity, self-control, racial, ethnic, and religious tolerance, and cooperation.” Finally, it directed an emphasis on “the nature and importance of free enterprise to the United States economy.”

While much of this language would place a “civics” spin on the teaching of American history—and could be largely innocuous—should the law find rigorous enforcement it offers room for

only a narrow presentation of historical facts and little latitude for interpretation. Interpretation, of course, is the “stuff” of historical investigation and imagination; this approach represents a blatant pursuit of a “one nation-one people” approach to history and strives for consensus and continuity.

Perceiving the Past

Mostly without even realizing it, individuals tend to divide time into three general, inconsistent, and individualistic spheres or cones of memory, all of them represented in museums. The first is a sphere of personal experience. Events that individuals participated in personally or that had salience to their individual lives are the first and most immediate sphere. These differ from person to person, and include not only activities that the individual experienced firsthand but events of great importance that took place in their memory. For instance, virtually all Americans know where they were and what they were doing when they learned of the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington. The same is true for other dramatic incidents in individual lives.

It is this memory of our individual and immediate experiences that govern most people’s perspective on the past. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in their study of popular uses of history in American life, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998), noted that far from Americans being disengaged from history, as has been routinely thought because of their detachment from national themes, most people have supplanted interest in these broader themes to the history of family and locale. Indeed, Rosenzweig and Thelen insist that Americans “pursue the past actively and make it part of everyday life.” They found that no more than 24 percent of their sample answered that the history of the United States was the past they felt was “most important” to them, as opposed to the 50–60 percent who identified a more intimate past as central to their lives.

This concern for local and personal history is expressed by visitors routinely at the Smithsonian Institution. The National Air and Space Museum is the most visited museum in the world, and certainly its attraction is in no small measure the result of the immediacy of the subject that it interprets. Repeatedly, visitors come looking for an artifact to which they have a personal connection. Steve Lubar, who curated the “America on the Move” exhibit at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, made the same point by observing that for all of the exhibit’s otherwise spectacular features, the majority of visitors only really ponder its later parts where their personal memory allows them to connect to the artifacts and story in a deeply personal and idiosyncratic manner. He noted that of the 15 sections of this exhibit, most people breezed through the first 12, and mostly stopped for extended periods in sections more recent in time and with artifacts, such as a used car showroom from the 1950s and a traffic jam with numerous recent vintage and quite cherry automobiles that they remembered. Like politics, to paraphrase Tip O’Neill, all history is local.

Less immediate but still resonating with Americans is a second sphere of history that is not intimate to the individual but related by members of the family, by close friends, and by mentors. While the person may have no individual sense of history about World War II, for

instance, they have heard stories about it and its effects on families and loved ones. It has a reverberation of meaning because of this connection. The visitors to the National Air and Space Museum are certainly there to see what most consider wonders of modern technology, but while they may have no firsthand knowledge of flight beyond the rather unpleasant experience of flying in a cramped airliner they have certainly heard stories from close relatives who flew in war or helped to send Americans to the Moon in the 1960s or helped build new aircraft. This shrine to American flight technology has power precisely because of its connection to intimate stories.

The third sphere encompassing all humans is the past that has no special connection through loved ones or personal experience. In that context, events, epochs, themes, and the like discussed throughout the broad expanse of history have essentially an equal importance. The Crusades, the Ming Dynasty, and the English, French, American, or Russian revolutions all essentially stand at the same level for most of those who have no intimate connection to them. As professionals, we face challenges in creating resonance with those past events, and visitors' perspectives are always obscure as they digest them. The distant past also has considerably more dark spaces than more immediate historical events. An important challenge for all historians is how to breach that truly lost and forgotten past and offer its meaning to people. This is done through many processes, especially rituals, public representations, reenactments; museums and historic sites; and a range of other possibilities for constructing and reinforcing meaning. There are numerous examples of this basic fact across a broad spectrum of American life, as master narratives of American history are reinforced rather than reinterpreted.

Where Does Federal History Fit?

It seems that the American history taught in schools has been consciously constructed to enhance the citizenship of the populace. Of course, what enhanced citizenship means has differed over time and space, and there has been constant renegotiation over these national stories and their meaning. The fierceness of the debate results from the periodic need to redefine national identity, particularly as the fundamental emphasis has been on a traditional vision of the American past—on a consensus interpretation of one nation, one people.

Where, in such a cacophony of competing ideas and issues, can we hope to situate the history of the federal government? Where can we begin to understand and explain American memory, myth, and the largely unrecoverable past of the nation? Where can we make a positive impact on a varied public with our historical efforts? Do we tend to reinforce cherished beliefs, celebrating the master narrative of the one nation, one people, or something else? And whatever we do—since both perspectives are important—do we bring to that understanding the important social, political, and environmental issues of our time?

Federal historians play a critical role in this effort to understand our national past. As I see it, historians must serve the broader community by mediating and explaining the largely unrecoverable past with its myth and memory. These interpretations can then take their place among those of all other groups with their own truths and perceptions.

Trouble develops, however, when there is a significant disconnect between what a particular social or interest group believes about itself through memory and myth and what historians conclude about that reconstruction of the past. All human groups like to be flattered; historians generally tend to do so by reconfirming the digested mythic past pretty much as it has been remembered by the group. The result is a self-serving history of the group. Most histories succumb to this fault, including my own. As such, it is embraced and used by the group to help define itself.

I would suggest that as federal historians one of our goals should be to move a bit more outside of the audience we serve to mediate the differences between those inside and those who are outside it. We can help in more ways than we can ever know to help illuminate greater understanding. With the fracturing of society at every level into smaller and smaller, tightly knit groups I'm not sure that there is any greater task for the historian at present. The breaking down of boundaries and the understanding of the "other" should be a critical component of our discourse. To quote William McNeill, "What we need to do as historians and as human beings is to recognize this complexity [of life on planet Earth] and balance our loyalties so that no one group will be able to command total commitment."

This is a tall order, no doubt. The manner in which it is accomplished effectively is myriad but never easy. In an era in which questioning the process that led to war with Iraq is viewed as unpatriotic, there is little reason to believe that tolerance for a wide-ranging serious debate on numerous controversial issues would be tolerated. My colleague Tom Crouch recently remarked that a lot has changed in the last 20 years. In the late 1980s, he curated an exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History on Japanese internment in relation to the American Constitution. Although controversial then, he did not believe he could mount that same exhibit today. What does that mean for historians, curators, social commentators, and our ability to undertake useful educational endeavors in the 21st century?

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