of the commerce and nightlife of Baltimore’s famed Pennsylvania Avenue is like taking a swing dance into a jazzy past. There are also displays and videos on the performing arts with an emphasis on youth and plenty of poetry, music, paintings, and sculptures by Maryland artists. The exhibit also emphasizes education, and visitors can sit in a re-creation of a rural schoolhouse and view a video on the struggle against segregated education and the importance of education in the black community.

The museum is a collaboration and a dream of various segments of the Maryland community, and while it is dedicated to the history and culture of black Marylanders, it is significant for all Americans. If a measure of a museum is how much time you need to see everything coupled with how much time you want to spend to see everything, then the Reginald Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture gets high a grade for both. There is a lot to see and do. As a professor of African American history, I could easily teach my courses in the museum and have a wealth of primary source materials at my fingertips, and with all of this, the museum has room to grow. I was never convinced of Maryland as America in miniature, but the museum has convinced me that at the least Maryland is “African America in Miniature.”

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In 1986, E. L. Doctorow wrote: “We have had the bomb on our mind since 1945. It was first our weaponry and then our diplomacy and now it’s our economy. . . . The great golem we have made against our enemies is our culture, our bomb culture—its logic, its faith, its vision.” The recently opened Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada confirms Doctorow’s observation. It also reminds one of how nuclear weapons permeated all aspects of society during the Cold War, when American citizens and their government accepted—at times even welcomed—the explosion of hundreds of nuclear weapons within their own homeland. By presenting the science and spectacle of nuclear weapons testing, the Atomic Testing Museum tells visitors of the price these activities had for Americans.

The Atomic Testing Museum is located just off the Las Vegas Strip, some seventy miles from the 1,375 square miles of the Nevada Test Site (NTS) where the United States conducted hundreds of atmospheric and underground tests during the Cold War. Dedicated in February 2005, the museum is operated by the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation, which was founded in 1998 “for the purpose of preserving and interpreting” the history of the NTS. The museum was financed with public funds as well as private donations and is a member of the Smithsonian Institution Affiliates Program.
The Atomic Testing Museum uses its 8,000 square feet of exhibit space to tell how nuclear weapons testing contributed to keeping international peace and winning the Cold War. It also considers the long-term effects of testing—whereby the equivalent of a small nuclear war was “fought” above and beneath the Nevada desert—on the health, environment, and economy of the region and the nation. While the museum endeavors to give a critical appraisal of U.S. weapons testing, the exhibits’ overall tone is one of justification, necessity, even celebration.

After passing the Harry Reid Exhibit Hall (named in honor of the state senator who helped secure funding for the museum), a visitor enters the galleries by passing a replica of a guard hut, a touch that accentuates the secretive and highly classified nature of America’s decades-long nuclear testing program. One of the first galleries one encounters presents a fascinating collection of material culture from the early years of the Atomic Age. Artifacts, some kitschy, some macabre, but all fascinating and well-chosen, show the inextricable intertwining of popular culture and the Bomb as American consumers—especially children and teens—were presented with atomic comics, atomic “spy-rings,” and models of nuclear weapon delivery systems.

However, the museum’s presentation of the “Dawn of the Atomic Age” ratifies a mythical and debunked version of how and why the first nuclear bombs were used against Japan. Truman is portrayed as a decisive leader who “ordered atomic bombs dropped.” There is, of course, no document in existence in which Truman “ordered” the dropping of Fat Man and Little Boy. Instead, historians have largely accepted the view that Truman inherited a series of assumptions and decisions already made by Franklin Roosevelt and acquiesced to them. Historians will also take issue with the museum’s assertion that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were important “industrial military targets” (if vital to Japan’s war effort, they would have been destroyed earlier by Gen. Curtis LeMay’s armada of conventionally armed B-29s) or that the United States only had two atomic bombs in August 1945. The museum also touches upon the contentious issue which helped torpedo the Smithsonian’s 1995 plan for exhibiting the *Enola Gay* by supporting the controversial and questionable claim that the nuclear bombings of Japan saved “up to a million American casualties alone.”

The majority of the museum’s attention, however, is rightly focused on the history, science, and effects of nuclear testing after 1945. The museum’s galleries lead the visitor through some four decades of weapons testing beginning in 1951 with Operation Ranger, a series of five tests which culminated in a 22 kiloton explosion. Tests at the NTS continued through 1992, when a worldwide testing moratorium went into effect. Numerous and smartly selected artifacts help tell the story of weapons testing on American soil. These include recreations of the famous “mannequin families” which were exposed

to nuclear fires during civil defense–related tests such as Operation Cue in the mid-1950s. Other artifacts contribute to visitors’ understanding of the science and technology behind nuclear weapons tests, including objects in one gallery which show how the development of ultra high-speed and stroboscopic photography techniques was enabled by activities at the NTS.

The museum’s high-tech Ground Zero Theatre provides an approximation of what witnessing one of these tests must have been like. Rumbling bass sounds and blasts of air convey the menace nuclear weapons posed, even to those far away from their hellish effects. The video presents numerous interviews featuring people who worked at the test site. While critical commentary from scholars is interspersed throughout, the overall message suggests that the NTS was an important part of the United States’ national security infrastructure and that the people who worked at the test site were indeed “soldiers” on the frontlines of that conflict.

And what of those people—military and civilian—who witnessed these tests of America’s nuclear arsenals? Tens of thousands of people directly participated in events at the NTS. Some military personnel stood less than a mile away from the explosions and quickly marched into contaminated areas to help strategists understand how soldiers would function on the nuclear battlefield. The museum includes the experiences of some soldiers who were exposed to radiation—one soldier recalls, “We returned to the decontamination area . . . and brushed each other off with brooms.” As a later panel notes, those exposed to such tests could receive compensation from the Department of Energy.

Some attention is given to environmental contamination resulting from NTS activities such as the Baneberry event, a ten kiloton test in 1970 which resulted in a “spectacular accidental release of radioactivity.” However, the effects on military personnel and those “down-winders” who lived in the path of airborne fallout in towns like St. George and Salt Lake City, Utah are not examined closely or critically enough. Further discussion of practices of deceit and omission employed by the Atomic Energy Commission when informing the public of the effects of nuclear testing during the Atomic Age would have provided a more objective account of NTS history. I also would have liked the museum to consider the point of view of those who disagreed with the widespread testing of nuclear weapons by the U.S. and the Soviet Union, especially before the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Such views could be presented in conjunction with those of scientists like Edward Teller and administrators such as Lewis L. Strauss, who both argued strenuously that nuclear testing was vital to national security.

The place of the weapons testing in the local culture and economy of Las Vegas is better presented and, for me, was absolutely fascinating. NTS staff lived at the town of Mercury, Nevada in the 1950s, making it the third largest city in Nevada. The museum provides a sense of what the relatively monotonous life of construction workers and engineers was like when interspersed with the thrill and terror of nuclear explosions. Meanwhile, tests of nuclear weapons became popular tourist attractions and helped drive the growth of
Las Vegas along with better recognized attractions such as blackjack and showgirls. Local newspapers would publicize tests for those who wanted to see something like the sun coming up in the northwest for a change. In 1957, The New York Times even recommended the best vantage points for tourists who wanted to partake in the “honorable pastime of atom-bomb watching.” The town itself benefited from extensive federal largesse through housing and infrastructure benefits; one estimate holds that, by 1970, weapons testing was adding $1 billion annually to the Las Vegas economy.

The museum concludes its exhibits by considering the role of the NTS in the maintenance of the U.S.’s remaining nuclear arsenal and in the storage of hazardous nuclear waste. The Bechtel Foundation, for example, sponsored a “Stewards of the Land” gallery which focuses on geology, hydrology, and radiation monitoring. Bechtel, of course, has a considerable history and investment with the NTS. It is one of the prime contractors for Yucca Mountain Project, the planned national repository for tons of high-level waste produced by America’s nuclear infrastructure. The company also manages the NTS for the Department of Energy. Whether or not nuclear testing ever resumes in Nevada—the museum itself appear largely equivocal on this issue or its larger political or social significance—the potential burial of radioactive waste at the NTS (a “versatile laboratory for a changing world”) will ensure that the site has a key role in affecting America’s nuclear and environmental future.

Leaving the museum, one passes an artifact from the World Trade Center, a hunk of twisted steel the museum links to the NTS via its current activities in emergency management and counter-terrorism. Perhaps this juxtaposition, the history of the NTS itself, and its ambiguous role in helping end the Cold War will encourage visitors to think more critically about the perils of blindly acquiescing to any and all risks in the name of national security.

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Visiting the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History on a midsummer’s day should be reassuring to any public historian. The place teems with visitors, most seemingly there to enjoy the nation’s treasures, some no doubt drawn in to escape Washington’s torrid summer weather. One well-attended temporary exhibition on the second floor asks, “Whatever Happened to Polio?” and provides many answers while commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the historic announcement in 1955 of the Salk vaccine, which led to the eradication in this country of a dreaded disease that crippled and killed its victims. At the height of the epidemic in the summer of 1952, 58,000 Amer-