Who Owns America’s Past? The Smithsonian and the Problem of History
xxvi + 384 pp.; illustrations, notes, index; clothbound, $29.95.

Since accepting the bequest of James Smithson in 1836 to establish the Smithsonian Institution, the United States has grappled with the socio-political baggage of a vague and illusory mandate. Charged with the task of creating “an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men” (4), Congress, the directors of the Smithsonian, and the general public have fought over the purpose and meaning of the institution. Is its primary purpose as a laboratory or a repository or some hybrid of the two? Although Smithson’s bequest endowed the institution in its early years, the federal government’s fateful decision to fund a “National Museum of the United States” set the stage for “the federal appropriation [to] become a weapon in the culture wars” (5). With these words, author Robert C. Post establishes the premise for his institutional history of the Smithsonian: who owns America’s past?

To answer this question, Post draws on his vast personal experience and extensive archival research to explore both the evolution of exhibit philosophy at the Smithsonian and the response of the public to exhibits. In the early years, lacking a clear mandate and mission statement, exhibits served the purpose of displaying what the institution owned with no explanation or analysis of the meaning of an item. In this collections-driven/neo-traditionalist model, artifacts were “interesting” simply because they belonged to the Smithsonian. This set a precedent through which the public came to view the Smithsonian as the authority on American history and history meant “facts” with no room for evolving interpretation or context. Visitors were expected to look and wonder, but not to question.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a new breed of professionally trained exhibit designers and curators began to challenge the collection-driven display model and to pursue story-driven exhibits. Under the leadership of Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, Smithsonian curators sought to explore the dark side of American history and to avoid the earlier tendency to treat artifacts, especially industrial artifacts, as “objects of reverence” (xii). As exhibits became edgier and less celebratory and upbeat, the Smithsonian came under fire from “stakeholders” who took umbrage at exhibits that made them feel uncomfortable. Accusing the Smithsonian of “disrespectful exercise[es] in ‘historical revisionism,’” a term that the public embraced to decry “the worst elements of America’s academic culture,” Congress threatened to pull financing for the institution. In response, the institution, under new leadership, moved to postmodern/immersive “experiences” (xiii-xiv). The goal of the institution seems now to be entertainment rather than education.

In many respects, Post provides a top-down history with little discussion of the mostly anonymous curators and other staff who implemented the exhibits. This is somewhat surprising given Post’s own experience as a Smithsonian
graduate fellow and curator. Yet it highlights the reality of the Smithsonian’s politics. Curators and exhibit designers work for the secretary who serves at the pleasure of Congress. Politics rather than scholarship determine what history is told at the museum and how it is told.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of Post’s narrative comes in his discussion of exhibit critics dating back to the Bell family’s dissatisfaction with the presentation of Alexander Graham Bell’s contribution to the invention of the telephone. Unhappy with the Smithsonian’s inclusion of other inventors in the story of the telephone, the Bell family threatened to pull their donation of artifacts if the Smithsonian did not display the items in a way that reflected family history even if that conflicted with the knowledge of experts. Far from an anomaly, the Bell episode represented the first of many battles over interpretation that culminated in the infamous Enola Gay controversy. Forced to bow to political pressure in order to keep the doors open and the lights on, the Smithsonian has abdicated its leadership as an educational institution and today serves merely as the “Nation’s Attic.”

Who Owns America’s Past serves as an important and timely update to Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt’s History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past (Macmillan, 1995) and reminds us that the culture wars are not necessarily over, nor were they unique to the 1990s. Tracing the history of controversy in the museum from its founding, Post places the Enola Gay story in a much broader context familiar to all practitioners of public history. Not only must we question who owns America’s past; but also who owns history and whom do we serve? Rather than provide answers as “America’s Museum,” the history of the Smithsonian demonstrates that no institution is immune from the criticism of donors, visitors, and funders. Ultimately Post has uncovered a story of the failure of the historical profession to explain to the general public what we do and why we do it. The burden is on all of us to advocate and educate.

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A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum by William S. Walker. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013. xi + 291 pp.; images, notes, index; clothbound, $80.00; paperbound, $27.95.

Ink pens, telephones, typewriters, radios, phonographs, film cameras, even museums and books: all these are still in use, but with the triumph of the impalpable universe stored at subatomic densities on the world’s digital servers, all stand on an uncertain ontological foundation, glowing with the twilight hues of residuality. Perhaps that is why in 2013 a history of the Smithsonian Institution has finally become plausible, and, as an affirmation of the reality of concrete objects, newly interesting and important. For as