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The Smithsonian Scandal that Wasn't

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The capacity to arrive at unexpected agreement is one of humanity's greatest charms. In recent times, sadly, charm has not made much of an appearance in debates over the interpretation of American history.

The fires of the "culture wars" often ignited in disagreements over history. The political squabbles over the Enola Gay and "The West as America" exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution, the debates over national history standards for the public schools, the controversies over the naming and interpreting of battlefield sites: All gave the right and the left opportunities to line up in battle array, with the ritual sparring becoming familiar and predictable, almost to the point of comfort.

In the last few months, the dispute over the Smithsonian's prospective exhibit "The Spirit of America" seemed to give us an almost nostalgic return to the familiar face-offs. To many, it was a reprise of the 1990s, with the defenders of historical integrity lined up, once again, against those who would distort or deny the complexity of the nation's past.

Catherine and Wayne Reynolds gave $38-million to the Smithsonian to finance a permanent exhibit on American achievement. By many accounts in the news media, this was a case where disagreement ruled: The donors supposedly wanted an uncritical, celebratory portrait of American achievement, paying exclusive attention to individuals, while historians took their stand for an accurate and realistic treatment of the past, focused on groups, movements, and social forces. Critics charged that the Smithsonian's leadership had caved in to the donors. Ultimately, the Reynoldses withdrew their gift.

Admittedly, I had only a brief opportunity for firsthand observation, participating last August in a two-and-a-half-day consultation with Catherine and Wayne Reynolds, the head of a foundation they have formed, Smithsonian curators, and outside consultants. In the months since, I have met further with the Reynoldses on two occasions. On the basis of what I have seen myself, I cannot categorize the coverage of "The Spirit of America" as our news media's finest moment. Indeed, my experience leaves me mystified by much of the reportage.

My career as a historian of the American West has involved rearranging the field so that the experience of ethnic and minority groups is front and center. I am a museum-quality

specimen of an unreconstructed, 1960s white liberal. And I had a wonderful time in 1991 defending the Smithsonian's "The West as America" exhibit against its overwrought right-wing critics, who saw its attempt to demythologize the West as an affront to our national identity. The fact that, with such a background, I found considerable common ground with Cathy and Wayne Reynolds is its own testimony that the latest situation must have been considerably more complicated than the public record has allowed it to appear.

The Reynoldses did want to focus on individuals. And yet, contrary to the stereotypes now deeply embedded in coverage of the exhibition they wanted to sponsor, this was not a fight between those who would have removed individuals from history to celebrate them uncritically and those who wanted individual life stories firmly embedded in the broader context of social history. Cathy and Wayne Reynolds agreed that portraits of individual achievement would make no sense unless the obstacles against which those individuals struggled received full coverage. In other words, the history of racism, nativism, poverty, and gender discrimination -- all the topics central to the work of social historians -- could not, and should not, be excised from an exhibit on achievement.

Responsibility for the selection of the individuals to be featured was to lie with a panel on which scholars would be represented. Thus, rather than an unyielding demand from an uncooperative donor, Cathy Reynolds's much-mocked suggestion of including Martha Stewart represented only a moment of speculating on possibilities in a conversation with a reporter.

By current practices in the field of American cultural history, moreover, that was a suggestion worth considering. In the early 19th century, writers like Catharine Beecher played an important role in telling American women how to conduct themselves in their family relationships and social ties. Martha Stewart's success is the latest manifestation of a long history, considered significant by nearly every American historian, of women trying to find orientation and direction in changing times. Using the example of Stewart would, indeed, have offered an effective way of inviting museum visitors to think about a long-running practice and to get a sense of scholarly work in the history of popular culture. The Smithsonian's recent acquisition of Julia Child's kitchen offers, after all, its own recognition of the cultural importance of figures like Child and Stewart.

In a similar way, preliminary discussions referring to accomplished athletes like Michael Jordan struck pundits as frivolous. And yet many academic historians have found in sports an important window on American cultural history. Moreover, Jordan's success rests on a heritage from earlier, embattled figures like Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson. To look at his "individual" achievement is to look, as well, at the people who preceded him in integrating sports and at the discrimination they fought.

Here, in what was billed as a choice between portraits of individual achievers and portrayals of the social history that provided the context for their lives, the war over "The Spirit of America" was supposed to be at its most embittered. In truth, the "war" could have been resolved quickly in peace negotiations. But in the climate of distrust and administrative confusion that has beset the Smithsonian, with donors and curators sharing the unhappy common ground of feeling neglected and unheard, there was no chance to resolve this unnecessary quarrel.

All of which still strikes me as a shame. Given the unmistakable enthusiasm of the public for biographies, an exhibit that profiled individuals could have tapped into that interest in behalf of a deeper understanding of the context of individual lives.

Cathy and Wayne Reynolds and I agreed, equally, on the proposition that historians badly need to find more animated and energized ways of sharing their knowledge with young people. In fact, university history departments are well populated with professors doing their best to put electronic media to work in classrooms to hold the attention of entertainment-saturated students. Here, too, the value of a museum exhibit pushing the envelope on the unconventional use of media was hardly at odds with the enterprises of many historians. The Reynoldses wanted a convergence of cutting-edge visual, light, and sound technologies to hold young people's attention in the most engaging, theatrical, and evocative manner possible -- an undertaking that would have suggested lots of ways to enrich classroom lessons.

In the cause of reckoning with the dilemmas facing today's young people, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and dysfunctional school systems, the Reynoldses and I also agreed that historians can play an important role. While the historical record is full of disheartening and demoralizing stories, it also holds an abundance of tales of people defying defeat and prevailing in good causes. Like the Reynoldses, I believe that those tales can deliver hope and inspiration, qualities in short supply for many young people.

We also agreed that public financing for museum exhibits and other cultural institutions is not, and shows no sign of becoming, adequate for their best operation. For the last decade at the Smithsonian, as the reporter Bob Thompson wrote recently in *The Washington Post,* "all significant exhibitions had to be done with private funds." While there are good arguments to be made for enhancing public support, the reality of our times makes the fostering of productive and respectful exchanges between donors and scholars an absolute necessity for the nation's civic life.

That's why it is such a shame that, writing about "The Spirit of America," many journalists took the easy formula, left over from the culture wars, and cast a much more complicated situation in tired old terms. And, I gather from conversations I've been

having, too many readers, academics not least among them, took the journalists at their word.

I believe that, in this case, the bitter struggle between the goals of the donors and those of many scholars stemmed as much from misunderstanding as from substance. If only for the sake of the future historians who will study this episode as a battle in the turn-of-the-century culture wars, I wish the public record did more than certify and deepen that misunderstanding.

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