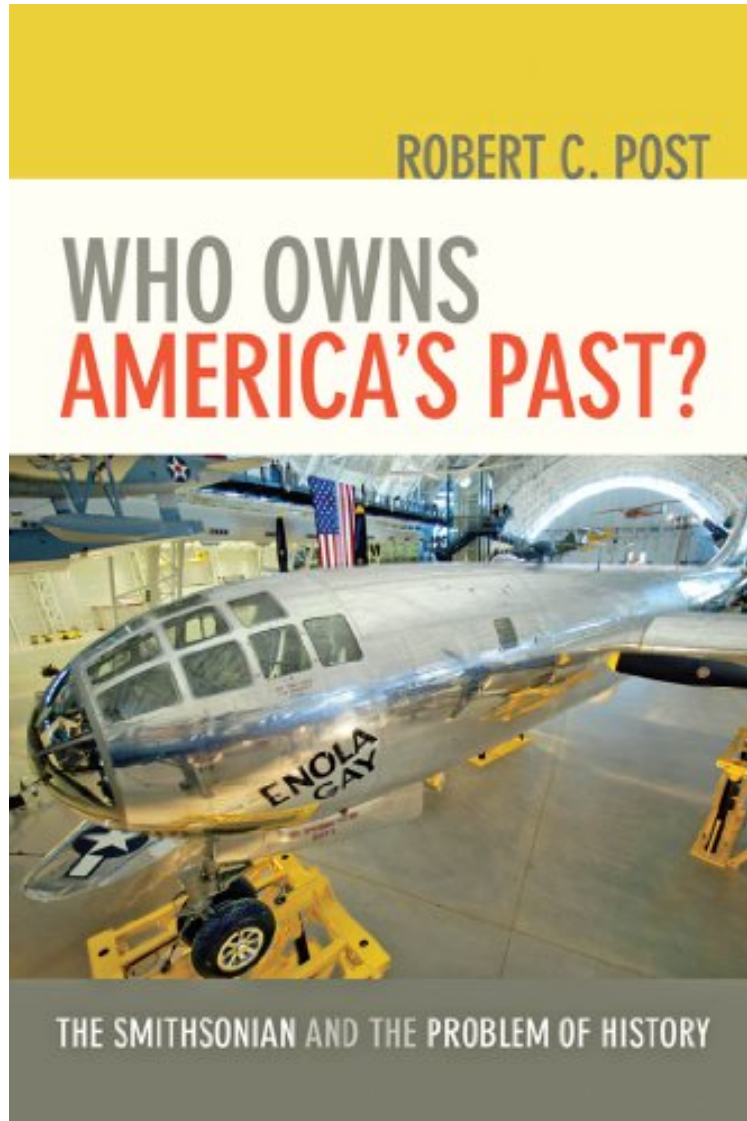


## Who Owns America's Past?

*Robert C. Post*

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**Robert C. Post : Who Owns America's Past?** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Who Owns America's Past?:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. about each of which he has written excellent volumes, both also published by Johns Hopkins Press By Stephen H. Cutcliffe Bob Post is an accomplished historian of technology specializing in transportation topics, including streetcars and drag racing, about each of which he has written excellent volumes, both also published by Johns Hopkins Press. In this, his most recent book, Post turns his historical lens on the Smithsonian Institution (SI), and in particular the National Museum of American History (NMAH) and the National Air and Space Museum (NASM). In the interest of full disclosure, I should say up front that I have known

and interacted with the author in various capacities for 30 some years. We have ridden, and gotten lost on, street cars and trains in several different countries; hopped the back fences at Steam Town National Historic Site to sneak a peak at some otherwise off-limit railroad equipment; and even co-edited a book together. Thankfully, he has never taken me drag racing. For this book, Post, a now-retired SI curator, serves in the role as an extremely knowledgeable docent, walking the reader through the founding and subsequent expansions of the Smithsonian, introducing collection management policies, and revealing behind-the-scenes controversies over exhibit design and interpretation. The most notable of the latter was that surrounding 50th anniversary plans to display and interpret portions of the Boeing B-29 "Enola Gay" of Hiroshima fame or infamy depending on one's perspective. [The complete plane is now on display at the NASM's Udvar-Hazy Center.] Other themes about which I previously had only hazy ideas, even though I have known numerous SI curators and historians over the years, include building expansions, artifact acquisition, exhibit funding, and professional staffing issues. One of the most interesting and enduring themes faced by the Smithsonian, indeed, by any museum, has been the tension between artifact display, especially when dealing with what one former NMHT director called "pieces of the True Cross," and their contextual interpretation. For me at least then, the book's most important discussion centers around the issue of whose and what stories are to be told in our museums, and how to do so. If ever asked to write another museum exhibit review, I would look at and evaluate things quite differently than I might otherwise have done, having now read this book. To steal a line, only slightly out of context, from the former NMHT director, Roger Kennedy, I would urge anyone with an interest in the history of technology, history museums and exhibitions generally, or the SI specifically to get their "mitts" on this book. If you do, you will learn a great deal about things, literally artifacts, but, more importantly, ideas about them. 1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A book of surprises By Rosalind H. Williams This book delivers two surprises. The first surprise is that the author-- in addition to impressive credentials as writer, editor, historian, and curator; has also been a drag racer and has written "High Performance: The Culture and Technology of Drag Racing," praised as "the Bible of drag racing for future generations" by "Big Daddy"; Don Garlits, father of the sport. So, take heed: this book about America's leading history museum is written by someone who hangs out with drag racers nicknamed Big Daddy. This tells you that you are in unusual company, and you have every reason to wonder how author Post, hooked on speed and noise, ended up working for a history museum. Which leads us to the second surprise: the stories recounted in the later chapters, which recount the rush of controversies over exhibits between the mid 1980s and later 1990s. (Post says that by one count there were 36 of them.) "Controversies" is putting it mildly. Many of them, especially that involving the display of the A-bomb-dropping aircraft Enola Gay, were vicious and unforgiving, personal as well as political. This, like a drag-racing scholar, is counter-intuitive. Aren't Americans dedicated to looking forward, not back? Aren't we entirely forgetful of the past? Isn't history something people used to care about and don't any longer? This conventional wisdom is of course itself a version of history. The point of the book is that the past is not gone, not forgotten, not past at all but a huge part of the accelerating, deafening present. This book reads so smoothly that you may not notice how many jolts it delivers. 1 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Great book Great Author. Dr. Robert Post is great. He knows history. Buy it worth the money. By Wayne K. Great book great Author Dr Robert Post. Buy it. Well worth the money. History explained so anyone can understand it

In 1994, when the National Air and Space Museum announced plans to display the Enola Gay, the B-29 sent to destroy Hiroshima with an atomic bomb, the ensuing political uproar left the museum's parent Smithsonian Institution entirely unprepared. As the largest such complex in the world, the Smithsonian cares for millions of objects and has displayed everything from George Washington's sword to moon rocks to Dorothy's ruby slippers from The Wizard of Oz. Why did this particular object arouse such controversy? From an insider's perspective, Robert C. Post's *Who Owns America's Past?* offers insight into the politics of display and the interpretation of history. Never before has a book about the Smithsonian detailed the recent and dramatic shift from collection-driven shows, with artifacts meant to speak for themselves, to concept-driven exhibitions, in which objects aim to tell a story, displayed like illustrations in a book. Even more recently, the trend is to show artifacts along with props, sound effects, and interactive elements in order to create an immersive environment. Rather than looking at history, visitors are invited to experience it. *Who Owns America's Past?* examines the different ways that the Smithsonian's exhibitions have been conceived and designed--whether to educate visitors, celebrate an important historical moment, or satisfy donor demands or partisan agendas. Post gives the reader a behind-the-scenes view of internal tempests as they brewed and how different personalities and experts passionately argued about the best way to present the story of America.

"Post's thoughtful elucidation of the exhibits and the ensuing controversies demonstrate the complexities of the environment in the national museum in the twentieth century. Further, this work documents the shifting priorities of the Smithsonian, revealing the many different actors that took part in the creation of both well-known exhibits and many smaller ones. The book also provides many interesting and important examples of the interconnections between

historians of technology and the Smithsonian. This excellent work will be valuable to public historians as well as laypersons." (Choice)"A pick for any collection strong in museum management and history. The result goes beyond a recommendation for arts holdings, examining how American history itself is documented and presented." (Midwest Book )"A detailed insider's look at growth and change across the institution. The book offers a rich and readable intellectual biography of the Smithsonian." (Journal of American History)"The Smithsonian finally gets its Washington insider-tells-all memoir. Who Owns America's Past? documents the value of the Smithsonian's distinctive culture?and also the way it has kept the institution from being all that it might be." (The American Historian)"Weaves original primary source research, scholarly synthesis, and personal experiences into a highly readable study of the cultural history of America's most popular museum institution." (Nick Sacco Museums and Social Issues)"Here is an eyewitness account of many of the personalities, controversies, artifacts, and interpretations that most of us know in their final, burnished form, upon the walls of the world's greatest history museum. Who Owns America's Past? is a needed book." (American Historical )"This is an important book that examines the inner workings of the Smithsonian in ways that are both interesting and useful. There are no easy answers to the questions Post raises with this insightful text." (Technology and Culture)"For readers curious about the upper stories and basement spaces beyond the exhibits, it provides access to decision makers and the collections they oversaw because the author regularly walked those spaces and conversed with their denizens... This book did not promise comprehensiveness or even an answer to the general question of 'who' or even 'what' defines history, but Post's account does provide a reminder that it is important to seek out the answer to that question in specific places because?particularly at one of the nation's most visible and influential institutions?it matters." (Sally Kohlstedt Isis)"This is a most readable account written by an insider of a fascinating institution." (The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage)"Robert Post's study of the evolution of America's premier museum is authoritative, thorough, and engagingly written by a curatorial insider with a critical perspective. His judgment of Smithsonian controversies during the past generation is reliable and well informed, especially those concerning the history of technology. This is institutional history in the very best sense because it highlights the role of individuals as well as ideas. We also gain insight into the museum's place in national politics. A most enlightening project." (Michael Kammen, Cornell University, and Past President, Organization of American Historians)"The great lacuna in historiographical accounts of the modern period is any overview of the role of the modern national museum in shaping both popular and scholarly historical presentations. While there is a modest literature in the museum studies world and a handful of dissertations, there is nothing of the scale and scope of this remarkable book. Part history, part memoir, part polemic, it is insightful, fascinating and sure to be an influential book about the history of technology and the Smithsonian Institution's role in shaping our understanding of modern American history." (Deborah G. Douglas, Director of Collections and Curator of Science and Technology, MIT Museum)"Post admirably provokes discussion about how an official national repository goes about presenting and interpreting its historical artifacts?a great pleasure to read." (Bob Casey, Senior Curator of Transportation Emeritus, The Henry Ford Museum)"Robert Post's extraordinary account of the Smithsonian Institution's treatment of history raises profound and disturbing questions about how curators, museum directors, the Smithsonian Secretary, stakeholders, and donors have shaped historical presentation. Readers will delight in Post's sometimes humorous characterization of staff, enjoy learning how the institution has changed over the years, and benefit from this careful examination of history, technology, and culture." (Pete Daniel, Curator Emeritus, National Museum of American History, and Past President, Organization of American Historians)From the Author Johns Hopkins University Blog What do Smithsonian curators do? For that matter, what is a curator? The dictionary says a curate is a clergyman, and in a museum a curator cares for artifacts and sees to their interpretation when they are displayed. ("Keeper" is the British term, but in the U.S. that word calls up diverse occupations: zookeeper, goalkeeper, jail keeper.) Although the Smithsonian famously lost George Washington's false teeth, the curatorial care of artifacts is rarely put to question. But interpreting what is put on display, when curators draw on their training as historians, that's something else. Often it may seem that displayed artifacts are not interpreted at all; they are simply identified. But a simple identification amounts to an affirmation and is thus a covert interpretation: "This artifact is worthy of display; it deserves your attention." Where the interpretation is overt, artifacts attract and sometimes invite controversy. The Smithsonian's most infamous controversy involved the display and interpretation of the Enola Gay, the B-29 deployed to destroy Hiroshima with an atom bomb. Curators at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) planned to interpret the Enola Gay partly in the context of the death and destruction it wrought. They were even going to address the disputed necessity of dropping the bomb in the first place. Many veterans and partisans of the military aviation community believed that theirs was not a valid interpretation at all but rather a "countercultural morality pageant." Through their allies in Congress they forced the Smithsonian to reverse course. The airplane was displayed solely as a technological marvel whose mission hastened the end of World War II. Much of the controversy was framed in terms of historical revisionism, an expression that means one thing to professional historians and something else to nearly everyone else. On the one hand, it means departure from the truth of what "really happened" in order to serve ideological ends. It means deliberate distortion. On the other hand, it means examining events in light of new

concerns or new evidence. For example, the term became commonplace among historians of World War I as documents were made available that revealed the causes to have been exceedingly complex and even led to calls for "revision" of the Treaty of Versailles, which had placed blame solely on Germany and its allies. Most historians believe that knowledge is provisional--that, in the words of MIT's John Dower, "critical inquiry and responsible revision remain the lifeblood of any serious intellectual enterprise." Dower adds that this "is a daunting task to try and convey to the public." And indeed it is. When NASM curators sought to convey a sense that the bombing of Hiroshima was an event fraught with moral ambiguity, and may not even have been "necessary," they were accused of misrepresenting the truth to suit their left-wing proclivities. To the public at large, the term revisionism became nothing more than an expression of opprobrium, and the expression was later used--irony of ironies--to advance the case for invading Iraq. After inspectors reported finding no weapons of mass destruction, President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice branded their reports as "revisionist history." Many historical events can be interpreted in different ways by deploying different facts, and one or another of these interpretations may be termed revisionist. But Bush and Rice had no facts on their side, none at all, and merely deployed the word as a shield against the facts. At NASM, the curators were accused of ignoring truth and denying the facts, but actually they were just choosing among narrative possibilities: Different facts, different stories. Whenever there are such possibilities, the question becomes this: What is the proper function of our National Museum? Is it simply to celebrate what most Americans are most proud of, typically what they "learned in school"? Or is it to revise what they learned and to educate them in light of history's ambiguity and complexity? Given the political dangers revealed in the Enola Gay controversy, this is certainly a daunting task, but in my view it is worth every effort, given the truth of these lines from George Orwell's 1984: "Who controls the past controls the future/who controls the present controls the past." From the Back Cover Honorable mention, National Council on Public History Book Award Outstanding Academic Title, Choice In 1994, when the National Air and Space Museum announced plans to display the Enola Gay, the B-29 sent to destroy Hiroshima with an atomic bomb, the ensuing political uproar left the museum's parent Smithsonian Institution entirely unprepared. As the largest such complex in the world, the Smithsonian cares for millions of objects and has displayed everything from George Washington's sword to moon rocks to Dorothy's ruby slippers from The Wizard of Oz. Why did this particular object arouse such controversy? From an insider's perspective, Robert C. Post's *Who Owns America's Past?* offers insight into the politics of display and the interpretation of history. Never before has a book about the Smithsonian detailed the recent and dramatic shift from collection-driven shows, with artifacts meant to speak for themselves, to concept-driven exhibitions, in which objects aim to tell a story, displayed like illustrations in a book. Even more recently, the trend is to show artifacts along with props, sound effects, and interactive elements in order to create an immersive environment. Rather than looking at history, visitors are invited to experience it. *Who Owns America's Past?* examines the different ways that the Smithsonian's exhibitions have been conceived and designed--whether to educate visitors, celebrate an important historical moment, or satisfy donor demands or partisan agendas. Combining information from hitherto-untapped archival sources, extensive interviews, a thorough review of the secondary literature, and considerable personal experience, Post gives the reader a behind-the-scenes view of disputes among curators, academics, and stakeholders that were sometimes private and at other times burst into headline news. Post's thoughtful elucidation of the exhibits and the ensuing controversies demonstrate the complexities of the environment in the national museum in the twentieth century. Further, this work documents the shifting priorities of the Smithsonian, revealing the many different actors that took part in the creation of both well-known exhibits and many smaller ones. The book also provides many interesting and important examples of the interconnections between historians of technology and the Smithsonian. This excellent work will be valuable to public historians as well as laypersons. Choice "A pick for any collection strong in museum management and history. The result goes beyond a recommendation for arts holdings, examining how American history itself is documented and presented." Midwest Book "A detailed insider's look at growth and change across the institution. The book offers a rich and readable intellectual biography of the Smithsonian." Journal of American History "The Smithsonian finally gets its Washington insider-tells-all memoir. *Who Owns America's Past?* documents the value of the Smithsonian's distinctive culture and also the way it has kept the institution from being all that it might be." The American Historian "Weaves original primary source research, scholarly synthesis, and personal experiences into a highly readable study of the cultural history of America's most popular museum institution." Museums and Social Issues "Here is an eyewitness account of many of the personalities, controversies, artifacts, and interpretations that most of us know in their final, burnished form, upon the walls of the world's greatest history museum. *Who Owns America's Past?* is a needed book." American Historical "This is an important book that examines the inner workings of the Smithsonian in ways that are both interesting and useful. There are no easy answers to the questions Post raises with this insightful text." Technology and Culture Robert C. Post was employed by the Smithsonian for twenty-three years and was responsible for several of the technological collections and for the content of major exhibits. His books include *Every Four Years: The American Presidency* and *In Context: History and the History of Technology*, and he is the former editor of the Society for the History of Technology's journal,

Technology and Culture. In 2001 he was awarded the Society's highest honor, the Leonardo da Vinci Medal.