

Whose Museum? What Nation?

Nations define themselves by what they choose to remember. The growing complexity of the United States is suggested by the ever-expanding volume of her historical memories, the range of groups and events that are commemorated, often in the name of multiculturalism. Just look at the changing landscape of the National Mall in Washington, D.C., with the stunning new National Museum of the American Indian. To secure a place in memory is also to stake a claim for power and resources in the modern world.

Actually, it is possible to exaggerate the damage done by multiculturalism. Anyone visiting the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History will be deeply disappointed if they hope to be outraged by vapid or obsessive displays harping on "women and minorities" in every other caption. Generally, the museum is a fine and thoughtful display. So good is it, in fact, that it is all the more amazing when we realize what is being omitted. Even the most sensible of American historians and museum-keepers still miss a crucially large portion of the nation's history, arguably its central vision. And once we understand that, we can appreciate most of our current rows over culture wars, Red and Blue America, and all the rest.

A national museum has to serve a dual function—to offer the canonical themes of American history but also to reflect changing historical visions. In the first category, we find displays about the presidency, the White House, and the first ladies. In the second, we can certainly see a powerful emphasis on social history, those issues of race and class that galvanize liberal academic historians. And so they should. All Americans should care about the history of labor and technology; of science and industry, of the movement from farm to factory; of the struggle between rival immigrant communities in the industrial towns of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The museum has something for everyone's taste. In the bookstore, itself one of the minor glories of Washington, D.C., we find vast quantities of patriotic paraphernalia; celebrations of flag, nation, and even George W. Bush; not to mention huge offerings

in military history. The musical offerings from every era of American history are magnificent.

Nothing in the museum should not be there, and that case can be made even for pop-culture ephemera: Julia Child's kitchen, indeed! After a while, however, you begin to notice the critically significant absences. For me, the first alarm bell sounded while I was walking through an exhibit called "American Encounters", about the diverse cultures that make up New Mexico. Throughout the exhibit, we find religious objects, chiefly from Latino cultures—*santos*, *bultos*, *milagros*, figures of the Virgin. Of course, they need to be here: How could you understand New Mexico without its religious past? And then the question dawns: Where are the equivalent religious materials elsewhere in the museum? Where is the sense of any religious presence or influence in American history?

As it stands, the question is too stark. You can indeed find photographs of churches and church communities, especially in galleries on African-American history or European-immigrant communities. You can even find religious references and texts—as if anything worthwhile could be said about African-American history without quoting that core tradition of prophetic-apocalyptic rhetoric so effectively deployed by Martin Luther King, Jr. In virtually every case, however, religion is cited as a cultural badge of minority traditions. Looking at the presentation of America's religions, you often get the feeling of a ham-fisted anthropologist visiting a remote village and saying, "So, show me your quaint tribal customs."

And all this in the national museum of a society founded absolutely on religious themes and ideas, in which, over the centuries, it is very difficult to trace a social or political movement that can really be described as secular. The Temperance movement, women's movements, abolitionism, Progressive reform, educational reform, movements to reform food and diet: all were, to a greater or lesser extent, profoundly shaped by religious thought. Could the Civil War have been fought if a large segment of soldiers on both sides had not viewed themselves as warriors of

God? Is it possible to understand the political rhetoric of the era without grasping its religious and often apocalyptic foundations?

And that is just one historical moment. If anyone ever objects to the notion of religion playing a role in politics, I usually ask them how they feel about that particular Great Awakening we call the Civil Rights Movement. In America, and not in most other countries, even movements that do not originally possess a religious context develop them. Witness how many of the battles of modern feminism have acquired religious and spiritual dimensions, with campaigns over women's roles in churches and synagogues, and the emergence of woman-oriented mystical and esoteric sects. America is, and continues to be, a religious product.

So where, in this National Museum, are the exhibits devoted to (say) American Prophets? To Great Revivals? Of course, there should be exhibits on Electricity, American Maritime Enterprise, or the Information Age. But where are the materials on the quest for God and godly rule as a dominant motive through much of American history? And no, the promising gallery entitled Engines of Change turns out not to concern itself with the churches in American life.

Museum-keepers and historians may feel that religion is too controversial a topic to display adequately, though this consideration does not prevent them from offering strongly partisan accounts of issues dealing with race and sex. I think the underlying issue is much deeper and more alarming. Academic historians really, sincerely, do not see that religious forces have played such a key role in the nation's past. Religion does not register with them, so, obviously, it could not affect anyone else.

Whatever the reasons, the effects are tragic. This is a museum of American history with God left out, leaving us to ask: Whose museum is this? What nation do they think they are living in? ◀

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Afghanistan: Opium Market to the World

No End in Sight

by Doug Bandow

“For more than two millennia, Afghanistan has been at the crossroads of civilizations and a major contributor to world culture,” declared the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2003. Exactly what Afghanistan has contributed to world culture is not so clear, but the desperately poor, primitive, war-torn state is important in another way. Over the last quarter-century, Kabul “became a major contributor to world narcotics production,” explained the UNODC.

The United Nations attempted to put a positive spin on Afghanistan’s role as a global Opiates-R-Us: “The establishment of democracy in Afghanistan and the Government’s measures against cultivation, trade and abuse of opium have been crucial steps towards solving the drug problem.” Like most else emanating from the United Nations, however, the claim is meaningless spin, p.r. cover for a problem that is growing worse, despite the United Nations’ and the United States’ efforts. Even the UNODC had to admit: “Dismantling the opium economy will be a long and complex process.”

Why is this problem so hard to solve? The popularity of poppies reflects the fact that drug trafficking is profitable. The recent upsurge in production is a response to the ouster of the totalitarian Taliban, which once won U.S. aid in its efforts to fight the drug trade. Although Washington is promoting the illusion that the West can simultaneously eradicate drug production and Islamic fundamentalism, the goals seem incompatible—in which case, the United States has to choose which objective is more important.

Drug production in Afghanistan, as elsewhere, ultimately is more a question of demand than of supply. Several decades of drug prohibition suggest that economic markets will always defeat government bans. In Afghanistan, where the average wage is a couple of dollars per day, heroin and opium trafficking produced revenues last year estimated at \$2.3 billion—as much as 60 percent of Afghanistan’s official annual GDP. Opium production has jumped 15 fold since 1979. As of 2002, Afghanistan accounted for three fourths of the world’s opium supply; last year saw the highest production levels ever. The United Nations claimed that drugs can be eradicated in Afghanistan “with the instruments of democracy, the rule of law, and development.” Unfortunately, this has not occurred.

Afghanistan was noted for neither drug abuse nor production until the Soviet invasion in 1979. By destroying established social institutions and creating widespread economic chaos, the Soviets turned Afghanistan into a model environment for the drug trade. Villages were bombed, crops were destroyed, livestock was killed, and people were displaced.

Opium became the perfect product in a land where tradi-

tional production, distribution, and transportation networks disappeared and social norms loosened. Legal crops suffered, and exports collapsed. Opium replaced other agricultural products on the best land, and drug producers employed the abundance of cheap labor—women, children, and returning refugees.

The war had other effects. Many refugees turned to drugs as a form of escape. And, according to the UNODC, “The medical use of opiates as analgesics and sedatives in the treatment of wounded combatants and other war victims also contributed to rising levels of addiction.”

Another factor, which Washington long refused to admit, was that America’s *mujahideen* allies relied on the drug trade for revenue. Indeed, it “was one of the only commodities which could generate enough income for large scale arms purchases,” reports the UNODC. During the Cold War, the United States subordinated her war on drugs to her campaign to undermine Soviet power.

After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, civil war raged for another decade. There was no effective central government in Afghanistan and no means by which the West could exert control. That vacuum helped propel the Taliban to power in 1996. The fundamentalist Muslim regime banned the use of all intoxicants, including opiates. However, Kabul had no objection to its people *selling* drugs to infidels; in fact, some Taliban commanders participated in the trade. Moreover, the Taliban’s victory was achieved in part by agreeing to allow some warlords to maintain their opium operations. Production doubled by 1999.

In 2000, Kabul banned the cultivation of opium but not its trade, in an attempt to avoid international sanctions. Production dropped dramatically in 2001 but then rebounded above the level of 2000, U.S. aid notwithstanding.

Following the Bush administration’s ouster of the Taliban, the new government banned opium production. The U.S. victory removed the restraints that the Taliban had established, however, and the poppy fields were replanted. Indeed, chaos along the border with Pakistan made smuggling even easier. (The opium trade also is rife along the borders with Iran, to Afghanistan’s west, and the Central Asian states to her north.)

Regime change did not provide Afghan households with a new source of economic support. And the subsequent influx of foreign aid, which has an extremely poor record of promoting development, could not alleviate the poverty of the mass of Afghans. Legitimate exports remain a fraction of the levels of two decades ago.

Hamid Karzai rules little more than Kabul—and that only with allied support, which is not enough to suppress scattered Taliban forces, discordant warlords, and opium producers. In many areas, the traditional power structure remains undis-

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