



LEFT HOVANESS AVEDIAN, RIGHT MARTY J. KALB, CENTER FOR HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE STUDIES

# I CIVIC REFLECTION THE UNDERSIDE OF HISTORY

*“The widest divide is between two groups. There are those who look to history to right wrongs. They want past abuses exposed; they want the record aired and cleansed, and if possible contrition exacted from the perpetrators or the successors of the perpetrators. Then there are those who want history to be edifying, to speak to the nation’s noblest traditions, to let bygones be bygones, to reconcile through fading memory.”*

*Joyce Appleby, Professor Emerita, University of California, Los Angeles*

**CIVIC EDUCATION MAY SOUND UNCONTROVERSIAL, AS BLAND AS APPLE PIE,** but this is far from the case. We don’t have a monolithic public, but rather one fractured by dozens of different perspectives of the past. The widest divide is between two groups. There are those who look to history to right wrongs. They want past abuses exposed; they want the record aired and cleansed, and if possible, contrition exacted from the perpetrators or the successors of the perpetrators. Then there are those who want history to be edifying, to speak to the nation’s noblest traditions, to let bygones be bygones, to reconcile through fading memory.

Since the 1970s, the popularity of commemorations, memorials, and exhibitions has strengthened efforts to use historical presentations to reveal moments of shame. The Human Rights Movement has made men and women everywhere acutely aware of their rights, particularly the right to have their grievances taken seriously. But campaigns to expose police brutality, disappearances, massacres, enslavements, lynchings, exploitations, and ethnic cleansing—because they are local—usually take place among people who don’t want these topics discussed.

I drew comfort about this situation when reading *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflict* by the German philosopher Axel Honneth. The gist of his argument is that aggrieved groups denied respect form an identity around

their quest for justice. And this struggle for recognition is intensifying globally. After reading the book, I began to collect items about the history wars around the world. I now have a bulging file; every week brings a new item. There are of course the conspicuous cases of Germany and the Holocaust, of South Africa and apartheid, of the Japanese in World War II, of the United States and slavery. But the field is much vaster than that.



In Brazil, a dictatorship was responsible for a number of imprisonments, disappearances, and deaths from 1964 until its end in the mid ’80s. At that time a decision was made not to air the record. And this was observed by the politicians, even

by the current president, Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva, who was actually interned during the period of repression. But then two photographs of a well-known guerilla, killed during the dictatorship, surfaced. And the person who they were traced to said, “Oh, there are dozens of boxes of records.” And since then, the army has revealed that it has all kinds of documents of every sort,

LEFT: GENOCIDE MEMORIAL IN YEREVAN, CAPITAL OF ARMENIA. ABOVE: SCULPTURE BY ISRAELI MENASHE KADISHMAN IN BERLIN’S JEWISH MUSEUM.



LEFT: ONE OF DOROTHEA LANGE'S MANY INTERNMENT CAMP PHOTOGRAPHS, SUPPRESSED FOR SHOWING SYMPATHY WITH HER SUBJECTS. RIGHT: ID-TAGGED AND AWAITING DEPORTATION ON BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, WASHINGTON.

including photographs. One box had almost a complete skeleton in it. And this has created terrible embarrassment because the government does not want to proceed with the airing. It's too recent; too many people would be implicated, some still in government. And of course there is a movement to make the documents public. Considering that Chile and Argentina have set a remarkable record for reviewing atrocities, probably the Brazilians will have to yield.

**IN SPAIN, AFTER FRANCISCO FRANCO'S DEATH IN 1975, POLITICIANS OF THE** left and right formed an informal alliance, deciding not to review the civil war so painful to all, but rather put the nation on the road to democracy with a pact of silence. But in 2001, a relative of someone who had been executed asked for permission to exhume the body from a shallow grave near his house. When the grave was opened up, the memory was opened up too. Everybody wanted to talk about the war. There were documentaries, memorials, a TV series, monographs, and exhibitions—about the conflict and the dictatorship that continued the war against the other side. The Congress of Deputies passed a resolution of moral recognition for the victims. One citizen said the Spanish had confused amnesty with amnesia, reconciliation with forgetting.

Perhaps the most surprising country in my group is France. The National Assembly passed a law calling for a positive portrayal of the colonial past. This did not go over very well in Algeria or Martinique, creating a flap as they resisted quite dramatically. Then there were riots among North African immigrants—all the more embarrassing because of this law. Jacques Chirac called for change, saying that the statute was dividing the French. It must be rewritten. It is not up to the law to write history. Well, yes and no, that's the virtuous position, but I think anthropologist Mary Douglas, writing in *How Institutions Think*, has a more accurate account.

To keep its shape, any institution needs to control the memory of its members, causing them to forget experiences incompatible with its righteous image. This is certainly how nations have behaved for a long time—denying abuses, suppressing the memory of events, and generally whitewashing the record. And it's not just the officials. In every one of these countries there's always a divide between the parts of the public that resist the official position and those that applaud it. It's certainly true in the United States. In almost any honest presentation there are those who complain it's really an effort to besmirch history.

The National Park Service is in the middle of this minefield. Any site that touches on the Civil War, Japanese internment, battles with

Native Americans—to name a few—will prompt conflict. I realize you're well aware of this tension.

**A RECENT CONTROVERSY TOOK PLACE ON BAINBRIDGE ISLAND IN THE STATE OF** Washington. There were some 230 Japanese Americans on the island at the beginning of World War II. This was the first group interned in Manzanar. They left Bainbridge in 1942.

Two years ago, a sixth-grade teacher won a state grant for a project to deal with how the event affected the island. The students spent about six weeks on it, eliciting a number of complaints from parents, sometimes about the project's length, other times about its negative aspect. One outraged parent called it an example of an agenda-based curriculum designed to lead our 11-year-olds to hate America. The school called on the support of scholars, drawing sustenance from President Ford's declaration that the evacuation was wrong and from a federal commission that said the internment was motivated largely by prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of leadership. An entire unit of the curriculum could be devoted to fears after Pearl Harbor. Understanding how good people do bad things is an important part of studying history.

I won't trivialize the challenge you're facing by rattling off a list of quick fixes. There isn't any way to avoid controversy when one is committed to presenting honest history. But here are a few guidelines.

Always go with historical fact as represented by contemporary scholarship. But vet those who advance it for bias, overstatement, and distortion. There is usually an impetuous rush that goes with improving on the scholarship of the previous generation.

The outrage expressed by those representing victims doesn't have the same moral quality as the outrage of victims themselves. Highlighting documents, pictures, artifacts, and quotations from the event are better than interpretive statements written in the present.

Present the perspectives of those not on the side of the angels; cultivate an appreciation of the past as a foreign country. Help people understand why ideas not now admissible once were.

And finally, present the United States as a nation struggling to live up to the demanding values imposed by the Declaration of Independence. Our society has done much to rectify injustices. This record should be celebrated at the sites where abuses are depicted. Showing how our ideals have been contested, neglected, and reaffirmed will give everyone something of value to take away.

The United States has the largest body of scholarship exploring the so-called underside of history. This is partly because historians have chosen to steer an independent course as witnesses to the past rather than as spokespersons for official positions. It's wonderful to have the National Park Service share that commitment.

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection, January 14, 2006. Joyce Appleby is the former president of the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association as well as former Harnsworth Professor of American History at Oxford. She is the author of *A Restless Past: History and the American Public* and *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*. Contact her at the University of California, Los Angeles, email [appleby@history.ucla.edu](mailto:appleby@history.ucla.edu).

LEFT DOROTHEA LANGENATIONAL ARCHIVES; RIGHT MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND INDUSTRY, SEATTLE





NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ABOVE: WILLIAM CLARK'S ILLUSTRATION OF SLAVES CUTTING SUGAR CANE DURING HIS VISIT TO ANTIGUA IN 1823, ON VIEW AT THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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*“The New-York Historical Society has a wonderful exhibit about the history of slavery in the city. It has drawn the largest crowd in the society’s history, which goes back over 200 years. I was just there. The audience was incredibly diverse—old, young; black, white. It was the kind of group you don’t often see in the national parks.”*

*Eric Foner, Dewitt Clinton Professor of History, Columbia University*

**MANY VISITORS COME TO THE PARKS LOOKING FOR TRUTH, BUT OFTEN THERE** isn’t one single truth that is completely uncontroversial. History is not a collection of facts. It is an ongoing dialogue, involving many different people with many different points of view. Sometimes we don’t give audiences credit for being able to tackle that.

We live at an odd moment in terms of the public and history. On the one hand, attendance at museums is growing. The History Channel is tremendously successful. The number-one best seller on Amazon’s list is Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book about Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet. David McCullough’s book *1776*—I just noticed in the *New York Times*—was the fifth-best-selling book for the year. Many people outside the academic world are reading these books and I say more power to the authors.

On the other hand, the subjects are the same as you would have found on the best-seller list 50 years ago. Perhaps more importantly, and I don’t say this in an uncharitable way, the content probably doesn’t differ that much either. The approaches—by people like McCullough, who I admire very much, he’s a wonderful writer—choose not to engage the debates that historians engage in.

# THE ABSENCE OF COLOR

**“People of color are not very visible in the national parks,” says Myron Floyd, professor of parks and natural resources recreation at North Carolina State University. It is an indication, he says, of the great distance between the promise and the reality of the parks as places of civic engagement. In a survey of people who do not visit the parks, says Floyd, Hispanic and African Americans were far more likely to report disincentives such as cost, distance, and a lack of information on what to do when they arrive. Of those who did visit, African Americans were most likely to say that that they did not feel at ease and that park staff gave poor service. By 2060, the census predicts, most Americans will be non-Anglo; the implications for civic engagement are enormous. “If the pattern persists,” Floyd asks, “how will the Park Service engage an increasingly multicultural society? Will the parks be relevant to future generations?” The answers, he says, will be critical to maintaining popular support.**

*“Reconstruction is an era central to understanding our history, with issues relating to citizenship, to democracy, to who is an American, to relations between the federal and state government. That’s when the concept of civil rights originated in American law.”*

If you read *1776* you get a wonderful picture of what happened that year. But you get no sense about the debates over liberalism or republicanism or of the role of ordinary Americans in the struggles of the Revolution. If you read Goodwin’s book you get a fascinating picture of Lincoln and his cabinet, but you don’t get any sense of how African Americans may have affected the coming of the war, or emancipation, which is something that many historians today spend a lot of time looking at.

Again, this is not to criticize, but it goes back to what Joyce Appleby was saying. The people reading these books are looking for a certain kind of national celebration. You’re not finding books about runaway slaves or women’s suffrage on the best-seller list.

**A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS ON A COMMITTEE LOOKING AT THE** National Museum of American History, the most popular exhibit was on the first ladies’ gowns. Not too many of my graduate students were doing dissertations on that topic. Still, one hopes that visitors wandered upstairs to look at the exhibit on Japanese American internment. I think it is possible to draw a lot of people into this kind of subject matter. The New-York Historical Society has a wonderful exhibit about the history of slavery in the city. It has drawn the largest crowd in the society’s history, which goes back over 200 years. I was just there. The audience was incredibly diverse—old, young; black, white. It was the kind of group you don’t often see in the national parks.

There is good reason to tackle the controversial, and the payoff is in attracting people. I’ve devoted my career of late to Reconstruction, the era after the Civil War. There are numerous parks dealing with the war, some very good. But there’s not a single park devoted to Reconstruction, with the exception of the Andrew Johnson home-  
stead, where the point of view is, shall we say, a little bit out of date.

Reconstruction is an era central to understanding our history, with issues relating to citizenship, to democracy, to who is an American, to relations between the federal and state government. That’s when the concept of civil rights originated in American law.

Unfortunately there’s a lot of misunderstanding and even resentment about Reconstruction. There are still people who don’t want that piece of our history uncovered. Civil rights sites, which are now burgeoning, ought to talk about their origins in that era. These issues are still very much with us today.

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection, January 14, 2006. Eric Foner has served as president of the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, and the Society of American Historians. An acclaimed historian, he has written many books including *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* and *The Story of American Freedom*. Contact Foner at Columbia University, email [ef17@columbia.edu](mailto:ef17@columbia.edu).

BELOW: BAND OF THE 107TH U.S. COLORED INFANTRY, 1865. BOTTOM: VIRGINIA FREEDMEN CAST THEIR FIRST VOTE AFTER THE PASSING OF THE 15TH AMENDMENT.





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*“I wonder if we have not added to people’s burdens by our repeated stance that there is no one truth. Martin Blatt, in the introduction to an issue of the George Wright Forum, said ‘civic engagement encompasses both the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and a commitment to act accordingly.’ So what do we do? Stir up controversy and then say, ‘Well it’s just a point of view you know.’ That’s a very tenuous position.”*

*Conversation: Eric Foner, Myron Floyd, Patricia Limerick, Michael Kammen, Edward Linenthal, Richard West, John Francis*

**ERIC FONER: THERE’S A SORT OF INERTIA AT SOME OF THE PARKS TODAY,** an acceptance of the current state of affairs as “natural.” Even though the parks were created at certain moments in time, for certain reasons, reflecting points of view that are often very out of date. Take Gettysburg. On the one hand it’s a battlefield and what can you say about that? But it was put up at a moment when the emphasis in national thinking was on reconciliation—“amnesia” as Joyce Appleby called it. I was shocked the first time I went there. It seemed like a shrine to the South, even though it was the Union’s greatest victory. It represented the high tide of the Confederacy. There was no mention of slavery, and that wasn’t an oversight. The park reflected a certain vision and got stuck. Now it’s being changed, which has led to discomfort among people comfortable with the old way of thinking.

Every national park is an historical snapshot. Grant’s Tomb, which is eight blocks from where I live, has a terrible description of Reconstruction. Yet it’s impossible to change without going through 50 different bureaucratic procedures. Once something’s set in stone it’s hard to get rid of it. So people come and find a vision of history that can be very alienating.

*Eric Foner is Dewitt Clinton Professor of History, Columbia University; Myron Floyd is Professor of Parks and Natural Resources Recreation at North Carolina State University; Patricia Limerick is Professor of History and Environmental Studies, University of Colorado; Michael Kammen is Newton C. Farr Professor of American History and Culture at Cornell University and a former member of the National Park System Advisory Board; Edward Linenthal is Professor of History at the University of Indiana and Editor of the Journal of American History; Richard West is Founding Director, Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian; John Francis is a Vice President, National Geographic Society, and a member of the National Park System Advisory Board.*

TOP RIGHT: THE NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER.  
BOTTOM RIGHT: BRONZE STATUES OF THE MEN WHO SIGNED THE CONSTITUTION, IN SIGNERS’ HALL.

*We the People* of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.





DAVID ANDREWS/NPS

LEFT: THE ENOLA GAY B-29 BOMBER, NOW ON DISPLAY AT THE NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM'S STEVEN F. UDVAR-HAZY CENTER, NEAR DULLES AIRPORT OUTSIDE WASHINGTON, DC.

## *“In retrospect, the Smithsonian made a very big mistake in the way they handled*

**MYRON FLOYD:** Even among those who can afford to go to a national park, can they understand the deeper meanings behind the symbols, the artifacts, the sites, the stories? You have to relate something to the unique personality and experience of the visitor.

**EDWARD LINENTHAL:** I've tried with no success over the years to convince people that controversy doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong. It means that people are engaged. If all of us in this room were asked to memorialize something that none of us cared about, it would be easy wouldn't it?

What should it look like?

I don't care.

Where should it go?

Doesn't matter.

Should it be representational?

Maybe, maybe not.

But if we were all asked to think about why we are invested in a particular park site, I suspect many of us would come up with different reasons. Well, that's what controversy is about. And being able to use that constructively is a virtue.

**PATRICIA LIMERICK:** I wonder if we have not added to people's burdens by our repeated stance that there is no one truth. Martin Blatt, in the introduction to an issue of the *George Wright Forum*, said “civic engagement encompasses both the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and a commitment to act accordingly.” So what do we do? Stir up controversy and then say, “Well it's just a point of view you know.” That's a very tenuous position.

**ERIC FONER:** I neither believe there is one truth nor that every opinion carries equal weight. When sites are modernized, visitors, particularly older ones, say “Wait a minute, I was taught that the tariff was the cause of the Civil War.” Do we say views change for various reasons? We haven't found a new box of documents that says “Oh my God, there was slavery back then.” All history is contemporary in the sense that the concerns are given to us by the present. But the answers are given to us by history. That's something that can be conveyed.

**MICHAEL KAMMEN:** There was debate in Congress over renaming what was once called the Custer National Battlefield. You read the testimonies of senators from the mountain states—who were receiving strong pressure from interest groups—and they made remarks like, “Why can't they leave history the way it was written? Don't they understand that the facts are known and established?” The significance of what happened at these places changes over time. And there is as much educational improvement needed on Capitol Hill as there is among the public.

**RICHARD WEST:** My home is the Smithsonian Institution. In retrospect, the Smithsonian made a very big mistake in the way they handled the controversy over the Enola Gay. It goes to the idea of a singular truth.

*the Enola Gay. It goes to the idea of a singular truth. There are those who felt that that's the only thing the Smithsonian should speak. That there was truth sitting out there with a capital T and various groups were arguing vehemently to gain control of it. The Smithsonian and the Park Service should be safe places for unsafe ideas.”*

There are those who felt that that's the only thing the Smithsonian should speak. That there was truth sitting out there with a capital T and various groups were arguing vehemently to gain control of it. The Smithsonian and the Park Service should be safe places for unsafe ideas. They should be able to incorporate this kind of discourse.

**EDWARD LINENTHAL:** I have the honor of serving on the Flight 93 Committee, where a controversy began to gain speed and take life on the web. A response in the op-ed pages blunted what could have been very ugly. I was also a member of the advisory committee for the Enola Gay debacle. When I was writing about it in *History Wars*, I had in my files very articulate and defensible responses from people at the National Air and Space Museum, which were never released. When the field is left open, there's a vacuum that's going to be filled.

**JOHN FRANCIS:** I'm on the National Park System Advisory Board and a vice president at *National Geographic*. When we had three networks, there was something called the “flipper effect,” where perhaps 30 percent of our population on a good night could come away feeling moved by the issues. Nowadays, you have a 1 percent share.

At *National Geographic*, we suffer by those numbers, realizing that the way to get people to care is to hit a broad spectrum of media opportunities. If you don't get people tuning in, you aren't going to get the message across.

And the question I have for the National Park Service is how do you get civic engagement into the lexicon—into the blogosphere, if you will? I would argue that at each site there's an opportunity to get out the buzz. Connect with the people who are interested in Harpers Ferry, connect with the people who are interested in the Tetons. That way you get a diverse audience to convene on a common theme.

If you aren't relevant, you aren't going to get the traction you need to advance the dialogue.

Excerpted from an edited transcript of the Scholars Forum: *The National Park Service and Civic Reflection*, January 14, 2006.