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Boehm, Scott.

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Privatizing Public Memory
The Price of Patriotic Philanthropy and the Post-9/11 Politics of Display

Scott Boehm


The Enola Gay controversy that erupted at the Smithsonian in 1994 has left indelible marks on the nation’s repository of historical memory. While the Republican takeover of the White House and Congress in 2000 signified the beginning of the end of the so-called culture wars of the 1990s that ignited, among other heated debates, public disputes about interpretations of national history, post-9/11 patriotic fervor largely silenced voices that attempted to criticize U.S. acts of violence against foreign nations. On Veteran’s Day 2004, as U.S. troops were fighting in Fallujah, the National Museum of American History (NMAH) opened its latest blockbuster exhibition, The Price of Freedom: Americans at War. Unlike the Enola Gay exhibition that offended many World War II veterans, The Price of Freedom has excited only public praise from soldiers new and old, whose wartime sacrifice is unconditionally celebrated throughout the 18,200 square feet of the sprawling exhibition.

According to Smithsonian accounts, The Price of Freedom is one of the NMAH’s most popular exhibitions to date. It is also one of the institute’s most contentious since the Air and Space Museum’s attempt to examine the effects of the atomic bomb and the inauguration of the cold war by displaying the fuselage of the Enola Gay alongside artifacts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and contextualizing it through a script that challenged traditional interpretations of Truman’s decision to use nuclear weapons against Japanese civilians. How-
ever, in stark contrast to the passionate public wrangling over that exhibition, including congressional hearings, this time deliberation—and outrage—has remained largely hidden behind institutional walls, only occasionally spilling over into the media and academic journals. While a coalition of veterans groups and Republicans led by Newt Gingrich ultimately succeeded in canceling the *Enola Gay* exhibition, the lack of public reflection over *The Price of Freedom* signifies the enduring power wielded by conservatives over the mainstream press, their subtle influence on the academy, and their domination of national public space. Furthermore, *The Price of Freedom*’s triumphalist reading of U.S. military campaigns as a perennial struggle for freedom from tyranny restages notions of American history discredited by academics, social justice activists, and anti-imperialists long ago, but which have been granted new currency by the Bush administration in the shadow of 9/11. As Marx would put it: first time tragic, second time farce.

Despite its popular success—including the highest rate of satisfied visitors ever surveyed by the Smithsonian’s Office of Policy and Analysis—the exhibition sparked dissent among staff long before its elaborate public unveiling, which prominently featured then director of Homeland Security Tom Ridge and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Richard Myers. Staff concerns sprung primarily from two sources: the exhibition’s contentious title and the delicate issue of donor control. While Director Glass claims that “no one seems to take ownership of the title,” many NMAH staff speculate that former Seattle Seahawks owner, big-game hunter, and real estate baron Kenneth Behring, who donated $80 million to the museum in 2000, is its source. Indeed, the hypermasculine ethos of his personal hero, Theodore Roosevelt, haunts the newly named Kenneth E. Behring Hall of Military History that houses *The Price of Freedom*. From the beginning, Behring’s donation entailed several explicit strings, including the stipulation that the NMAH “maintain a close cooperative relationship” with him, and that “Behring Center” was to be added to the museum’s name and displayed “prominently upon the National Mall and Constitution Avenue entrances.” Moreover, Behring has publicly stated that “this money did not come easy for me. I want to make sure it’s spent in a way that I think is beneficial to America.” At the very least, such provisos have, starting with the title, plagued *The Price of Freedom* since Behring became the exhibition’s sole underwriter.

My concern, however, is not who “owns” the exhibition title, but that as a lens through which to interpret U.S. military history, *The Price of Freedom* is a highly problematic example of epistemic violence. In an Orwellian usage by the Smithsonian, the title is an unfortunate parody of the ubiquitous quote
popularly attributed to Thomas Jefferson, “eternal vigilance is the price of freedom”; Donald Rumsfeld used a similar title for a *New York Times* op-ed piece marking the one-year anniversary of the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Historically informed visitors might expect an exhibition documenting abuses of presidential power or periodic crackdowns on civil liberties, an important wartime topic avoided at all costs by *The Price of Freedom*. Indeed, exhibition curators feared that visitors might think the exhibition was about the civil rights movement. After audience testing of the title, “Americans at War” was added to clarify the exhibition’s content. According to Director Glass, the title is a “hook” meant to “pull you in.” Yet even project director David Allison recognizes that “not all American wars are about freedom.” Katherine Ott, NMAH curator and chair of the NMAH Congress of Scholars, characterized staff concerns in an internal memo that stated, “we strongly suggest reconsidering the title of the exhibition. The concept of freedom has many complex meanings in American History, most having little to do with warfare but rather struggles for rights, democracy and inclusion.” In another widely circulated memo, Barbara Clark Smith, NMAH social history curator, asserted, “the easy identification of the U.S. military and struggles for ‘freedom’
is untenable. Similarly, the claim that fighting for the U.S. has been the sole or most significant form of struggle on behalf of liberty that Americans have made is a controversial one.\textsuperscript{12}

That these controversies remained largely out of public purview illustrates how private capital can help to preclude productive civic debate. Mitigating the stakes of acute ideological conflicts by effectively domesticating them, the casual privatization of the Smithsonian epitomizes the nadir of critical engagement within national sites of public memory. At the same time, the content of The Price of Freedom controversies suggest deep anxieties by many Smithsonian staff about wedding national identity to the idealization of military values—anxieties only compounded by the fact that the exhibition curators categorically ignored them.

By framing U.S. wars as inevitable episodes in the militarization of the national spirit that continues to evolve in Iraq, the Smithsonian is complicit with the Bush administration’s use of the rhetorics of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny to justify a policy of perpetual war. However, whereas such rhetoric often seeks to efface violence, The Price of Freedom openly asserts state violence as the principal rational response to international conflict, circumventing diplomacy and the question of how U.S. imperial ambition factors into its historical belligerence. As a result, however much exhibition curators might claim to problematize the wars they chose to represent—particularly through “My View” audio displays that include personalized perspectives from each major war—The Price of Freedom ultimately glorifies U.S. military campaigns by failing to offer any alternatives to armed conflict. Compounded by a dearth of historical context that would help explain U.S. global entanglements as attempts to manipulate geopolitics and dominate international economic markets, the systematic disavowal of dissenting voices contributes to the naturalization of an ahistorical violent state of exception.

Thus, The Price of Freedom—however unwittingly—restages commonly held sentiments of national superiority by catering to an audience conditioned by mainstream media and other proponents of patriotic history to consume narratives that promote the singular morality of the United States in world history. Narrating the nation’s military past—and present—as a series of virtuous responses to unprovoked international threats, The Price of Freedom illuminates what I call “the post-9/11 politics of display,” in which the trauma of 9/11 engenders a hegemonic cultural “re-membering” of U.S. wars as a means to reconstruct the wounded national body within sites of public memory. Anchored by artifacts that enlist the patriotic sympathies of visitors and mediated by a script that eschews critical analysis, The Price of Freedom nostalgically
refashions the nation’s bellicose history after memories of a triumphal past in an attempt to reinvigorate the present with rearticulations of transcendental national myths. Significant cuts in federal funding and the intensified solicitation of private donors since the Smithsonian’s appointment of former corporate captain Lawrence Small as its secretary have rendered the institution susceptible to staging such exhibitions as the museum struggles to remain fiscally afloat. Overdetermined by the convergence of neoliberal economic policies with the cultural practice of the radical Disneyfication of public space, historical controversies are displaced by an aura of national consensus represented in The Price of Freedom by the fetishization of 9/11 and its remains.

The Force of a Dangling Metaphor

In the corner of a dimly lit room, museumgoers pause solemnly before the black bar separating them from the spotlighted artifact hanging from the ceiling. They linger longer here at this display than at any other point in the exhibition, seemingly captivated by the other-worldliness of the weighty object dangling before their eyes. It could pass for a modernist sculpture of a lynched body, while it threatens to bring down museum walls with the force of its mass. Young children are fixated by the abstract enormity dwarfing their imagination, as knowing adults outline the twisted contours of the rust-colored metal with transfixed eyes. Long gray scratches stretching across its contorted body conjure desperate clawing on the inner doors of prematurely sealed caskets. The monstrosity yearns to be touched like no other object in the collection, and hesitant hands reach out to caress the smoothly surreal surface of survival wreckage, signifying contact with another dimension of culture—the symbolic communion with ghosts of recent history.

The sagging steel column assembly from the seventieth floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center haunts The Price of Freedom just as it serves as a dangling metaphor for a cultural logic of imperialism. As the anchor of an exhibition that enthusiastically charts U.S. wars of expansion, this uncanny embodiment of the national wounds of September 11 mobilizes sentiments of collective trauma and metaphysical castration. Spawning narratives of military strength and heroic sacrifice, this symbol of pain in the national body is remasculinized via nostalgia for an imperial past. Furthermore, it is molded by exhibition curators into a justification for the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, conspicuously replicating the Bush administration’s disingenuous rationale for waging war on an imagined geography of evil. The transformation from stalwart supportive structure to lacerated museum object conceals an ironic
consistency. As a piece of the Twin Towers, this salvaged steel once served as a taut symbol of U.S. global economic power. Radically transfigured by 9/11, the mangled rod in The Price of Freedom is a material metaphor the nation lives by during a “war on terror” that the exhibition suggestively endorses. In dramatically different forms and contexts, the same material acts as a fecund tool for fixing hegemonic forms of national identity, while its malleability highlights the tractability of historical memory on national consciousness.

The deployment of post-9/11 pathos in the exhibition demonstrates how national traumas are facilely figured in cultural spaces that situate themselves as “the repository of our collective memory,” as Director Glass considers the NMAH. 13 Making 9/11 a somber focal point of The Price of Freedom is symptomatic of what Marita Sturken has called “the rush to memorialize,” characterized by a recent acceleration in the cultural practice of commemorating contemporary traumas.14 Considered in this light, The Price of Freedom feels like a melancholic memorial to 9/11: an open wound that a messianic script attempts to close with the narrative thread of historical triumphalism. Discord about how 9/11 is situated in The Price of Freedom stems from aversion to such memorialization, which is viewed by many staff as unprofessional and dangerous. In contrast, the response of Director Glass’s father is highly suggestive of how the popular urge to memorialize national traumas intersects with the post-9/11 resurgence of patriotism to produce the exhibition’s exceedingly high rate of visitor satisfaction. After walking through The Price of Freedom with Glass, his father turned to him and commented, “I wish the World War II memorial was more like this.”15 Thus, displays of “memorialized history” are sometimes more satisfying than memorials themselves.

Despite the Smithsonian’s increased privatization, many visitors continue to consider it a sacred site of national fellowship, which grants it significant cultural capital to legitimate the militant patriotism The Price of Freedom extols. As I seek to demonstrate, the proliferation of such values at the Smithsonian engenders notions of national identity buttressed by a desire for patriotic history, multifaceted articulations of manifest destiny, and representations of a hegemonic masculinity characterized by personal sacrifice to the nation’s military objectives. The result is that the exhibition naturalizes U.S. imperialism as it remythologizes traditional national heroes, which helps explain the phantasmatic presence of Theodore Roosevelt throughout. TR’s boot seems to have traversed the entire exhibition, leaving it with a resolutely masculine texture that is anxious to display potent symbols of national virility and force, most clearly exemplified by the championing of technological developments in weaponry and military machinery.
In his autobiography *The Road to Purpose*—for sale in the NMAH gift shop—donor Kenneth Behring foregrounds his admiration for Roosevelt. He begins the book with a quote by Roosevelt in which he praises “the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood.” An acclaimed big game hunter, Behring also mentions Roosevelt’s many kills on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, to which he also controversially donated $20 million in 1997. Compared to that space, Roosevelt is granted sparse coverage in *The Price of Freedom*, with only a few Rough Rider images, a small political cartoon, and a 1900 McKinley-Roosevelt campaign poster, yet Roosevelt’s infamous foreign policy based upon carrying a “big stick” infuses the entire exhibition with its imperial imperative and implicitly racist discourse on civilization. Roosevelt’s rugged manhood is rooted in earlier incarnations of a selective tradition that has its genesis in the colonial context that produced the nation’s archetypal hero, George Washington, who is prominently featured in *The Price of Freedom*.

**Whitewashing History, Whitewashing Heroes**

Crisp, metallic notes of a Revolutionary War–era fife lure visitors into *The Price of Freedom*. Inside, a mechanized puppet theater, the first of several of the exhibition’s interactive displays, immediately draws visitors toward the center of a brightly lit room, built around “the Liberty Tree,” upon which hangs the effigy of an infamous Boston stamp distributor. Although Barbara Clark Smith, one of the museum’s early American scholars, questions its historical accuracy as a cultural form used for political satire in the colonies, the puppet theater is a big hit with children as it familiarly situates the drama over tea taxes, and playfully introduces one of the maxims of the period: “No taxation without representation.”16 Across from the puppet theater is a life-sized reproduction of a colonist’s home ransacked and burned by an imposing British soldier. Thus, the birth of the nation is represented as rebellion justified by repressive British rule, without interrogating the imperial roots of the nation’s founding, predicated upon the dispossession of American Indians from their land. While forerunners to the Revolutionary War, such as the French and Indian War, are quickly covered by bland wall-mounted text that mentions competing land claims by European empires and American Indians—claims treated as equivalent—these concerns are minimized and covered superficially, providing only the smallest context for understanding what Europeans were doing in the so-called New World in the first place.
Although the position of American Indians in regard to the emerging U.S. nation is covered in greater detail in the section unapologetically named “Wars of Expansion,” manifest destiny is naturalized through the representations of those encounters by the exhibition’s uncritical mapping of U.S. empire. By foregrounding U.S. military leaders who sought to violently regenerate a racialized spirit of national supremacy, visitors are encouraged to disavow the history of genocide that the exhibition effaces. To that end, The Price of Freedom spends significant space presenting the Cherokee as well-adjusted, civilized members of U.S. society, while a reproduction of the iconic painting depicting the Trail of Tears is hidden behind the “Wars of Expansion” entrance sign, a section of the exhibition of which Director Glass is particularly proud. Likewise, rather than examining the violent legacy of U.S. imperialism in North America, the exhibit sensationally renders Geronimo as an inscrutable symbolic hurdle to establishing U.S. hegemony from the original Atlantic colonies to the untamed lands of the Pacific. But unlike the Smithsonian’s controversial “West as American” exhibition in 1991, The Price of Freedom celebrates the conquest of the West from the point of view of white frontiersmen rather than from the perspective of those who resisted what President Bush might have called “freedom on the march” had he been there. Subsequently, not far from Geronimo’s picture is a bronze medal from the so-called Indian Wars, embossed with the image of a nearly naked American Indian mounted on a galloping horse and holding a long spear in his outstretched right arm. The medal was awarded to Lt. General Nelson A. Miles, the celebrated Indian hunter who forced the Lakota onto reservations after Custer’s defeat at Little Bighorn, helped capture Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, and led the search that finally captured the elusive Geronimo. Suggestive of trophy hunting, the Indian Wars Service Medal is material evidence of manifest destiny that drove white settlers to hunt down, forcibly remove, and slaughter native populations “occupying”—to use the language of the exhibition—lands they sought to colonize both for themselves and for the idea of a nation they believed was fated to expand exponentially.

By constructing the eighteenth-century feud between imperial European clans as foundational for future U.S. military encounters—rather than earlier conflicts between white settlers and autochthonous natives such as in King Philip’s War—The Price of Freedom seamlessly establishes the narrative framework that sustains the exhibition: noble American soldiers fight against injustice to secure freedom for a nation that is the preeminent international force for good in the world. Constructing such a framework absolves the visitor from questioning the aims of U.S. imperialism while it muffles the dissenting
voices of America’s native populations, upon whose elimination the nation’s foundations are erected. Hence, visitors are invited to imagine themselves as the heirs of a long tradition of spreading liberal progressive ideals, underscored by a ten-foot-high reproduction of the Declaration of Independence, prominently displayed at the beginning of the exhibition.

The only thing looming larger than the Declaration of Independence in the opening section of The Price of Freedom is the figure of George Washington. His image appears ten times in the exhibition, along with his brilliantly blue-and-gold uniform, a pair of his frayed epaulets, his green ivory gripped battle sword, his camp chest and stool, and his Mt. Vernon tea table. Washington’s ubiquitous presence makes it seem as if the nation literally began with him. His pervasive presence is evoked through artifacts that metonymically articulate his mythological status as founding father of what Dana Nelson calls “national manhood,” and the exhibition catalog devotes an entire section to “George Washington’s Legacy.”

Not surprisingly, Washington is implicitly hailed as the archetype for the many national heroes spotlighted in the exhibition, and his representation privileges narratives of personal sacrifice and dedication to the nation—especially through military service and exceptional leadership. For example, by selectively omitting his 1796 “Farewell Address,” in which Washington specifically warns the young nation about the dangers of standing armies and entanglements with European powers, curators miss out on an opportunity to criticize belligerent U.S. foreign policies, as well as to critique the evolution of the U.S. military-industrial complex and the militarization of U.S. society, which President Eisenhower warned of in his own farewell address in 1961. Instead, representations of Washington that stress his military prowess set the standard for future warrior-leaders such as Andrew Jackson, George Custer, and Colin Powell.

Although not marked as such in the display, Washington’s uniform is half authentic, half replica, suggestive of how national heroes are retroactively constructed by overlaying the past with material from the present, while omitting mundane details that threaten to destabilize the aura of myth. Aside from the professional ethics of accurately labeling artifacts, this unmarked detail points to how an enthusiasm for conveying the illusion of “the Real” led curators to cut corners not only in their curatorial responsibilities, but also in their representations of historical figures. Relying on a theoretical model that conceptualizes history as the actions of powerful presidents and generals, The Price of Freedom posits “whitewashed males,” whose military uniforms have been dusted off for a hit parade of masculine heroes, as the principal motors of U.S. history.
Curators dub Andrew Jackson the nation’s “New American Hero,” the second recipient of a metaphysical torch in a transhistorical relay of heroic masculinity starting with George Washington. Jackson's dark blue regalia from the battle of New Orleans shines with the luster of a patriotic bequest. Flanking his battle uniform are Jackson's polished silver-and-gold sword and scabbard, symbolic extensions of personal strength that belie their violent function. Likewise, in the characteristically celebratory panel, curators note that Jackson's performance in the battle of New Orleans “added to his fame as an Indian fighter,” without criticizing the imperialist foundations of his reputation as a national hero. Instead, a dark painting by Charles Severin shows Jackson riding a white horse in dramatic glory, sword raised high in the smoke-filled New Orleans sky—an almost gothic reincarnation of the “whitewashed male” on the canvas of U.S. military history.

George Custer is depicted in a remarkably similar way in Samuel Paxon's painting of his famous “last stand.” Custer stands tall at the center of the bloody battle scene in his gleaming buckskin jacket, contrasted with the dark uniforms of his men falling all around him to even darker Indians. Along with the reprint of the painting, which is by far the largest on display in the section called “Western Indian Wars,” Custer's famed buckskin jacket is hung beside a ceremonial Lakota shirt, one a symbol of white superiority, the other a residue of a doomed culture in a race war won by the more technologically advanced American settlers. Even though Custer was the victim of his own recklessness at the Battle of Little Bighorn, his martyrdom helped expedite the genocide of the Lakotas, of whom barely more than a ceremonial shirt in a glass case remains. Displaying the Lakota shirt alongside Custer's jacket begs a comparison that subtly suggests Custer's “sacrifice” was necessary for the nation's modernization.

Well over a hundred years later, the mainstream media fetishized new weapons technology, such as stealth bombers and Patriot missiles, as they destroyed desert landscapes evacuated of their history, not unlike the American West during Custer's time. During the Gulf War, Colin Powell was depicted as a rational leader of a calculated war waged through precise “surgical bombing” that minimized both U.S. military and Iraqi civilian deaths. Since Powell's “blackness” is nonthreatening to heroic white masculinity precisely because his patriotism is consistently reaffirmed by his military campaigns against orientalized others, his battle uniform hanging in The Price of Freedom signals what Melani McAlister calls “military multiculturalism,” in which demographic shifts in military recruitment are exploited to promote the idea of a unified military brotherhood in which racial differences are dissolved. Ironically, the uniform
of Melissa Rathbun-Nealy, a female soldier captured and temporarily held prisoner by Iraqis during the Gulf War, is displayed near the one belonging to Powell, who is a passionate critic of women and gays serving in the military. But the most obvious irony is that beside Powell’s uniform is a photo of the U.N. Security Council meeting to “liberate” Kuwait, suggestively illustrating the rationality and benevolence of Western military force, while placing the Gulf War itself within the genre of rescue narrative. Yet Powell’s infamous presentation of falsified evidence concerning Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction to the same body in February 2003 is excluded from a narrative that continually highlights mythical heroism over historical integrity.

Such emphasis contributes to the production of a militarized national memory. Andrew J. Bacevich has described a “new American militarism” that encourages Americans to support the Bush Doctrine, noting that since 9/11, “Americans have come to define the nation’s strength and well-being in terms of military preparedness, military action, and the fostering of (or nostalgia for) military ideals.” The Price of Freedom is swimming in such nostalgia, projecting it upon the past through the traumatized lens of 9/11, ultimately blurring the critical historical vision of curators.

Looking Back at the Present: Projecting 9/11 into the Past

If the steel column assembly of the World Trade Center is a dangling metaphor that anchors The Price of Freedom’s representations of U.S. military history, shaping how curators convey a sense of a glorious past, then it should come as no surprise that the hegemonic trope of 9/11—the nation as innocent victim of barbarous foreign evils—is repeated throughout the exhibition. Demonstrating how the nation’s military past is structured by a melancholic post-9/11 display, The Price of Freedom’s overarching narrative centers on national traumas that provoke feelings of retribution, such as the battle for the Alamo, Custer’s Last Stand, the sinking of the $U.S.S. Maine$, and the attack on Pearl Harbor—the most generative analogue to 9/11.

The World War II section is both literally and figuratively situated around Pearl Harbor. Placed nearly in the middle of the sprawling WWII display, three enormous panels depict the Pearl Harbor attack in black and white, as well as FDR’s declaration that December 7, 1941, would be “a date which will live in infamy.” Just behind the panels is a wall of vibrant Second World War recruitment and propaganda posters. The image of the Pearl Harbor attack is repeated here on a centrally located poster that features a tattered U.S. flag flying at half-mast in front of billowing smoke beneath the patriotic command,
“Remember Dec. 7th!” The exhibition catalog dedicates two full pages to Pearl Harbor, and visitors can purchase a replica of the U.S.S. Arizona in The Price of Freedom gift shop for $28. Thus, through an elaborate process of historical transference, the trauma of 9/11 is projected upon Pearl Harbor, where narratives of “successful” revenge sublimate unresolved present anxieties.

While the rise of fascism in Europe and Japan is presented as an alarming threat to global security, the attack on Pearl Harbor acutely dramatizes how the safety of U.S. domestic space was violently penetrated by what are posited as foreign barbarians, kamikaze pilots that metonymically replace the 9/11 hijackers. Towering red-and-black panels featuring intimidating photos of Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo, a History Channel video that charts Axis developments in frantic newsreel style, and a Nazi flag introduce the expansive World War II section, yet Pearl Harbor provides the pretext for the nostalgic ethos contained therein. With hopeful gestures to an uncertain future, the section focuses on how a wounded nation pulled together as a family happy to sacrifice in order to win a war against fascism.

Walking through this noticeably bright area feels like visiting a national golden age in which men, women, and children happily played their prescribed wartime roles. The popular interactive “Rosie the Riveter” display—susceptible to mechanical breakdowns—draws visitors into the war economy’s gendered division of labor by challenging them to see how many rivets they can drill in thirty seconds. Next to the display is a panel called “Dressing for War,” which measures the literal lengths to which women went in tailoring their clothing in response to wartime rations on precious threads. Elsewhere, “morale boosters,” such as Esquire magazine pinup girls, are hung on a wall next to an upbeat theater featuring Irving Berlin’s musical “This Is the Army.” Footage from USO shows includes Bob Hope linking normative gender roles with war by bringing Patty Thomas onstage and telling troops, “I just want to show you what you boys are fighting for, that’s all.” Children are encouraged to “pitch in” to help the war effort through Disney propaganda films. And eye-catching recruitment posters declare the masculine imperative to leave home to fight overseas, while upbeat war tunes from a 1940s radio fill the air.

There are costs to catering to such nostalgia for a nation unified by war. Privileging a narrative of national cohesion in the wake of the trauma of Pearl Harbor proscribes any criticism of U.S. claims to Hawai‘i; events that disrupt such a narrative are considered minor concerns in an exhibition aimed at displaying domestic accord. This explains how the internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans is positioned quite literally in an overlooked corner, out of the dominant lines of sight of the exhibition. Hidden behind one of
the entrance walls, a glass case containing a metal suitcase, the duffel bag of prisoner #22096, a knot-wood cane, and several wood carvings made in an art class at Rohwer relocation camp in Arkansas are all that represent their internment. A descriptive panel retroactively employs post-9/11 terminology to explain the creation of the camps: “fearful of threats to homeland security, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942.” The treatment of internment is an uninspired afterthought overshadowed by grandiose representations of “the greatest generation’s” sacrifices, while the daily life of internment is painted as a benign—if prolonged—productive summer camp experience.

Considering the detainment of thousands of Arab Americans since 9/11 in the name of “homeland security,” the countless accounts and photographs of torture at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the establishment of the legal category of “enemy combatant,” and the practice of extraordinary rendition, the treatment of Japanese American internment would seem of particular concern to curators attempting to document how “American wars have social as well as military impact [sic],” as Director Glass claims in the exhibition catalog. Instead, internment is marginalized in a master narrative that relegates such obvious contradictions to hidden corners. Inversely, considerable attention is paid to the plight of U.S. prisoners of war during World War II, through a prominently positioned display case, and Vietnam, through a dark, somber passageway that attempts to re-create the psychological trauma of isolation.

Like internment, the U.S. use of nuclear weapons to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki is also a minor consideration in The Price of Freedom. In sharp contrast to the ultimately canceled Enola Gay exhibit, curators treat this highly contentious decision as an inevitable—if unfortunate—part of the war. An aerial photograph showing the destruction of Hiroshima hanging next to similar images of fire-bombed Japanese cities serves to minimize the singularity of the act that inaugurated the contemporary nuclear age, as well as the massive human suffering it produced. Contained by a narrative of national unity and resolve, and unthreatening to those who objected to the Enola Gay exhibit, “the bomb” is presented as an expedient to end the lingering bloody war in the Pacific, which is granted considerable space. Further justifying Truman’s decision is a photograph of Japanese-held prisoners of war that slightly overlaps the photograph of Hiroshima, subtly suggesting that the Japanese might have deserved such a devastating punishment for their own ruthlessness. While many of the objections to the Enola Gay exhibit came from veterans who felt criminalized by its assertions, The Price of Freedom avoids producing such controversy by representing the use of nuclear weapons as necessary to winning
the war and thereby validating the service of the veterans involved. Clearly, this is one reason that, according to Katherine Ott, “veterans love it.”

**Insurgent Narratives**

While post-9/11 anxieties about national security are projected into the past, structuring the ways of experiencing U.S. military history in The Price of Freedom, there are episodes in such a history that resist their marginalization by dominant narratives of national victimhood. For example, in the absence of a proxy for 9/11 such as Pearl Harbor—through which World War II is narrated as providing national unity in the face of a domestic attack justifying internment and the use of the atomic bomb—the Civil War and the U.S. war in Vietnam stand out as anomalies in the exhibition's march toward freedom. These sections of the exhibition are two of the largest, and two of the original wars curators sought to cover—along with the Revolutionary War and the Second World War—before it was decided to make The Price of Freedom the NMAH’s only permanent comprehensive exhibition on U.S. history. While this late decision explains why “the Big Four” garner significantly more space than other wars (see, for example, the paltry World War I display), the celebratory narrative of The Price of Freedom explains why the Civil War and Vietnam sections are so confusing when compared to the rest of the exhibition. Episodes of domestic turmoil and highly contested meanings, these wars are not so easily interpreted through the patriotic lens of 9/11.

Structurally detached from a linear pathway that subliminally implies rational progression, the Civil War section, contained in a space to one side of the corridor containing the “Wars of Expansion,” is easily passed by. Unlike the rest of the exhibition, which follows a singular path from the American Revolution to the current war in Iraq, visitors must choose to enter the Civil War section, suggesting its deviation from the triumphal parade of U.S. military history. Prefaced by the fight over slavery in the Kansas Territory—a surprising inclusion that prominently features John Brown and Sharps rifles shipped to Henry Ward Beecher in crates labeled “Bibles”—curators certainly attempt to place slavery at the center of the Civil War. A dramatic photograph of the scarred back of a former slave who fought on the Union side is meant to represent the cruelty of slavery at the same time as the exhibition recognizes African American contributions to the war. It is displayed in the circular entrance to the section, which outlines multiple perspectives on the war from the position of Northern industrialists, free laborers, and abolitionists, as well as Southern planters, farmers, and slaves. Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis are also
introduced as the leaders of opposing forces in a war stimulated by “divergent economic paths.”  

Off to a surprisingly satisfactory start, the section disappointingly morphs into traditional ways of presenting military history: guns, battlefields, and strategy. While museums must rely on their collections to produce histories meant to stimulate and educate visitors, The Price of Freedom’s treatment of the Civil War does little more than put the NMAH’s extensive Civil War collection on display. Civil War buffs can appreciate General Sherman’s campaign hat, the chairs and table used at the surrender at Appomattox, and General Sheridan’s stuffed horse Winchester. Yet aside from a unique display on medical photography featuring photos of disabled war survivors, little innovative analysis of the war and its effects is offered, which ultimately renders it an unfortunate war between honorable—and overwhelmingly white—brothers. Working within such a traditional framework, the NMAH fails to explore topics such as slavery in the North, which the New-York Historical Society recently examined in their widely popular and revelatory Slavery in New York exhibit.

The U.S. war in Vietnam, while fundamentally different from the Civil War, also fits uncomfortably within the dominant narrative of The Price of Freedom. Curators attempt to overcome this obstacle by placing it within the framework of the cold war, prefaced by the nuclear arms race, the Korean War, and the Cuban missile crisis. But despite its placement within a larger war against the threat of communism, Vietnam is a rupture in a narrative of U.S. military superiority that cannot be contained within the cold war “victory” story that The Price of Freedom suggests by placing a replica—unmarked as such—of a graffiti-covered chunk of the Berlin Wall adjacent to the Vietnam material. Such framing encourages visitors to see the war as one defeat in a wider war that was ultimately won in 1989, making the sacrifices of U.S. soldiers in Southeast Asia not only worthwhile, but imperative to the eventual triumph of freedom and democracy over communist repression.

Furthermore, a hopeful message of national resurrection subsumes the disunity produced by the war. In an innovative display, stacked period televisions in front of a large couch broadcast images of the war as viewed by families within their living rooms. Controversy is not avoided here, as Martin Luther King’s dissenting voice, National Guards at Kent State, and the frantic evacuation of U.S. troops are all included, producing one of the few displays of genuine pedagogical value, even as it hails the museumgoer as a spectator—rather than a productive agent—of history. However, this display is overshadowed by one of the main draws of The Price of Freedom: a genuine Huey helicopter. The dramatic story of how “slick” #091 made it from Vietnam to the Smithsonian
after being shot down in combat dominates the Vietnam section, muting national conflict by its sheer size and transubstantiation from casualty of war to symbol of U.S. resurrection and national reconciliation. Thus, the helicopter functions as what Freud called a “screen memory” that prevents images of loss and disunity from dominating national memories of the war in Vietnam.

Yet, items left at the Vietnam Memorial are included in a glass case next to the Berlin Wall replica, selected from the NMAH's Vietnam Memorial collection no longer on display. Included among a teddy bear, a Christmas tree, a carton of Marlboros, and a bottle of Jack Daniels is a curious curatorial choice that quietly disrupts The Price of Freedom’s investment in the concept of “just war.” A letter written to President Reagan in 1986 by Charles J. Liteky, in which he returns the Medal of Honor he was awarded for bravery in Vietnam lies unassumingly on a glass shelf. Although curators fail to contextualize the letter, Liteky famously placed it—and his medal—at the memorial in protest of what he called the U.S. military’s “crimes against humanity in the name of freedom.” Liteky, who denounced Reagan’s support of the Contras in Nicaragua and protested against the notorious School of the Americas, is the only Medal of Honor recipient to return his medal, and his letter fills in the violent gaps in the exhibition between the end of the U.S. war in Vietnam and the first U.S. war in the Gulf. In order to quickly reach the war that “kicked the Vietnam Syndrome,” as President George H. W. Bush put it at the time, The Price of Freedom skips over U.S. military interventions in Nicaragua, Panama, and Grenada. These deployments of the standing army George Washington warned against in his Farewell Address are not covered in a narrative that makes little room for their interrogation, since they stray so far from the moral imagination of the United States as a perennial freedom fighter devoted to the principles of just war theory.

**Bottom Line: The Price of Patriotic Fictions**

The capstone of The Price of Freedom is what critics on the NMAH curatorial staff call “the crying room.” After exiting the problematically titled “New American Roles” section, in which the twisted steel column assembly from the World Trade Center serves as a justification for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, visitors enter a concave space commemorating Congressional Medal of Honor recipients, such as Charles J. Liteky. Writing on the wall that proclaims “No one deserves the title of ‘American Hero’ more than the recipients of the Medal of Honor” sets the tone for the last stop of a triumphal procession through U.S. military history. These decorated soldiers are posited as
the highest achievement of U.S. citizenry: bravery on the battlefield marked by unselfish sacrifice to a nation that depends on dutiful service to maintain domestic security and global dominance, all in the name of defending “freedom.” A display case features Medal of Honor recipients from the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam, which visitors peruse while they wait to watch the exhibition’s concluding film.

_Fighting for America_ is a twelve-minute film jointly produced by the Smithsonian and the History Channel. Like a shorter film oddly placed between the Louisiana Purchase and the War of 1812 that mixes images of 9/11 with Iwo Jima, an exploding concrete Swastika, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the dismantling of a statue of Saddam Hussein, _Fighting for America_ appeals to the patriotism of visitors through historical leaps speciously connected by images that imply U.S. determination and superiority. The film begins with an overture commending patriotic sacrifice: “For over 200 years American soldiers have fought for freedom around the world. We honor their sacrifice.” A series of quotes from Thomas Paine to Abraham Lincoln to U.S. soldiers in Iraq follows, juxtaposed with images dominated by the war in Iraq. Midway through the film, 9/11 footage is filtered through the words of Jared S. Raferty, an ensign with the U.S. Navy. As a plane crashes into the World Trade Center, a voice-over proclaims: “September 11th was a day that changed me. With all this country has gone through, I had to ask myself, ‘If not me, who?’ I can’t keep pointing the finger at the next guy.” Verbally framing sensational 9/11 imagery, Raferty’s words articulate the demands of heroic masculine citizenship that permeate _The Price of Freedom_, while they circumscribe any analysis of the causes of 9/11. Indeed, one of the many ironies of the exhibition’s title is that instead of encouraging mindless patriotism, it could have been a frame through which the blowback of 9/11 is examined as a result of hawkish U.S. foreign policy.

Emblematic of the exhibition as a whole, _Fighting for America_ functions both as a somber reminder of the death produced by war and as a militaristic patriotic pep rally, a paradox that functions, in part, by largely excluding deathly images of the targets of U.S. imperialism. The film ends with a cinematic tour of U.S. military cemeteries stretching from Normandy to Cambridge to Arlington, listing the number of U.S. dead buried at each site. At the specific request of donor Kenneth Behring, the film also includes a funeral at Arlington, which had to be reenacted with paid actors due to Pentagon restrictions on filming military funerals. That this detail of the film is not indicated to audiences is characteristic of an exhibition that seems to care significantly more about making emotional appeals than historical authenticity. The repeated use of
Saddam Hussein statues being toppled in Iraq is another egregious example of such negligence, while at the same time the image functions as a potent symbol of national triumph that masks present failures in Iraq. Appearing three times—in the earlier short film, as a large backdrop for the Operation Iraqi Freedom display case, and as one in a series of sensational streaming images on the laptop of an embedded NBC reporter—the image is never described as a staged tactic. Additionally, Iraq’s fictional possession of WMDs is not mentioned as the primary cause for the war, nor is another widely publicized PSYOPS practice in Iraq—the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

Rather than interrogate these military debacles or the Bush administration’s WMD scare campaign, The Price of Freedom plays its trump card to convey the idea of patriotic sacrifice in Iraq: the military uniform of U.S. Army Ranger Captain Russell Rippetoe, the first American casualty of the war in Iraq buried at Arlington Cemetery. The uniform hangs in front of an image of a falling Saddam Hussein statue. Along with Rippetoe’s photograph and dog tags, a camouflaged Bible and the folded U.S. flag used at his funeral, a pack of Pentagon-issued “Iraqi Most Wanted” playing cards rest uneasily behind the display case glass. But perhaps the most unsettling detail is in the descriptive text: Rippetoe’s bayonet is the same one used by his father during the Vietnam War, suggesting the continuity of violence that the Price of Freedom glorifies from the Revolutionary War to the war in Iraq.

National history museums function as cultural technologies that legitimize state violence when they promote visions of history that reinforce the patriotic mythologies of manifest destiny and historical exceptionalism. The Price of Freedom illustrates how the privatization of public space privileges triumphalist interpretive frameworks when militantly patriotic donors demand a say in how their money is spent. In a post-9/11 world that desperately needs rigorous history in order to better understand and learn from national traumas such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, it seems the Smithsonian is intimately entangled with patriotic projects that lead to little more than the stale celebration of American exceptionalism and the American Dream, an obsession shared by both Kenneth Behring and NMAH director Brent Glass.

Yet the NMAH has a golden opportunity to revaluate the role it plays in preserving U.S. public memory. On Labor Day 2006 the NMAH closed for extensive renovations that will last until the summer of 2008. Long overdue, the museum’s physical overhaul might mirror institutional changes in its methods of historical interpretation. However, early evidence suggests otherwise. Some members of the NMAH staff believe plans for the new design include more space for the display of artifacts, but leave little room for their interpretation:
the nation’s attic, indeed. Meanwhile, Kenneth Behring’s name is being chiseled into the museum’s white marble, an unequivocal sign of the Smithsonian’s continued commitment to patriotic philanthropy.

Since it is unlikely that the NMAH will voluntarily change course under an administration that actively courts donors such as Behring, the public that the Smithsonian purportedly represents must pressure the museum to fulfill its original mission to “disseminate knowledge” rather than patriotic propaganda. The transformation of the post-9/11 politics of display would indicate a significant shift in national cultural politics; their unchallenged continuation means that busloads of school children from across the country see U.S. history through the eyes of the victor, rather than through a critical lens. Conceding sites of public memory to those who glorify cultures of violence enshrines a national ethos that hungers for battle as a means to periodically test the strength of the nation. Through its Teddy Roosevelt-infused presentation of military history, The Price of Freedom is a virtual proving ground of one’s willingness to fight against demonized enemies of state—without asking questions. The consequences of submitting schoolchildren to such standards of moral judgment are the responsibility of educators, politicians, and cultural critics who know where such criterion lead: the permanent exhibition of war that includes future generations of Americans within a narrative of patriotic sacrifice, state violence and mass death.

Notes

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3. Bob Thompson of the Washington Post has covered several Smithsonian controversies in recent years, including disputes over Kenneth Behring’s financial ties to The Price of Freedom. Carol Burke has recently written about the exhibition in Radical History Review, in which she discusses its fascinating financial backstory at length.

4. See “Visitor Opinions,” which states: “No single Smithsonian exhibition surveyed by OP&A has had as many satisfied visitors as PoF with nearly 80 percent rating their experience as ‘superior’ or ‘excellent.’”


6. Ibid.

9. Author interview with Brent Glass, December 20, 2005.
10. Author interview with David Allison, December 19, 05.
15. Author interview with Brent Glass, December 20, 2005.
18. Author interview with Brent Glass, December 20, 2005. Glass commented, “I’m very happy with the way we’ve presented the wars of expansion.”
19. Author interview with Katherine Ott, December 19, 2005; in addition, many of the artifacts presented as part of the Trail of Tears belong to other historical periods.
20. Curators also fail to note that the battle of New Orleans was unknowingly fought two weeks after the Treaty of Ghent ended the War of 1812, making it an unnecessarily tragic bloodbath marked by unusually high casualty rates, and technically not “the last major battle of the war,” as the text of the exhibition script claims.
23. For further discussion of how whites respond to Colin Powell, as well as an insightful analysis of the relationships between race, patriotism, and war, see George Lipsitz, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Benefit from Identity Politics (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 69–98.
25. See Burke, “The Price of Freedom Is Truth,” for an analysis of the “Baby Kathleen” story that accompanies the Huey, further compounding the overall effect of the artifact that I outline here.
27. Author interview with Katherine Ott, December 19, 2005.