EXHIBITING TRAGEDY:  
MUSEUMS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF SEPTEMBER 11

by

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

On the morning of September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four commercial jetliners, turning them into weapons against American targets. In just a few short hours, the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were destroyed, the Pentagon was attacked, and nearly 3,000 people lost their lives, making September 11 the most devastating foreign assault on U.S. soil. The events of September 11 became instant history. As the most photographically documented tragedy in American history, the footage of the destruction was replayed and analyzed endlessly in the media, which perpetuated the ensuing fear, uncertainty, and anger that pervaded the nation’s consciousness. Similar to the aftermath of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Americans felt that their cultural landscape had changed forever. With the threat of war and subsequent terrorist attacks looming in the distance, Americans searched for answers and ways to cope with the tragedy.

Museums, institutions dedicated to preserving memory and history, found themselves at the center of this search. New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman reported just six days after the attacks that New
Yorkers were flocking to their city’s museums to find comfort and solace.¹ As one visitor said, “I am terribly shocked by what happened, but here I am reminded how everybody shares in this past.”² Many museums, however, wondered what they could offer beyond a quiet space for reflection. September 11 forced museums to rethink their public role and challenged them to find appropriate and meaningful ways to address tragedy in their institutions.

In the subsequent days and weeks, museums rushed to respond to these historic events. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York found itself acting as a social service organization in the immediate hours following the attacks, offering food, water, and first aid to a confused and traumatized populace making its way uptown, away from the World Trade Center destruction.³ The Newseum in Arlington, Virginia, located near the Pentagon, re-opened on September 12 to display live news feeds and headlines from around the world. Other museums across the nation offered programs, concerts, and town hall meetings.

Many institutions also developed exhibitions in an attempt to publicly explore the events of September 11. These ranged from

² Quoted in Ibid.
memorial exhibitions designed to help a mourning nation heal to more ideologically-motivated statements that exposed the political and social consequences of the attacks. The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History presented September 11: Bearing Witness to History, which featured artifacts from the impact sites of the tragedy, personal stories of survival and rescue, and a visitor-response area, all designed to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the attacks. On the other side of the country, the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, Washington, displayed two exhibitions exploring what it means to be an American after September 11 and the consequences of the USA PATRIOT Act on immigrant and minority communities.

Such explorations are essential given the emotional nature of tragic events. Psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulik use the term “flashbulb memories” to define the ways in which these traumatic occurrences are vividly imprinted in the minds of individuals.4 Central to these memories are the elements of surprise, emotional trauma, and consequentiality. The assassination of John F. Kennedy and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, for example, created flashbulb memories for all Americans of that time, nearly all of whom could recall when and where

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they first heard the news. Similarly, a year after the events of September 11, ninety-seven percent of Americans remembered exactly where they were and what they were doing the moment they learned of the terrorist attacks.\(^5\)

As technology has developed and improved over the past several decades, Americans increasingly witness these national events through the media of film, photography and television. The explosion of the Challenger in 1986 was one of the first instances the public viewed such a tragedy live on television. Similarly, the graphic images of September 11 constitute the primary recollections that Americans have of the attacks. The horrifying images of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center and the collapse of each of the towers (both broadcast live) created a moment in which Americans had the profound sense of collectively viewing history.

Marita Sturken, Professor of Communications at the University of Southern California, has observed that the witnessing of such occurrences “enables Americans, regardless of the vast differences among them, to situate themselves as members of a national culture.”\(^6\) Indeed, after the

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tragedy the nation seemed united as never before despite the terrible circumstances. The ubiquitous presence of the American flag in the days and weeks following the attacks—a symbolic representation of a shared national mourning—indicated the collective aspect of the tragedy. Regardless of their geographic location or political beliefs, September 11 was an event experienced by all Americans.

The endless television coverage of September 11 had a large part in fostering this sense of collectivity and in giving meaning to the attacks. The public was transfixed not only by the horrifying and vivid images of the World Trade Center attacks, but also by the heart-wrenching human facets of the story, including images of loved ones posting missing-person posters in New York and the impromptu shrines and vigils that sprung up around the nation. Peter Jennings of ABC News observed that the television became the “national campfire” in the days following September 11.7 Through this national coverage, the media also helped to create a popular narrative of the events. Similar to the scripting of other national tragedies before it, including the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the events of September 11 came to symbolize a vicious attack perpetrated by evil terrorists on an innocent nation. As noted by historian Edward

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Linenthal, unlike the Gulf War veterans responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing, “those guilty of mass murder on 9/11 fit comfortably into historical American images of evildoers.”

This narrative was supported by the imagery seen on television of both Osama bin Laden and the Middle East. The photographs of Afghanistan’s desolate and seemingly uninhabitable landscape and the grainy footage of a bearded and sinister-looking Osama bin Laden (as well as our own imagined views of him hiding in the barren caves of Afghanistan) intensified our collective perception of the Middle East as alien, mysterious, and threatening. It was not difficult for Americans to demonize what was so foreign and little understood.

The replaying of the disturbing and unforgettable images of September 11 simultaneously cemented a popular narrative of the event while also denying the public the opportunity to move beyond the video footage to a greater understanding of the broader causes and consequences of the attacks. The emotional and traumatic aspects of bearing witness to mass murder, both at the time of the events and in their subsequent replaying, made it difficult to view the events objectively. It is in this realm that museums can play a vital role in helping the public move beyond political narratives to engender a greater awareness of September 8.

11. The memory of 9/11 has been and doubtless will be invoked often in the future, most notably by the government and politicians, who use such events to further their own political agenda. Museums can work against such rhetoric by helping the public to explore the events from multiple perspectives, providing historical context, and offering views from underrepresented communities. As Marita Sturken notes, it is not the initial image of such tragedy that fosters understanding, “It is the reenactment, the replaying, the fantasizing of the story that allows the mourning process to proceed and the event to acquire meaning.”

As the mission of all museums is to educate the public, they are a logical place to explore events such as September 11; indeed, museums seem to be the ideal forum for such explorations. In 1998, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen published a report based on interviews with 1,500 Americans on the popular uses of history in American culture. Of all sources of historical information, respondents named museums as the ones they trusted most—above relatives, universities, books, and television. As public institutions, museums can also play a civic role by offering places where diverse participants can gather together to discuss social and political issues. By engaging visitors in the discussion of

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9 Sturken, Tangled Memories, 37.
contemporary concerns, museums become increasingly vital in their communities and contribute to the growth of what author Robert Putnam has dubbed social capital, or the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from social networks.11

Over the past several decades, this civic role of the museum has greatly expanded. Museums have transformed from collections-centered institutions into ones that focus more and more on the needs and desires of their visitors. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought tremendous change to museums, as an increasingly diverse group of stakeholders asked that museums reflect the complexity of their communities and be socially relevant for their visitors. Today, more than ever before, museums are not expected to simply store artifacts from the past but to interpret, offer multiple perspectives, and to comment on contemporary events.

In 1998, the American Association of Museums recognized these roles of the museum by establishing the Museums and Communities Initiative to “explore the potential for renewed, dynamic engagement between museums and communities.”12 Discussions around this initiative

resulted in the 2002 publication *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, which asked museums to strengthen community partnerships, share authority, and recognize the responsibility they have as public institutions to contribute to social capital and civic pride.\(^{13}\) The events of September 11 brought into sharp relief these new duties of the museum. As John Durel, former Director of the Baltimore City Life Museum asked after the attacks, “Beyond our passive role of offering places for solace and togetherness, will we become active in building a better world out of this tragedy?”\(^{14}\)

Like Durel, many museum staff members wondered how they could put into practice the concepts encouraged by initiatives such as AAM’s Museums and Communities. In the midst of this rhetoric regarding the roles and responsibilities of the museum, September 11 was the first instance in which museums across the nation were truly tested to see if they could rise to the occasion and prove themselves to be relevant, engaging institutions capable of exercising their full potential. Thus, the ways in which they respond to and represent the events of September 11 and their aftermath will be a defining moment in the history of museums. In the interpretation of the terrorist attacks, museums have the


responsibility to demonstrate that they are institutions vital to civic life that can provide solace and understanding following national tragedy. Already, the varied responses to September 11 indicate the myriad roles that museums can play at such a time. They have created new paradigms by offering communal healing places, historical perspective, and opportunities for cross-cultural understanding.

There are, however, many challenges inherent in the representation of tragedy on a national scale. In speaking of the struggle to respond to September 11, National Museum of American History Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs James Gardner noted that the circumstances had placed museums “in the uncomfortable position of working at the intersection of grief and history.”

In the interpretation of tragic events, museums are put in the difficult place of attempting to contextualize an extremely emotional event. These raw emotions often contribute to museum controversies, when stakeholders feel that museums have misrepresented history. In the battle over the proposed exhibition of the Enola Gay at the National Air and Space Museum, for instance, World War II veterans protested when they believed that the museum’s interpretation of the bombing of Hiroshima did not accurately represent

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their experiences. Indeed, the very notion of representation raises a complex set of questions, as the word “represent” also means “to stand for.” In essence, to re-present an event is to relive it and to reconstruct it. With the high expectation of essentially recreating history, how can museums accurately present a true account of an event that has varied meanings and associations to diverse individuals?

In this way museums also find themselves caught between both history and memory. While the events of September 11 remain in recent consciousness it is difficult to provide historical perspective. However, it is not always individual memories that contribute to such difficulties; it is the broader cultural memory of events that often poses the greatest challenges. Sturken defines cultural memory as that which is “shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning,” while history is “a narrative that has in some way been sanctioned or valorized by institutional frameworks or publishing enterprises.”

History aims at the creation of an objective, often official narrative of the past and focuses on the broader origins and consequences of events, usually in a dispassionate tone. Memory, on the other hand, is inextricably linked to emotion and is part of the everyday consciousness of individuals, created not only

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16 Sturken, Tangled Memories, 3-4.
through family, upbringing and personal experiences, but also by movies, books, and television—part of an individual’s larger cultural environment.

The complexity of the relationship between memory and history in the museum becomes clear when one looks to the past. The representation of World War II has been controversial at several institutions as the battle over the public and national memory of the war was waged by veterans, politicians, and historians. During the 1980s, the National Park Service came under fire for its inclusion of Japanese artifacts at its museum at the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor. In 1994, the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum found itself at the center of a controversy surrounding the display of the Enola Gay when many veterans and politicians protested the fact that the exhibition would question the necessity of using atomic weapons against Japan. This heated and highly-publicized debate resulted in the cancellation of the originally planned exhibition and the resignation of the museum’s executive director, and threw into question the authority of the museum to present unpopular viewpoints on historical events.

The representation of World War II, both during the conflict and in later years, illuminates the political nature of the interpretation of tragic events. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, museums across the nation rushed to boost public morale and prepare the citizens of America
for wartime through educational programs, demonstrations, and exhibitions. At the same time, however, many museums also presented propagandistic exhibitions designed to assure visitors of the supremacy of American values and democracy and of our nation’s inevitable victory in a war against evil. These exhibitions included only one viewpoint of the war and ignored events that might have complicated the view of America as a democratic superpower, such as the government-sanctioned internment of Japanese Americans. In the years since, when museums have attempted to reinterpret the events of World War II to include more multifaceted views of U.S. policy and wartime decisions, they have found themselves embroiled in controversy at the crossroads of memory, history, and politics.

More recently, the rise of the memorial museum and memorial exhibitions has defined a new role for the museum. Memorial museums are places of healing and commemoration, designed to inspire reflection on the causes and consequences of tragic events and memorialize their victims. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, dedicated in 1992, was created to educate the public about the Holocaust but also to honor its victims by displaying photographs and artifacts relating to the events. The Oklahoma City National Memorial, created after the 1995 bombing of the city’s federal building, includes a museum in its memorial
center that represents the healing process of a community coping with tragedy.

The display of memorial artifacts has been a way for existing museums to create healing environments as well. In 1992, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History displayed the personal objects left by visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. More recently, the New-York Historical Society has exhibited many of the temporary memorials erected in the wake of September 11 by members of the grieving public in New York City. This trend, however, has left many institutions to wonder how they can sensitively honor the victims of war and terrorism while at the same time remain removed enough from the event to provide historical perspective. While offering healing spaces in which visitors can reflect on these horrific events, the rise of the memorial museum and exhibition also raises questions regarding their ability to represent an unbiased and critical historical perspective in a commemorative environment.

The many roles that museums have played in relation to the interpretation of tragic events leave myriad opportunities and challenges for museums today. Should they work to prepare visitors for the possibility of other terrorist attacks? Should they pay tribute to the victims of the attacks and offer a healing space for visitors? Or should they
approach the events from an historical perspective, explaining the causes of such tragedy? These are the questions that many institutions are asking themselves in the wake of September 11. James Gardner of the National Museum of American History has commented that

the challenge for history museums is to steer a course that responds to the needs and concerns of the public without compromising our commitment to making meaning of the past. But then that is always our goal. What is different with September 11 is the level of emotion that constitutes the context for our work.\textsuperscript{17}

The purpose of this project is to inform the museum community about the issues surrounding the interpretation of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, specifically focusing on the development of exhibitions. Museum exhibitions are generally static, seemingly permanent, and require institutions to present a specific opinion by choosing what objects to display and whose stories to tell. While public programs were more common in the aftermath of September 11, they were usually presented as either discussions amongst members of the public or as the opinions of specific individuals. By offering a specific narrative of events, museum exhibitions provide rich examples of the different approaches museums have taken in examining the events of September 11 and the challenges they have faced in doing so.

\textsuperscript{17} Gardner and Henry, “September 11 and the Mourning After,” 52.
This project will first explore the dilemma of these representations in an historical context, by examining how museums’ reactions to past national tragedies have shaped their contemporary responses to September 11. It will also analyze current exhibitions about September 11 at various institutions to compare and contrast the different approaches that museums have taken to represent the events to the public and showcase the many possibilities for its interpretation. This master’s project will be useful to curators, exhibition developers, and other museum staff who want to know how to approach the development of an exhibition about a difficult topic. The struggles that museums face when representing such tragedy illuminate the need for guidance in interpreting emotional and political events, both in their immediate aftermath and in later years. Since September 11, little has been written about how museums should approach the representation of this historic event. Through an examination of historical trends as well as case studies and interviews with museum professionals and other experts, this master’s project will provide recommendations for institutions that plan to develop exhibits about September 11 or other national traumas.

As trusted public institutions and privileged spaces for reflection, intellectual stimulation, debate, and community gathering, museums have a tremendous power to shape history, national memory, and public
opinion. As such, it is vital that they think critically about how to approach the interpretation of tragic and historic occurrences. September 11 challenged museums to assume the role of an active participant in current events. Institutions that can effectively navigate the complexities of interpreting this event in meaningful ways will succeed in fulfilling their educational responsibility. Tackling the representation of September 11 will be a way for many museums to connect to diverse members of their public and to become more meaningful and relevant institutions in their communities.

**Research Questions and Objectives**

In preparation for the creation of this master’s project, I developed a set of questions and objectives that have guided my research and interviews, which are listed below.

**Questions:**

1. When interpreting September 11, what lessons can museums learn from past representations of tragic events, including World War II and the Oklahoma City bombing?

2. What types of exhibitions have American museums developed relating to September 11, and what approach did they take to the events?

3. What was the development process for these exhibitions, and what challenges did these institutions face?

4. Given past museum controversies, how should institutions approach the representation of tragic and emotional events?
5. What are the issues that museums must address when planning an exhibition about September 11, both now and in the future?

Objectives:

1. To research museum exhibitions and programs that followed the attack on Pearl Harbor, the controversy surrounding the Smithsonian’s exhibition of the Enola Gay, and the creation of the Oklahoma City National Memorial.

2. To research exhibitions at American museums that responded to the events of September 11.

3. To conduct case studies of September 11 exhibitions at two different institutions, including site visits and interviews with exhibition developers.

4. To examine the practical, theoretical, and ethical issues surrounding the interpretation of tragic events.

5. To compile the results of my study into a list of recommendations for museum professionals who plan on developing an exhibition about September 11 or other difficult events.

Methodology

I employed a variety of methods to explore my research questions and objectives. These included a literature review, interviews, case studies, and site visits. I chose each of these methods for their effectiveness in uncovering stories and information that were vital to the development of my project. Each provided a different but necessary portion of my research and helped me to hone my topic.
The first method of research I utilized was a comprehensive literature review, which was necessary to examine several historical events that shaped the way in which contemporary American museums respond to tragic events. This first consisted of a study of museum exhibitions and programs mounted in reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, focusing on issues of *Museum News* from 1941-1943, which included articles by museum curators and directors, transcripts from American Association of Museums annual meeting presentations, and listings and reviews of exhibitions and programs. As this magazine was published twice a month during this time period, it was a rich source of information for my topic.

I also surveyed a wide range of literature that provided information on the controversial display of the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum and the development of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial. For these subjects, I looked to books, essay collections, and a variety of periodicals, including history and art journals and newspapers. These helped to illuminate many of the controversies that have surrounded the interpretation of political and emotional events. To provide context for my research, I also consulted seminal publications relating to field-wide museum initiatives, including the American Association of Museums’ *Excellence and Equity: Education*
and the Public Dimensions of Museums and Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums. In addition, I read works by scholars including Edward T. Linenthal and James E. Young, who focus on the process of historical representation and memorialization in contemporary society.

Finally, I consulted articles in mainstream press pertaining to museum exhibitions and programs about the events of September 11. These included reviews of museums, exhibitions and programs, all of which provided information on the wide range of responses from museums to the events of September 11 and helped me to choose my case studies. Many, though not all, of these articles were found using online resources, through search engines such as ProQuest as well as newspapers and journals online including the New York Times, USA Today, and the Washington Post.

In addition to a literature review, I conducted fifteen interviews for a deeper and more personal understanding of the issues surrounding my topic. I spoke with several museum professionals to gain greater insight into the challenges faced by institutions attempting to interpret September 11. Interviewing exhibition curators provided information on the complex process of developing an exhibition that deals with difficult subject matter. I also interviewed a range of non-museum professionals, including educators and historians, who have experience with the study and
interpretation of national tragedies. These interviews offered perspective on the larger issues that many institutions such as universities, government agencies, and non-profit organizations face when grappling with these representations.

In my interviews, I specifically wanted to learn about the concerns that museums have in presenting emotional and potentially controversial subjects and how they can best respond to the needs of their audience. I asked participants their opinions on what museums could provide to the public in the wake of a tragic event and what they believed visitors are looking for in these responses. I also questioned interviewees about the challenges involved in representing events like September 11 in the museum. I concluded by asking for referrals to other people with whom I could speak about my topic (see Appendix A for a complete list of interview questions).

In addition to my literature review and interviews, I conducted two case studies of exhibitions developed in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11. These included site visits to personally view each exhibition and interviews with their curators and developers to understand the creation process of each exhibition. During these conversations, I asked questions to learn more about each institution’s development process and how the subject of September 11 was approached. I wanted to
know how the idea for the exhibition was generated and what kind of experience curators were looking to create for visitors. I also asked about the specific challenges each museum faced when creating the exhibition and what the response of visitors has been. These interviews gave me a greater understanding of the each of the exhibitions and the process that museums have used to approach the interpretation of September 11.

My choice of institutions was driven by their vastly different approaches to the subject of September 11, which exemplify the range of possible responses to such a tragedy. The exhibitions that I profiled are the National Museum of American History’s (NMAH) *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* and the Wing Luke Asian Museum’s *I Am American: A Community Journal* and *The Veil of Patriotism*. NMAH is one of the primary collectors of September 11 artifacts. Its exhibition on the attacks reached over one million visitors while in Washington, D.C., and is currently touring the nation. As part of the Smithsonian Institution, which receives a large portion of its funding from the federal government, NMAH plays a unique role in interpreting American events from a national perspective. While it enjoys a particularly high profile and authority due to this affiliation, it is also more constrained in its responses and susceptible to controversy. In contrast, the Wing Luke Asian Museum is a small, ethnic-specific institution whose exhibitions reflect the opinions
and concerns of the Asian-American community in a specific area, namely Seattle, Washington.

**Limitations**

This project is limited in its scope on several counts. First, given my focus on American museums and their responses to September 11, I will not study the responses of museums in other countries to tragic events, such as how the Holocaust is represented in European museums. While such a study would have provided a broader perspective on how historical institutions interpret and create national memory around tragic historical episodes, my project is aimed towards providing American museums and their staff with recommendations for interpreting American national tragedies.

This project concentrates primarily on the interpretation of September 11 in museums. Initially, I wanted to incorporate in-depth studies of museums’ responses to several different tragedies and controversies in American history, including the Oklahoma City bombing, Pearl Harbor, the exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, and possibly even the Vietnam War. However, the inclusion of so many other events would have been too difficult to cover in just one project. Instead, I decided to include these other events as historical comparisons to better understand
the issues surrounding the interpretation of September 11. Therefore, Pearl Harbor, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the exhibition of the *Enola Gay* will be incorporated into my study as background information to support my research on September 11 exhibitions.

While my Background will discuss these reactions to historical events, I will do so only in the context of how it shaped American museums’ current interpretations of emotional and political events. The Background section of this project is not meant to provide a comprehensive review of museums’ reactions to tragic events in American history. Instead, I have chosen to discuss selected exhibitions and museums that exemplified the varied reactions that museums have displayed over time as well as the political controversies and complexities that surround the interpretation of difficult events. I chose these events because they illuminate specific themes I will address in my project, including memorialization, political controversy, and patriotism. Therefore, other compelling tragedies, including the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, that of Martin Luther King, the AIDS epidemic, and the explosion of the Challenger, fall outside the scope of my study.

Though I will mention specific programs to make observations on the various ways in which museums have approached the interpretation of
September 11, my analysis and recommendations will focus on museum exhibitions. Organizations across the nation presented myriad programs after both September 11 and Pearl Harbor, including community forums, lectures, and art classes. However, to do in-depth research on both exhibitions and programs was too large a task. My decision is also connected to the fact that I was committed to conducting site visits of each exhibition I used as a case study. Since many of the programs relating to September 11 happened in the weeks and months immediately following the attacks, attendance at these programs would have been impossible. In addition, my choice of exhibitions reflects the fact that they generally enjoy higher attendance and visibility in comparison to programs. Nonetheless, a study of programs would have provided a more complete overview of how museums responded to September 11. Finally, while the act of exhibiting raises the issues surrounding the collection and accessioning of September 11 artifacts, the ethics and practicalities of such collecting are so complex as to merit a separate study.

Another limitation of my project is the use of case studies rather than a nation-wide survey of museums to determine which institutions presented exhibitions relating to September 11. While the use of case studies does preclude a breadth of perspectives, I found that this method was better suited to my study. Since I was primarily interested in the
process of exhibition development, rather than the end result, I felt that the objective of my project—recommendations for developing September 11 exhibitions—would benefit more from an in-depth analysis of a few different exhibitions to understand the similarities and differences in their approaches rather than providing data on how many museums presented 9/11 exhibitions. In addition, given that time and geographical constraints would not allow me to visit more than a few of these exhibits, I decided it was better to focus on the two September 11 exhibitions that I profiled.

Another important reason for doing case studies rather than surveys is related to the sensitive nature of my topic. Though many museums across the nation approached the subject of the terrorist attacks in some way, there were many other organizations that chose not to respond. These museums may have had valid reasons for not addressing this topic, including a belief that more distance was needed from the events in order to interpret them or a lack of resources. However, I was afraid that asking questions on this subject would pressure these institutions to defend their inaction, thereby defeating the purpose of my research. I relied instead on my literature review and interviews to learn more about the different organizations that presented September 11 exhibitions.
Initially, I had wanted to speak with visitors to the exhibitions that I studied to learn their feelings and responses to what they had just experienced. Such interviews would have allowed me to comment on the effectiveness of the exhibitions and whether or not the public viewed them in the ways in which each museum intended. However, the limited amount of time I had to spend in these exhibitions (as both were out of state) precluded interviewing an adequate sample of visitors. The decision not to use personal interviews for this project means that my results may not accurately represent the views of the majority of visitors to each exhibition. However, since each exhibition included a place for visitors to share their own feelings and opinions, I chose to look at these written responses to see what types of reactions the exhibitions elicited. I also relied on media coverage, evaluation results, and anecdotal data about visitor response from each institution.

Lastly, my own inexperience in developing exhibitions may restrict my knowledge and analysis of the development process at other institutions. Especially as I have not been involved in the development of an exhibition about a tragic event such as September 11, I cannot personally comment on the professional and personal difficulties surrounding such an interpretation nor on the difficult negotiations required between staff, stakeholders, and museum resources required to
present such an exhibition. To learn more about this process I relied on
the personal interviews I conducted with those who were involved in the
development of such exhibitions.

Product Description

My master’s project product will be an article on the interpretation
of September 11 in museums. Entitled “Exhibiting Tragedy: Museums
and September 11,” this approximately 2,500-word essay will outline the
inherent challenges and opportunities in developing exhibitions about
large-scale tragic events and offer recommendations for museums that are
planning to create exhibitions about such national traumas. This article
will be helpful to museum curators, exhibit developers, educators, and
other staff involved in the creation of this type of museum exhibition.

My article will begin with a brief review of my research for my
background section, including information on reactions to and
representations of tragic events in museums. Specifically, I will focus on
representations of World War II in museums both during and after the war
to offer perspective on how the role of the museum has changed over time
and how it is continually evolving. Since information on exhibitions about
World War II during the 1940s is not widely known, it will be interesting
and useful to the museum field.
The body of my article will consist of two parts: a discussion of my September 11 exhibition case studies and recommendations for developing an exhibition on September 11. In the first part, I will analyze the exhibitions I studied for my project, *I am American* and *Veil of Patriotism* at the Wing Luke Asian Museum and *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* organized by the National Museum of American History. Key points I will pull from my findings are the challenges exhibition curators and developers faced during development, their views on addressing political and emotional topics in the museum, and the goals for their exhibitions. I will also look at the differences between the two exhibitions to show the range of responses possible for an exhibition about September 11. Though the institutions that I profile in my project are quite different in their size, audience, and mission, I will point out some of the similarities between their exhibitions, which can help museums think about effective ways to approach the representation of difficult topics.

The last section will offer recommendations for museum staff interested in developing an exhibition about 9/11 or other tragic or emotional events. These recommendations will be based on my background research as well as my findings from my case studies. They will not be specific recommendations; rather, they will be more conceptual proposals designed to make curators and exhibition developers think
critically about how to address the challenges of representing such an event. My article will include five to six key recommendations as bullet points with short explanations of each.

An article is an effective format through which to communicate the findings and recommendations of my master’s project. It allows space to analyze my topic in depth and give background on historical events that have shaped current museum practices, and also the ability to include photographic illustrations of the exhibitions I profile. An article is also an ideal way to reach the targeted audience for my project’s findings, it being geared towards a wide range of museum professionals, including curators, educators, exhibition developers, directors, board members, and any other museum staff that would likely be involved in the development, interpretation, or generation of ideas for exhibitions at their institutions. My article will encourage them to think analytically about the representation of difficult subjects in the museum and provide them with concrete examples as well as tips for creating such an exhibition. It is my hope that the article will also encourage museum professionals to address current events and historically significant issues such September 11 in the museum as a way to make their institution a valuable asset to their community.
The journal I have chosen for the submission of my article is *History News*. Published by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), this quarterly publication is targeted towards staff members of history museums, historical societies, and other public history institutions. The journal reaches a wide audience of these professionals, with a current circulation of 6,000 to institutional and individual AASLH members and an estimated readership of 12,000. *History News* seeks “articles that address issues and concerns related to doing public history, and the challenges and success of history professionals working in the field of state and local history in all its formats.” Feature articles are 2,500 words in length and include six to eight illustrations.

Another reason for selecting *History News* as a forum for my article is that my master’s project is geared towards institutions that interpret historical events. Though AASLH focuses on issues that relate to the interpretation of public history, with a focus on state and local history, the national importance of the attacks of September 11 warrants an article focusing on its representation. In fact, *History News* has already published articles relating to the interpretation of September 11. The Winter 2002 issue *History, Tragedy, and Remembrance* featured essays by museum professionals from institutions including the New-York Historical Society, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and the Museum of the City of
New York. It also included an article by noted historian Edward Linenthal. All dealt with the implications for public historians of collecting and interpreting September 11, and pointed out many of the issues inherent in the public representation of such a difficult event.

My article is a logical extension to this issue of *History News*. I will take the subject one step further by assessing how institutions have responded to the attacks in the past two-and-a-half years and the challenges they have faced in doing so. My article will differ from the essays in this issue through the use of concrete examples and inclusion of specific recommendations for museums. While there have been several articles about representing September 11 in journals, including *Public Historian* and *Museum News*, they were published shortly after the attacks. None, therefore, were able to analyze September 11 exhibitions and provide specific recommendations for institutions looking to represent the event at their institution. Thus, my article will be a new contribution to the field and will be useful to a wide range of museum professionals.

**Glossary**

Due to the varied and often debated definitions of some of the terms I use in this project, I am including an explanation of specific words and phrases repeated often in this paper.
Cultural or National Memory: As defined by Sturken, memory that is “shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning.”\footnote{Sturken, Tangled Memories, 3.} As defined by Susan Crane, “a conceptualization that expresses a sense of the continual presence of the past.”\footnote{Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” American Historical Review 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1372.} Cultural memory is flexible, linked to emotions, and is deeply imbedded in the consciousness of individuals. It is created through a complex network of cultural forces including the media, the government, family, and personal experiences.

Exhibition: A public display by an institution of physical artifacts, images, and/or text used to represent and/or interpret an event or idea.

History: An academic discipline that aims at an objective narrative of the past by exploring the causes and consequences of historical events. As defined by Sturken, “a narrative that has in some way been sanctioned or valorized by institutional frameworks or publishing enterprises.”\footnote{Sturken, Tangled Memories, 4.} History is a thorough and often dispassionate record of past events, using primary and secondary sources as information.

Interpret: To explain, to define, to present in understandable terms. To form a narrative surrounding a topic or event.

Memorial: Memorials are places, objects, or monuments intended to preserve the memory of a person, persons, or event, for mourning and/or celebratory purposes. In this project, I refer to memorials as sites of memory, or for public memorials, sites of collective memory around an event. In the words of James E. Young, these public memorials are also sites of “collected memory,” the many discrete memories that are gathered into common memorial spaces and assigned common meaning.”\footnote{Young, The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), xi.} Memorials are common spaces that create a shared memory for a community or society.

**Activist or Living Memorial:** Memorials that aim to transform those who visit them by engaging and educating visitors about the causes and consequences of violent and destructive events. These memorials...
are not static; they are sensitive to ongoing history and current events and how knowledge of the past can impact the future. They often include artifacts and changing exhibitions. Examples include the U.S. Holocaust National Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial.  

Sturken also refers to living memorials as those that encourage and engender participation, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. By leaving objects at the memorial, visitors participate in the ongoing creation of the historical narrative and memory of the event.

Memorialize: The process by which individuals or institutions commemorate a person, persons, or event. To call an event to remembrance, to create shared memory around an event.

Patriotism: The feeling or display of affection for and devotion and allegiance to one’s country. Patriotism is not to be confused with nationalism, which refers to a more fanatical form of patriotism, characterized by excessive devotion to one’s country, its beliefs and interests, and the belief that one’s country is superior to all others.

Propaganda: Ideas, facts, or allegations spread publicly by an organization or government deliberately to further a specific cause, belief, or point of view. The systematic dissemination of deceptive or distorted information that is intended to sway public opinion.

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23 Sturken, Tangled Memories, 78.
BACKGROUND

What we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history. What we take to be flare-ups of memory are in fact its final consumption in the flames of history. The quest for memory is the search for one’s history.

—Pierre Nora

The events of September 11 brought into sharp relief the responsibilities and challenges facing museums today. Museums are no longer only temples, but are now also teachers, forums for the discussion of contemporary social issues, and collectors and creators of national memory. Museums are charged with not only displaying artifacts but with interpreting them, creating historical narratives, and representing a variety of viewpoints that reflect the diversity of our society. These myriad and often conflicting roles became clear after the terrorist attacks of September 11, as museums struggled to find appropriate ways to react meaningfully and sensitively to the events and questioned whether or not they should even respond at all.

The representation of tragedy in the museum can be difficult and controversial. Museums must contend with a high level of emotions in both visitors and stakeholders, making it tricky to reconcile opposing viewpoints and present a balanced interpretation of a traumatic event.

National tragedies in particular bring their own set of challenges. Politicians and the media create popular narratives of events that affect our nation, making it difficult for museums to step back and represent them from an unbiased perspective. As a nation’s first response to tragedy is usually patriotism, museums often resort to propaganda to further the views of the government rather than providing an opportunity for reflection. As time goes by, the differences between history and memory—the singular, factual narrative of past events versus the complex and personal recollections of lived experiences—can cause controversy if a less-accepted or different version of the story is told.

September 11 was not the first time that museums found themselves operating under these difficult circumstances. An historical look at how museums have responded to and depicted nationally traumatic occurrences illuminates the challenges and opportunities that museums face in representing September 11. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, museums across the nation rallied not only to improve morale and gain support for the nation’s involvement in World War II but also to educate the public about the war and its effect on their lives. Decades after the war ended, the representation of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and that of Hiroshima at the USS Arizona Memorial and at the National Air and Space Museum, respectively, became controversial as
both struggled to appease veterans of the war while at the same time reflect contemporary scholarship that had tendered the history and meaning of those events more complex. Today, many museums are created specifically as memorials, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial. These institutions, dedicated to paying tribute to victims of tragic events, fuse history and commemoration in an uneasy alliance.

Exploring the history of museum exhibitions in response to national tragedies deepens our understanding of the politics and emotions behind these interpretations. The events that I discuss in this section have been chosen because they exemplify the many complexities involved in the representation of horrific events, both in their immediate aftermath and their reinterpretation in later years. The controversy that has arisen from many of these representations indicates the power that museums have in emotionally engaging visitors and shaping national memory. This realization, coupled with the exploration of these historical events, can provide a framework for museums searching for ways to approach the presentation of September 11 to the public, both now and in the future.
**Museums Respond to Pearl Harbor and World War II**

From the beginning, American museums differed from their European counterparts in their focus on education and visitor experience. After the Civil War, museums were founded in major cities across the nation and became important cultural destinations. First established primarily as collecting institutions, the educational role of the museum expanded during the 1920s and 1930s thanks to visionaries such as John Cotton Dana, who emphasized the role of museums as vehicles for community and educational service and believed that they should present current and relevant information to the public. During the 1930s, museums also benefited from a large amount of support from the Works Projects Administration (WPA), the Civil Works Administration, and other federal organizations. The total WPA expenditures alone towards museum projects from its inception until June of 1940 totaled over $19 million.\(^{25}\) By the 1940s, therefore, museums viewed themselves as educational and social institutions with a public role.

An example of the acceptance of this role was a three-part exhibition on national defense that opened at the St. Paul Museum in Minnesota beginning in May of 1941. Supported in part by the state of

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Minnesota and the WPA, the exhibition covered the particulars of American air, land, and sea defense. It was meant to educate visitors about the nation’s defense operations and their relationship to the ongoing war in Europe. The front page of the Museum News issue published on December 1, 1941, displayed a photograph from this exhibition with a headline that asked, “Can America be Bombed?”—an ironic question, given its publication a week before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The air exhibit’s explanation of the difficulties of air attack, which included maps and information on fuel and bomber loads for various distances, reflected Americans’ belief in their invulnerability to attack. It also indicated the museum’s commitment to its role as an educator of contemporary events.

Less than a week after this Museum News article appeared, Japan launched a surprise attack on the Pearl Harbor Naval Base in Hawaii. On the quiet Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, Japanese forces bombed and destroyed several of the U.S. Navy’s prized battleships, including the USS Arizona, and killed over 2,000 soldiers. The nation reeled from the disaster. Believing that their distance from the war assured their safety, Americans suddenly recognized their susceptibility to attack. The “day that would live in infamy” changed United States history forever. Though

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the U.S. had tried valiantly to stay out of the war, this was now impossible.

The first concern amongst many museums was the safety of their buildings and their collections, given the threat of additional acts of war. This pertained especially to museums located in Hawaii. Both the Bishop Museum and the Honolulu Academy of Arts emerged from the bombing unscathed, but immediately began putting their most valuable collections into safer locations. The Academy of Arts reopened to the public on December 9, after removing many of its objects from display and replacing them with artworks of secondary importance. The museum drafted a plan that outlined different methods of saving the collections in the event of another bombing. *Museum News* published a two-page article on the protection of collections and the effects of bombs on buildings of different sizes and materials the month after Pearl Harbor.\(^{27}\) However, it was pointed out that the threat to civilian institutions, given the difficulty of attacking American targets, was low.\(^{28}\)

Aside from the fears of additional air strikes, it was felt that American museums had an important role to play in the war effort. On December 20 and 21, 1941, just two weeks after the bombing, the


Association of Art Museum Directors convened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Called by the Metropolitan’s Director Francis Henry Taylor, the meeting also included directors of science and history museums. Attendees discussed the responsibilities of the museum during a time of war, asserting that “if, in time of peace, our museums and art galleries are important to the community, in time of war they are doubly valuable.”

It was resolved:

1) that American museums are prepared to do their utmost in the service of the people of this country during the present conflict
2) that they will continue to keep open their doors to all who seek refreshment of the spirit
3) that they will, with the sustained financial help of their communities broaden the scope and variety of their work
4) that they will be sources of inspiration illuminating the past and vivifying the present; that they will fortify the spirit on which Victory depends.

Museums across the nation responded quickly to this call to action. The New York Museum of Modern Art presented daily “Safety for the Citizens” film programs just two weeks after war was declared. These forty-five-minute British-made films educated visitors on what to do during an air raid, the importance of obeying curfew and blackout rules, the duties of the housewife during wartime, and civilian volunteer

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30 Ibid., 4.
organizations. The Cincinnati Art Museum added books to its library about defense, first aid, air raid precautions, and civilian morale services, and even hosted Red Cross First Aid classes. The Brooklyn Botanic Garden presented programs (some free of charge) on planting victory gardens, an activity encouraged by the government to aid in the effort of conserving national resources.

In addition to programs such as these, several museums also mounted exhibitions related to the war. The Franklin Institute, in cooperation with the Philadelphia Council of Civilian Defense, created an exhibition on camouflage, the art of concealing strategic structures and landmarks so as to remain undetected by enemy aircraft. The Chicago Historical Society opened a national defense room, in which it displayed artifacts from past American wars. The Portland Museum of Art exhibited anti-Axis cartoons, while the Toledo Museum of Art presented a series of exhibitions entitled “Art of Our Allies,” which presented the works of Australian, British, Russian, Chinese, and Dutch artists.

In May of 1942, the American Association of Museums (AAM) held its annual conference at Colonial Williamsburg, devoting its discussions to the duties of museums in wartime. Representatives from each type of museum—art, history, and natural history—discussed the unique roles that their institutions could play in the midst of an
international crisis, such as boosting public morale, providing historical
information, and inspiring patriotism and national pride. More than
anything, the meeting was a call to action to inspire museums to actively
support their country. Though not directly involved in the war economy,
museums could nonetheless actively participate in the war effort. As
Edward L. Bernays said in his speech “The Museum’s Job in Wartime,”
“Total warfare today has three fronts—the economic, the military, and the
psychologic…the psychological front…is a front on which museums can
function effectively in wartime.”

This theme was revisited many times throughout the conference.
Recognizing that resources were limited for museums, it was nevertheless
felt that the role of the museum could be a powerful one, providing a
space for spiritual nourishment and refreshment that could relieve the
stress of both the armed forces and civilians. The “spiritual home front”
was regarded as a vital part of a war being fought for “the protection of a
civilization.”

As institutions that preserved, displayed, and upheld
American and democratic cultural values, museums were placed on the
front lines of this battle.

Not content simply to keep their doors open to the public, many museums felt that they had to be more proactive in supporting the war by developing programs and exhibitions designed to educate the public on wartime resources and civilian duties and assure American victory in the battle against evil. New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which John Hay Whitney, the president of MoMA’s board, called “a weapon in national defense,” produced a series of exhibitions related to the war abroad during the 1940s. MoMA’s displays were striking in their direct and political nature. The first such exhibition, entitled *Road to Victory*, was designed as a single-path walkthrough exhibition that led visitors through a series of enlarged black and white photographs and photomurals accompanied by text panels. The show opened in June of 1942 and was curated by Edward Steichen, designed by Herbert Bayer, and included text panels written by Carl Sandburg. Thoughtfully conceptualized and designed, *Road to Victory* was created to appeal to visitors’ national pride, leading off with huge photomurals of pristine American wilderness, followed by images of farmers and farmland which highlighted the agricultural richness of American land as well as its domestication. Photographs of families and small-town life were paired with evidence of our country’s industrial prowess, including the construction of battleships.

and bridges. Thus, Steichen, Bayer, and Sandburg set the scene of a powerful but peaceful and prosperous nation.

Just as visitors were lulled into the serenity of these images, they turned a corner to face a jarring image of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Directly below this photograph, curators placed a smaller image of two laughing Japanese officials, Ambassador Nomura and Peace Envoy Jurusu. Labeled “Two Faces,” the juxtaposition seemed to show the two men laughing at the destruction of Pearl Harbor. After this disturbing turn, visitors then encountered photos of American military force, including planes, naval ships, and ground troops. The final image of the show was a larger-than-life photomural of U.S. soldiers standing in formation.

Of these MoMA exhibitions, art historian Mary Anne Staniszewski has said, “It has always been obvious that everything in these wartime and cold war installations—from the construction of the walls to the images and elements within them—was intended to persuade.”34 Road to Victory did not present or discuss facts in an objective manner; it was a visceral response to the horror of Pearl Harbor and the nation’s sudden entrance into war. The exhibition did not promote reflection on the political causes of Japan’s attack or the realistic consequences of war on American life.

34 Ibid., 209.
Instead, everything about the exhibition was meant to assure visitors of our nation’s illustrious past, our innocence in the face of international attack, and the inevitability of American victory. The picture painted of America—abundant, wholesome, wounded yet powerful—was displayed to boost public morale and encourage support of the conflict. Though today these features of the exhibition make it seem overly simplistic and blatantly propagandistic, it was widely admired by both critics and visitors at the time, and was no doubt psychologically beneficial for a population facing the reality of life during war.

Museums’ responses to Pearl Harbor and World War II are indicative of their public role during the 1940s. They also illuminate the two sides of this public role—one of responding to the needs of the public and one of uncritical patriotism and propaganda. A traumatic event such as Pearl Harbor caused feelings of fear, vulnerability, and confusion at a mass level. Museums responded to these feelings with programs and exhibitions designed to assuage fears and reassure the public. Museums prepared civilians for life during wartime by presenting programs and exhibitions that offered what they believed to be useful information and resources (such as Red Cross demonstrations and exhibitions on defense)

and gave them hope by assuring them of America’s ultimate victory in the war.

The propagandistic aspect of these responses is indicated by exhibitions such as *Road to Victory*. In his 1942 AAM presentation on the wartime duties of historical museums, Chicago Historical Society Director L. Hubbard Shattuck stated that “museums should become the shrines of true Americanism.” For many museums, including MoMA, this meant the creation of exhibitions that encouraged not reflection but action. Though they offered a wide range of useful programs and exhibitions during the war, museums’ singular focus on patriotic messages left no room for other viewpoints. Exhibitions of art from allied countries replaced those of Japanese and German art. Little was displayed that encouraged Americans to think critically about the war and nothing was exhibited that encouraged Americans to look within their own country to examine less-publicized events including the internment of Japanese Americans. Though not directly controlled by the government, museums acted in regards to the best interests of their country in accordance with their status as public, social service institutions.

Throughout history, museums have often acted directly or indirectly as agents of government power and control. In his essay “The

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Exhibitionary Complex,” author Tony Bennett applies Michel Foucault’s theories regarding the employment of governmental power and control through public institutions to the field of museum studies. Similar to other state institutions, museums, by categorizing and exhibiting objects, form displays that articulate and ratify existing structures of social power and knowledge. During the nineteenth century, many private and royal collections were opened to the public through state-run museums. By manipulating the representation of history, science, and art history, museums thus became a vehicle for those in power to exercise control over these disciplines to present a singular, government-endorsed view of the world.

Though American museums differ from their European counterparts in that they are not state controlled, Bennett’s argument nonetheless holds true for U.S. museums during the 1940s. During the 1920s and 1930s, museums became more accessible and began to reach out to the public through educational programs. These efforts were rewarded by increased financial support from the government through agencies including the WPA and the Civil Works Administration. By the 1940s, museums therefore viewed themselves as institutions with a public role and a responsibility to remain accessible and educate visitors, not unlike that of a social service organization. Their focus on this public role
was also heightened during the war due to funding issues. Since museums were classified as “recreational” rather than “educational” institutions, they became ineligible to receive certain types of government funding. Therefore, museums were also struggling through their exhibitions and programs to prove that they were relevant and necessary to the war effort in order to regain this lost support.

**World War II in American Memory**

In a 1996 *Museum News* article about the history of American museums, art professor Terry Zeller remarked that “although important steps were taken to increase physical, psychological, and intellectual access to museum collections, by the end of the war, American museums still remained *for* the people but not necessarily *of* the people.”

Though publicly accessible and committed to education, museums continued to avoid minority viewpoints and controversial subject matter after the war and throughout the 1950s, in part due to the increasingly conservative political environment during this time. Both the Dallas Museum of Art and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts came under fire for exhibiting artwork by communist sympathizers Pablo Picasso and Diego Rivera. As a result of this climate, and in large part due to a volunteer force

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comprised of white, middle- to upper-class women, museum programs and exhibitions (such as MoMA’s *Family of Man*) espoused conservative and middle-class values and generally avoided any discussion of the Cold War or other contemporary issues.

It was only during the late 1960s and the 1970s that the Civil Rights movement and widespread social protests began to reach museums. In 1970, members of the Art Workers’ Coalition and New York Artists Strike against Racism, Sexism, War and Oppression protested at the annual AAM meeting in New York City. They accused museums of reflecting the elitist views of the wealthy and privileged and ignoring contemporary social ills including racism, sexism, and the Vietnam War. Speaker Ralph Ortiz, Director of El Museo del Barrio, argued that the failure of museums to take a stand on these pressing issues made them complicit in the perpetration of these injustices.38

Public discontent over museums during this time, especially amongst historically underrepresented groups, led to the founding of neighborhood and ethnic-specific museums such as El Museo del Barrio, the Anacostia Museum, and the Wing Luke Asian Museum. These institutions addressed the needs and concerns of particular communities that many felt were not being tackled by mainstream museums. At this

38 Ibid., 56.
time several larger museums also attempted to reach out to other communities, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which presented the exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* in 1969. However, for the most part, museums did not confront many political or social issues during this time, including the subject of the Vietnam War.

The debates surrounding the Vietnam War made it extremely difficult to discuss or present to the public; however, the war did have a significant effect on how Americans remembered and represented World War II. Even before Vietnam, World War II had always been addressed in terms of good and evil. Allied forces were not only fighting to defend their own nations, but also to defend democracy, and indeed, civilization itself. In contrast to the unified patriotism in America during WWII, however, the Vietnam War was an extremely divisive event in U.S. history. Anti-war protestors questioned the necessity of U.S. involvement in Vietnam against the staggering loss of American and civilian lives and protested U.S. imperialism that led the country into the conflict in the first place. After the war ended, World War II was portrayed more than ever as the nation’s last “good war.”

As the WWII generation has aged, the increasing sacredness of the memory of World War II becomes clear in how the war has been remembered and represented through memorials and museum exhibits.
The memorial at Pearl Harbor is one such example. In 1949, the Pacific War Memorial Commission was established in Hawaii to create a “living war memorial commemorating the sacrifices of our heroic dead of World War Two.” Complaints from veterans and political representatives about the neglect of the USS Arizona, which remained in Pearl Harbor where it had sunk after the bombing, increased during the 1950s. These protests eventually resulted in the collection of enough funds to erect the USS Arizona Memorial, dedicated on May 30, 1962. The 180-foot-long concrete structure surrounds the sunken Arizona, which remains a tomb for the many of the 1,177 men who died aboard it.

Even during the Vietnam War, the memorial functioned as a reminder of more heroic times in American history. On Memorial Day in 1968, Admiral Harold G. Bowen, Jr., speaking at services held at the USS Arizona Memorial, addressed the dwindling “spirit of nationalism” in the U.S. and asserted that Americans must fight “like our forebears that we today here honor.” But into the 1970s and 1980s, the memorial itself became contentious as WWII-era veterans and politicians protested what they felt to be the desecration of a sacred site. The presence of Japanese naval ships in Pearl Harbor, the proliferation of Japanese tourists at the

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40 Quoted in Ibid., 182.
site, and the sale of USS Arizona memorabilia made in Japan were all sharply criticized by visitors.

The National Park Service (NPS), which administers many battle sites and memorials in the U.S., also received criticism over its interpretation of the events at Pearl Harbor. A museum is located at the visitor center at the Harbor where tourists board boats to visit the memorial. A film shown there featured several segments that many visitors complained were unpatriotic. One of the most controversial quotes from the film was spoken by the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet at the time of the attack, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, who called the attack on Pearl Harbor a “brilliantly executed military maneuver.”41 Those who wrote to their congressmen and to the NPS to protest this statement felt that giving any credit to the Japanese for such an insidious attack was heretical.

As the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing approached, the actions of the NPS garnered even more attention. In 1987, it came under fire for considering the inclusion of the personal belongings of a Japanese airman who flew in the attack over Pearl Harbor in a museum exhibit, items that NPS wanted to display to avoid the representation of a “faceless enemy”

41 Ibid., 198.
and to emphasize the cost of war for both sides.\textsuperscript{42} Around this time the NPS was also considering accepting the return of the \textit{Ha. 19}, a Japanese minisub that was captured on the day of the attack. The controversy surrounding its potential exhibition was so great that the NPS decided that the minisub would be displayed at the Nimitz Museum in Texas until after the fiftieth anniversary passed. However, the \textit{Ha. 19} remains in Texas to this day. As the commemoration ceremonies neared, letters to politicians and the media from angry visitors demanded that the NPS relinquish its control of the memorial.

The battles over representation and interpretation at Pearl Harbor represent the costs of departing from an accepted patriotic orthodoxy that does not tolerate the inclusion of other stories or viewpoints. To many, the addition of even a few Japanese artifacts in the museum at Pearl Harbor constituted a defilement of a sacred site. Over time, the USS \textit{Arizona} and Pearl Harbor have become more than just physical battle sites, but ideological ones, as well. Pearl Harbor represents not only the loss of American lives during the war but also Japanese treachery and justification for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As historian Edward Linenthal notes, “It is largely through the ruins of the USS

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 196.
Arizona that Americans have been taught to think about the war, the Japanese, and the opening of the nuclear age."

In retrospect, the debates surrounding the NPS and the USS Arizona Memorial seem mild compared to the events surrounding another fiftieth anniversary, that of the events that led to the end of World War II. It was during this time that the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum (NASM) became embroiled in a bitter battle over the display of the Enola Gay, the B-29 aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. NASM had been planning the display of the plane for years, hoping to explore not only the technological aspects of the mission but also the larger issues it raised including the decision to drop the bomb and its effect on post-war policy and politics. Whereas the disputes at Pearl Harbor surrounded the portrayal of the Japanese, NASM’s interpretation of the Enola Gay threatened to question the morality and effectiveness of the United States’ decision to use the atomic bomb as a weapon against Japan.

The controversy over this exhibition came in the midst of several culture wars being fought in the political arena during the 1990s. Debates over gays in the military, an anti-flag burning amendment, and affirmative action all questioned ideas of patriotism and equality in America. These

43 Ibid., 178.
debates spilled over into the museum world, as well. The National Endowment for the Arts was accused of funding morally questionable projects, including “indecent” artwork by Robert Mapplethorpe. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art was attacked for its historically revisionist exhibition *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*, which reexamined the meanings of artwork depicting the settlement of the West. Conservatives lashed out at liberals and academics for redefining pornography as art and for presenting a liberal, revisionist American history to the public.44

In the post-Vietnam era of political correctness that emphasized the presence of minority and underrepresented viewpoints, it became harder for museums to present a singular, triumphal vision of the American past. Emerging from a more conservative era in which such questioning was not possible, museum staff began to think about how to become more inclusive and how to relinquish the authoritative voice that had become so ubiquitous. In 1992, AAM published the document *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimensions of Museums*, which stressed the importance of museums’ educational function and the necessity of representing the diversity of American society. Museums, it

stated, should not only be “institutions of public service and education” but also had the power to become “important social and community centers.” Excellence and Equity encouraged rigorous scholarship that included multiple perspectives as an essential part of the interpretive process, even when dealing with contentious subject matter. In fact, it affirmed that “debate, even controversy, is integral to the scholarly endeavor.”

In the midst of these events on a national level, curators at the National Air and Space Museum were busy planning the exhibition of the Enola Gay. The museum had taken possession of the plane back in 1949; however, its large size prevented it from being displayed publicly. During the 1980s, many veterans contacted the museum to encourage the restoration and exhibition of the Enola Gay, some even suggesting the aircraft be handed over to another institution so that it could be properly cared for and exhibited. The plane’s long exposure to the elements and looting by souvenir-seekers made it badly in need of repair. NASM, responding to these concerns, began the slow process of restoration in 1984. For museum staff, the restoration brought up questions of the

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46 Ibid., 15.
47 Ibid., 19.
In 1987, the appointment of Martin Harwit as NASM’s Director brought the issue of the *Enola Gay* to the forefront of the museum’s agenda. The choice of Harwit, a respected professor and astrophysicist, represented a departure for NASM, whose directors historically had ties with the U.S. military. Originating from an academic background, Harwit was interested in not only celebrating the history of aviation but also in exploring and debating important issues surrounding air and space technology, such as President Reagan’s proposed Star Wars initiative. Having himself witnessed the destructive power of the detonation of atomic weapons as an Army physicist in the Bikini atolls during the 1950s, he also wanted to examine the larger consequences of the use of atomic weapons in Japan.

Originally, Harwit wanted to display the *Enola Gay* in the context of an exhibition about strategic bombing during WWII. After extensive internal debate, however, that proposal evolved into an exhibition that focused solely on the use of the atomic bomb and the opening of the atomic age. The title of the exhibition was to be *The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War*. It would attempt to explore the events surrounding the decision to drop the
atomic bomb, its effect on the city of Hiroshima, the end of the war and the beginning of the Cold War era.

The rancor over the proposed exhibition began when veterans learned that it would question America’s decision to use atomic weapons against Japan. The museum planned to present recently discovered information about the political motivations behind President Truman’s choice to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as explore the other option of a ground invasion of Japan and potential American and Japanese losses. But while the idea that the use of the bombs may have had more to do with U.S.-Soviet relations than with the surrender of Japan was not new in academic circles, it was still not the accepted narrative for many Americans, especially veterans and those of the World War II generation. Though Harwit and NASM had attempted to gain guidance and support for the exhibition by contacting veteran groups and by including other perspectives in the exhibition, the inclusion of any information that would question the use of the weapons was clearly not acceptable to these stakeholders.

The Air Force Association (AFA), a non-profit organization comprised mostly of retired air force veterans, first voiced its displeasure after reviewing an exhibition planning document in 1993. The AFA felt that the museum depicted Americans as racist aggressors while ignoring
the brutality of the Japanese. According to them, the inclusion of graphic photos of the destruction of Hiroshima would elicit too much sympathy for the Japanese and their cause and ignore the heavy American casualties inflicted by them. They also believed that the exhibition concentrated too greatly on the atomic bomb in the context of U.S.-Soviet relations rather than looking at the thousands of American lives that they believed were saved by the avoidance of a land invasion.

In January of 1994, Harwit sent a draft of the exhibition script to the AFA for review and comments. However, apparently frustrated that NASM was not making enough changes to their exhibition, the AFA published a scathing article about the *Enola Gay* exhibition in the April issue of their monthly magazine. In it, John T. Correll, Editor in Chief, argued that the exhibition “depict[s] the Japanese in a desperate defense of their home islands, saying little about what had made such a defense necessary. US conduct of the war [is] depicted as brutal, vindictive, and racially motivated.”48 The allegations that NASM was practicing “politically correct curating”—by presenting revisionist, liberal, and unpatriotic viewpoints in the exhibition—were thus publicized. Soon, every major newspaper and radio program in the country had weighed in on the debate.

NASM staff, understanding the sensitivity of the exhibition’s topic, had expected that some controversy was inevitable. In 1993, NASM curator Tom Crouch asked Martin Harwit in a memorandum, “Do you want an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don’t think we can do both.”

However, the brutal and relentless attacks on the museum by the AFA, veterans, politicians and the media were unexpected. The museum attempted to remedy the situation by convening advisory committee meetings with military historians to review and revise scripts of the exhibition. But the situation continued to decline, and finally Secretary of the Smithsonian I. Michael Heymann announced in January 1995 that NASM would present a drastically scaled-back version of the exhibition. Congress had already asked for the resignation of Martin Harwit, who stepped down as Director in May of 1995.

The controversy surrounding the exhibition of the Enola Gay stemmed from many different sources. It was perhaps the timing of the proposed exhibition that made it so contentious in the first place. Traditionally, the fiftieth anniversary of such a momentous event is

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reserved for commemoration and even celebration. Veterans, therefore, were outraged that the anniversary would be marked by the Smithsonian by an exhibition that questioned the necessity of the bombing in the first place. The fusion of historical scholarship and commemoration proved to be too difficult to achieve, especially as the exhibition was organized by one of “America’s museums.” The Smithsonian, thanks to its geographical location and funding relationship with the U.S. government, is often viewed by the public as an official repository of national history and culture. Though the issue of the bombing of Hiroshima had been debated before, to give it physical expression in a national institution was not acceptable to many stakeholders.

National Museum of American History curator Steven Lubar pointed to the “disjunction between memory and history” as the largest problem that NASM curators faced in the representation of the bombing of Hiroshima.  

Historian Susan Crane has noted that cultural memory functions as “a sense of the continual presence of the past,” while historical narratives represent a loss of contact with the past and its memory. While attempting to create what they believed to be an objective view of this historical event, curators ignored the powerful

51 Crane, “Collective Memory,” 1372.
nostalgia connected to World War II in American memory. For many
Americans, the remembrance of World War II is one of a valiant effort by
U.S. forces to battle evil abroad—a good war that epitomizes American
heroism and sacrifice. The museum also discounted the intense emotions
connected to the lived experience of the war—recollections that, for many
veterans, constitute an integral part of their identity. Thus, it is no surprise
that when NASM’s proposed exhibition (organized by many who had no
individual memory of the bombing) did not match and even contradicted
their memories, they protested.

These protestations also reflect an embedded cultural belief in the
role of the museum. Crane argues that the public holds specific
expectations of museum visits based on past museum experiences. As
many Americans have utilized museums from an early age, not only with
family but in the context of school fieldtrips, they have become familiar
and reassuring landmarks in the nation’s cultural landscape. The majority
of the public views museums as neutral, instructional, and historical
institutions outside of the bounds of memory. As Crane asserts,
“assuming that our own memories are fallible, we rely on museums as

52 Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum,” in Museum Studies: An
Anthology of Contexts, ed. Bettina Messias Carbonell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd,
2004), 319-321.
well as on historians to get the past ‘right’ for us.”

When visitors’ expectations are contradicted by museums, therefore, they may feel betrayed by an institution that they previously trusted. Facing only an omniscient curatorial voice, visitors find themselves as “interlocutors without discussion partners in the museal conversation” and consequently become resentful and frustrated. In the case of the Enola Gay exhibition, much of the controversy arose from the belief that the questioning of the bombing of Hiroshima did not belong in a museum environment.

The protests of veterans and several politicians led to the eventual display of the Enola Gay with little interpretation or context, represented only by the technical information about the plane and accompanied by a filmed interview with the crew members that flew her during her most famous mission. The political motives of the choice to use the bomb, its effects on the residents of Hiroshima, and its global consequences were not discussed at all in the exhibition, leaving visitors without an understanding of the complexity behind such a momentous decision.

The scaled-back version of the Enola Gay exhibition outraged many historians and academics around the nation. Believing that the public was denied the opportunity to see the history of the bombing of Hiroshima presented in a new light, they blamed conservative politicians

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53 Ibid., 323.
54 Ibid., 321.
for making it impossible to reinterpret and present new scholarship relating to historical events. Historian Richard H. Kohn called the cancellation of the original exhibition possibly “the worst tragedy to befall the public presentation of history in the United States in this generation.”

There were others, however, including Richard Kurin, Director of the Center for Folklore and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian Institution, who blamed NASM for not properly consulting with veterans during the exhibition’s development. Since they did not value the veterans’ memory of the events as much as their own scholarly historical narrative, they planned an exhibition that veterans could not, understandably, support. Similarly, Crane notes that although exhibition developers consulted a wide range of stakeholders, including veterans and survivors, they “tended to discount the emotional validity attached to [their] beliefs.”

Had curators given more credence to the memory of veterans and the public—by involving them in the development process and including more of their viewpoints in the exhibition—perhaps such an intense battle would not have ensued. A better-developed exhibition would have taken into account the different meanings of the Enola Gay. While for the Cold

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56 Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History,” 329.
War generation it represented entrance into a nuclear age, for many of the
WWII generation the aircraft represented deliverance from a prolonged
war and heavy American casualties—a decision that may have saved their
own lives of those of their loved ones. To question such a decision
without validating their beliefs was unacceptable to a group of
stakeholders that was able to exercise its power to close the proposed
exhibition before it even opened. The lesson learned from the Enola Gay,
then, is of the immense difficulties of mediation between history, memory,
scholarship, and commemoration.

**Museums as Memorials**

As evidenced by the USS Arizona Memorial and Enola Gay
controversies, the preservation and interpretation of tragic events can be a
contentious process in which history—the discipline that records and
explains the past—often collides with memory—what constitutes the
presence of the past in everyday life. Traditionally, museums have
represented events from an historical perspective. In recent years,
however, the emotional characteristics of memory, as well as the sacred
quality of objects relating to tragic events, has been acknowledged by the
increasing function of museums as memorial spaces. Memorial
exhibitions and memorial museums, including the U.S. Holocaust
Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial, reflect this
trend.

The belief that museums are appropriate places for the
commemoration of tragic events is evidenced by exhibitions that privilege
memory over history and those that include the display of memorial
artifacts. Two examples of this type of exhibition can be seen at the
Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. In 1992, the
museum displayed objects from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in
Washington, D.C. in the exhibition *Personal Legacy: The Healing of a
Nation*. Famous for its minimalist design, the monument was created by
artist Maya Lin and dedicated in 1982. Much of its popularity lies in its
healing quality and its reflection of the nation’s ambivalence towards the
war. The names of the nearly 60,000 soldiers who lost their lives are
etched into the monument itself, which has become a destination for both
tourists and those who lost loved ones in the conflict. Over the years,
thousands of personal objects have been left at the memorial by these
visitors, which have been collected and preserved by the National Park
Service.

The commemorative aspect of the exhibition was obvious both in
content and design. By arranging the objects beginning on the ground and
proceeding up to eye level, the museum’s display echoed the visual of the
memorial itself, recalling the original context in which the objects were found. In addition, little interpretive text was included in the exhibition. *Personal Legacy* did not attempt to create a narrative about the controversial and divisive Vietnam War, but rather empowered visitors to create their own meanings about the tragedy through the contemplation of the objects on view. The museum thus created a healing space in which visitors could come to terms with the tragedy of the war by reflecting on its effects on individual Americans.

In 1995, NMAH created an exhibition in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of World War II’s end. Painfully aware of the controversy surrounding the display of the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum, curators designed *World War II: Sharing Memories* to bridge the gap between memory and history. It was obvious, said exhibition curator Steven Lubar that the museum “needed to move beyond the usual museum exercise of presenting history from a historian’s perspective.” Curators chose everyday objects, instead of historically specific ones, which functioned as “aide-memoires” for visitors. Rather than providing an historical narrative of World War II, the exhibition evoked memories of that era through objects, music, and personal stories. At the end of the exhibition, visitors were invited to share their own memories and stories.

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58 Ibid., 18.
about the war by writing them down in one of the several notebooks provided by the museum.

Education and research specialist Lois H. Silverman observes that national tragedies inevitably become a part of our national psyche and sense of identity. She notes that “institutions that have artifacts from these events offer a place for people to process their feelings and pay their respects. These museums become surrogate memorials.” In fact, there are many museums today that act not as surrogates but are created specifically as memorials. The genre of the memorial museum joins both history and memory by combining the function of a memorial as a healing and commemorative space with that of a museum that preserves and displays historical artifacts. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial are two such examples.

On April 22, 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. opened to much publicity and fanfare. The planning of the museum dated back to 1978, when President Jimmy Carter created the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, whose task was to create a national memorial to the Holocaust in the United States. Early in the planning stages, it was decided by Commission members that they wanted

to create a “living memorial.” In contrast to a static monument to those that had perished, a living memorial is a flexible environment that educates visitors about the consequences of violent and destructive tragedies, creates parallels between historical and current events, and encourages participation and action. The Commission determined that this living memorial would include an educational foundation, archives, and at its center, a museum.

The choice of a museum was well suited to the objectives of the memorial. Commission members felt that the inclusion of physical evidence relating to the horrors of the Holocaust would help silence would-be deniers of the event. However, on a more basic level, the choice of a museum reflected the understanding of the emotional and storytelling power that objects can convey. A visual narrative of the Holocaust, including not only photographs but also personal artifacts of those who perished, would make the story of the Holocaust more accessible and meaningful to visitors. As a national memorial, the museum would forever preserve the memory and stories of the Holocaust by exhibiting these objects and stories.

60 For a discussion on living memorials, see Linenthal, Unfinished Bombing, and Sturken, Tangled Memories, 78.
61 See Linenthal, Preserving Memory, for a complete account of the development of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.
In many ways, the Holocaust Memorial Museum is no different from other museums that recount various historical narratives through the exhibition of artifacts. What sets it apart is its commemorative aspect and the frank emotional quality of its representation. Though the process of its development and creation was often highly contentious, the twenty million people who have visited it since its opening can attest to its emotional power. The exhibition format, a physical walkthrough of the Holocaust’s history, allows visitors to draw larger lessons from its stories. As part of its mission, the museum hopes to not only disseminate information about the Holocaust but also to “encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.”

While the Holocaust Memorial Museum represents events that took place half a century before its opening, another memorial museum, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, is a monument to those who were killed in an attack just six years prior to its dedication. On April 19, 1995, domestic terrorists bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, resulting in the deaths of 168 people, including nineteen children. At the time, it constituted the most devastating act of terrorism on U.S. soil.

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Planning for the memorial of the bombing began just two months after the attacks, due to the wish of survivors and family members that they be involved in the construction of any official memorial. The city received thousands of memorial ideas from around the world, including many from people who offered to shoulder its costs in exchange for creative control over its design. Upset that the memorial might be created by an outsider, survivors and family members lobbied for inclusion in its development process. In response to this, the mayor of Oklahoma City designated the creation of a task force for the memorial consisting of survivors and families of victims as well as local residents. After two years of painful and emotional debates, a memorial design was chosen for the site of the building in 1997 and was completed and dedicated on the fifth anniversary of the bombings, April 19, 2000.\(^{63}\)

The memorial task force wanted those who visited the memorial to leave with an understanding of the “impact of violence.”\(^{64}\) This wish evolved into the creation of the Memorial Center, dedicated on February 19, 2001, which contains a museum, archives, and the Oklahoma City National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. Modeled after the Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Memorial Center museum

\(^{63}\) See Linenthal, *Unfinished Bombing*, for a complete account of the development of the Oklahoma City National Memorial.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 185.
exhibition presents a narrative of the events of the day of the bombing, from the initial blast and the rescue and recovery of victims and survivors to the ensuing media coverage and the rebuilding of the city. The museum also offers personal connections to the victims of the bombing, whose individual photographs are displayed with an object that belonged to them (donated by a family member). The Memorial Center, which includes sound and video clips, offers a visceral experience that simultaneously communicates the horror of violence and the community’s hopes for a more peaceful world as displayed by city residents who survived the tragedy.

For both the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City Memorial, the choice of a museum represented the best way to commemorate these events. The hope of survivors and witnesses of horrific historical episodes is that lessons can be learned from these tragedies so that they will not be repeated. By translating the representation of these events into a physical, narrative format, the objects and museum exhibition can both convey the devastating impact of violence and also transform into a healing environment in which the grieving can receive spiritual refreshment. This approach to design marks a change in how Americans memorialize events and in the roles that a museum can play.
The creation of both the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial is a sign that the museum exhibition is entering our nation’s language of memorialization, alongside the more traditional sculptures, monuments, and public artworks used to commemorate events. Unlike an architectural monument, the museum memorial offers a more personal experience through direct contact with individual artifacts and also provides historical perspective on tragic events and their causes and consequences. In addition, museum memorials are more flexible environments in which exhibits can be changed and updated throughout time to reflect current events.

Though similar in this regard, the Holocaust Museum and the Oklahoma City Memorial differed somewhat in their creation. While the former was founded to preserve the memories of a dying generation, the latter represented the need for a grieving community to heal. In his book on the bombing, Professor Edward Linenthal discusses the recent trend of the decrease in time between an event and its memorialization. Historically, memorials were erected several years or even decades after an event. In a rush to avoid slipping away from public memory, the memorial was created as a testimonial to a generation that was passing away. In contrast, memorials today act as a way for a mourning populace

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65 Ibid., 4-5.
to process and reconcile with the effects of a tragic event. The swift construction of the Oklahoma City National Memorial represented and administered to the community’s need to engage in a communal healing process.

While the memorial’s rapid creation reflected the fear of family members and survivors that the bombing would soon be forgotten, ironically, the hurried construction of memorials today may actually signal our desire to forget and move away from tragic events. As Professor James E. Young notes, in discussing the writings of French intellectual Pierre Nora, the physical manifestation of memory often signals its release from our individual and internal memory. By doing the remembering for us, memorials relieve us of our responsibility to reflect on unpleasant events.66 If we then relegate such remembering to memorials, however, how can we ensure that we revisit and reinterpret such events in later years?

Linenthal also notes the recent democratization of the memorial process in America, which is evidenced by the Oklahoma City Memorial’s process, which involved hundreds of people, including family members, survivors, and local community members. This democratization is also reflected by individuals’ needs to contribute their own personal legacy to a

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66 Young, Texture of Memory, 5.
memorial, by leaving their personal objects and remembrances at tragic sites. These trends are also quite visible following the events of September 11, 2001. Museums such as the New-York Historical Society displayed the makeshift memorials made by grieving members of the public after the tragedy. Meanwhile, planning for a World Trade Center Memorial (to include a museum) has already begun, and includes family members of victims and survivors of the event.

The memorial museum attempts to balance history and commemoration; however, a perfect balance is difficult to achieve, and this recent fusion raises questions regarding the effectiveness of these institutions. If a memorial museum is created by those affected by a tragedy to honor its sufferers, how can it accurately represent the unheroic stories of victims that invariably constitute part of the historical record of an event? If a memorial commemorates the victims of an event, how can it represent its perpetrators from an unbiased perspective? Who are considered the true victims of an event? Whose stories are told—and whose are excluded?

Commemorative museums and exhibitions are not without their controversies. “Memorials,” observes Marita Sturken, “do not teach well about history, since their role is to remember those who died rather than to
understand why they died.” Though its museum exhibition is quite powerful, many believe that the Oklahoma City National Memorial’s primary focus on the victims of the event irresponsibly ignores the circumstances and motivations that led to the bombing itself, depriving visitors of a greater understanding of the tragedy. Though the terrorists are mentioned in the exhibition, it chronicles primarily the captures and trials of the perpetrators, rather than engaging in a discussion of the ideology behind the attacks and other cases of domestic terrorism. Understandably, many victims and family members could not bear to see any mention of the terrorists on the sacred ground of their loved ones’ mass murders. To do so would be to give power to the perpetrators of such horrifying violence. However, as an institution dedicated in part to the prevention of violence and terrorism, a discussion of what prompted such a horrific attack would no doubt be useful in this regard.

Such concerns were also present during the creation of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. As council historian Sybil Milton noted, when it comes to the Holocaust, there “is a universal willingness to

Accordingly, the museum focuses more on the suffering of Holocaust victims than the ideology of the Nazis, fearing that such representations could glamorize Hitler’s regime. Many argue, however, that in doing so the museum creates a one-sided narrative of victimization, thus trivializing the complexity of the Holocaust’s history. As Professor Timothy Luke contends, the Holocaust is portrayed as a “key subplot in World War II—victims replay the formulaic scripts of a thousand television shows and feature films…unfathomable evils are recast as stock characters, plot staples, or moral clichés.”

This decision was not the only controversy in the memorial’s creation, however. The museum’s definition of the Holocaust as a primarily Jewish event was extremely contentious, as many disputed the lack of representation of other groups targeted by the Nazi regime, including Poles, Russian POWs, the disabled, and homosexuals. Critics argued that the creation of the memorial was politically motivated by U.S.-Israel relations and President Carter’s desire to garner more support from American Jews. In addition, as a memorial on U.S. soil, America is cast as a heroic character in the Holocaust’s narrative, as seen in the

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69 Quoted in Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 199.
museum’s opening images of U.S. troops liberating concentration camps while it glosses over, for instance, the fact that America turned away from its shores Jewish refugees seeking asylum in the U.S.

Memorial museums like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial and the Oklahoma City Memorial serve as powerful educational tools and reminders of the horrific consequences of violence and intolerance. It is their commemorative nature, however, which forces us to ask whether or not memorials can accurately represent an unbiased history to the public. Politics, emotions, and history become inextricably entangled in the interpretation of tragic events, and the results raise pressing questions. Whose voices are being heard in these memorials, and for what purpose are they being used? Are history and commemoration mutually exclusive?

These concerns about balancing memory, history, and emotional responses are ones that many museum professionals have regarding the interpretation of September 11. The need to memorialize the event is an impulse with which many museums are struggling. History museum curators in particular wonder how they can balance their responsibility as historians to interpret and contextualize an event with the emotional needs of their visitors. As James Gardner of the National Museum of American History asked, “How do we remain compassionate without sacrificing the
perspective that our institutions bring to the process of understanding the past and the present?"71

The Therapeutic Function of the Museum

The theme of memorialization in the museum has particular relevance following the events of September 11. Another topic of equal significance is that of the museum as a place for personal and communal healing. Just as the memorial museum educates visitors in part by appealing to their emotional responses to the artifacts and subject matter, the belief in the therapeutic potential of the museum focuses on the psychological responses that a museum visit provides to individuals. Over the past several years, a variety of experts have studied the ways in which museums can provide a range of psychological benefits for visitors—including stress relief, comfort, affirmation, and healing.

The idea that museums can offer therapeutic benefits is not a new one; in fact, its roots lie in several trends in the museum field that have emerged over the past two decades. Though American museums have always been recognized as educational institutions, their focus has recently shifted from providing instruction to offering experiences for visitors. Economists B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, authors of The Experience

Economy, describe experiences as “memorable events, revealed over time, that engage individuals in an inherently personal way.”

Pine and Gilmore argue that companies increasingly market experiences as opposed to goods and services, citing trends such as themed restaurants and vacation packages. In the museum world, the importance of experiences has been recognized through a variety of enhanced public offerings. As marketing expert Neil Kotler points out, while exhibitions and collections still form the heart of a museum, “they are surrounded more and more by contextual and interpretive materials, storytelling, and exploration of the meaning of objects.”

The emphasis on experience is related to educational theories that study the diverse ways in which individuals encounter objects and ideas. In place of the term learning, many professionals now refer to “meaning-making” as a prime objective of museum exhibitions and programs. Meaning-making signifies that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals rather than passively communicated from an authoritative museum to its visitors. This construction takes into account that people utilize their prior knowledge and attitudes as well as social interactions while learning from museum exhibitions and objects. Therefore, the

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learning process involves shared authority and takes place as a dialogue between a museum and its visitors.

The emergence of meaning-making and experience as major facets of the museum visit has led many scholars to focus on the potential of museums to provide personal and psychological benefits in addition to educational ones. Joined by their interest in environmental psychology, a group from the University of Michigan studied the ways in which museum-going can offer restorative benefits for visitors. They based their research on the theory of attention restoration, a process that reverses the effects of mental exhaustion, which is characterized by irritability, distractibility, and impatience. Their research concluded that museums can offer the four properties of a restorative environment, namely being away (in a different environment), extent (a place where one can spend time in), fascination (interesting and engaging), and compatibility (environment is appropriate, meets one’s needs and expectations). After studying a group of visitors at the Toledo Museum of Art, they concluded that visitors did indeed experience a restorative benefit from their time at the museum.

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Lois H. Silverman, an education and research specialist, has also done extensive research on how museum-going can prove beneficial for a wide variety of individuals, including the mentally and physically ill. As she asserts, “I am interested in the role of the museum in healing and in helping to ‘teach’ people a particular way of thinking about things. Learning is broad and encompasses many things, and involves visitors making meaning of what they see.” Silverman focuses on the social benefits of museum visits as well as those offered by a direct interaction with objects, noting that “artifacts possess an undeniable power to elicit responses from people.” She elaborates how she believes museums can be useful to visitors:

The ways in which therapists and social workers work with clients toward beneficial change is extraordinarily relevant for museums. Many therapeutic approaches involve working with client or patient responses—memories, stories, knowledge, attitudes, emotions—the same sort of responses that are called forth when people encounter artifacts in museums. In a variety of ways, therapeutic approaches welcome and utilize such human responses as self-expression, emotion, reminiscence, opinion, interaction—as well as cognition—to explore, address, and practice new possibilities, patterns of thought, and behavior.

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76 Silverman, telephone interview.
78 Ibid., 76.
Silverman, with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, created the Museums as Therapeutic Agents (MATA) project to study the ways in which museum programs can supplement professional care for those in need of psychological assistance, indicating that more research on this topic is sure to emerge.

Despite these studies, the exploration of the qualitative benefits of museum visits has not been embraced by everyone in the field. A visit designed to deliver experiences, some argue, diminishes the educational content of exhibitions. Professor Hilde Hein notes that “sheer intensity of experiences...is not a guarantee of cognitive merit or moral excellence.” It may be that the healing exhibition is prone to the same difficulties of the memorial museum, namely, that the focus on experience and emotional responses eclipses potential educational merit by ignoring the more difficult and complex facets of a subject.

Those who believe in the therapeutic potential of museums are not deterred by such objections, however; they believe that emotional responses are necessary for a memorable and meaningful museum experience. Silverman asserts that interacting with “the stuff” in a museum is so important because “it evokes deep responses from us,” noting that historic objects in particular evoke memories and

reminiscences, allowing visitors to connect with them on a deeper level. Likewise, Hooley McLaughlin of the Ontario Science Center argues that sparking emotions and passions is necessary for a memorable museum experience. “Memory requires emotional associations,” he affirms. “Let us not forget that the wildness that is in the human spirit will be the real basis for a meaningful visitor experience.”

The recognition that museum visits can provide more than an educational experience is particularly germane following the events of September 11. Immediately after the attacks, religious institutions reported a marked increase in attendance, while a Pew Internet and American Life Project found that one in four internet users in America searched online for information about religion following the tragedy. This fact supports psychologists’ claims that following a traumatic event—especially one that reminds people of their mortality—individuals seek comfort and enter a quest for meaning and value in their lives.

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Research on the therapeutic and restorative benefits of museums suggests that these institutions can offer similar assistance to those seeking comfort, by providing interaction with not only objects of artistic quality but also historical artifacts that remind visitors of their cultural background and heritage.

**The Roles of the Museum in Interpreting Tragic Events**

The history of American museums reveals the many functions of these institutions over the past century, especially in the midst of a national crisis. It shows how museums can offer historical context, a safe place for civic dialogue, and a psychologically healing and restorative space for visitors in the wake of a tragic event. Some of these duties reaffirm the more traditional functions of the museum, while others indicate that museums are creating new paradigms in the quest to engage visitors in meaningful ways. Speaking directly with museum staff and other professionals illuminates the contemporary roles and responsibilities of the museum and the myriad possibilities for responding to the events of September 11.

As previously mentioned, one of the most pronounced trends embraced by institutions following the events of September 11 is the museum’s function as a therapeutic environment. Whether aware of the
studies of this effect or not, many museum professionals today are intrinsically aware that museums can provide a healing environment for those seeking refuge in a difficult time. Sarah B. Henry, Vice President of Programs at the Museum of the City of New York, used the term “civic healing” to articulate how museums can provide a public space for reflection, learning, and understanding. Cassandra Chinn, Program Director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum recognizes that the social aspect of the museum experience is central to its function as a therapeutic environment. As public institutions, she notes, museums are accessible and provide a place for people to socialize with one another, which can be a critical aspect of the healing process. During a difficult time, museums can be instrumental in the rebuilding of a community and helping people move forward. Similarly, curator Kathleen Kendrick of the National Museum of American History observes that “museums can offer a place for people to come together and have a shared experience of remembering and reflecting on important events.”

Two of the more traditional duties of the museum affirmed by events such as September 11 are to collect history and to provide context to visitors in the wake of tragedy. James Gardner of NMAH maintains

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85 Cassandra Chinn, telephone interview with author, 12 December 2003.
that museums can put current events into an historical context to provide perspective, since museums do not simply display objects, but use them to create historical narratives.\textsuperscript{87} Though many argue that the events of September 11 are still too fresh to be treated as history, documenting such events as they occur is the key to their future understanding. The historical meaning and importance of events is often not realized until much later; however, museums have a responsibility to collect and record events as they happen to preserve them for future generations.

The presence of artifacts is also central in this regard. Jane Thomas, Collections Manager at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, recalled that when she first brought artifacts from her collection into local classrooms, the students were stunned. “I had their undivided attention,” she said. “Artifacts make events real to people.”\textsuperscript{88} Susan Hamilton, a psychologist and Senior Associate for the Disaster Mental Health Services for the Red Cross, also noted that artifacts can bring people closer to an event and help them to imagine it. The empathy this creates is an essential part of learning from traumatic occurrences.\textsuperscript{89}

Especially in the interpretation of tragic events, museums can offer memorable educational experiences. Thomas characterizes her institution

\textsuperscript{87} James Gardner, telephone interview with author, 23 April 2004.  
\textsuperscript{88} Jane Thomas, telephone interview with author, 10 May 2004.  
\textsuperscript{89} Susan Hamilton, telephone interview with author, 30 April 2004.
as an instructional tool that helps people understand the impact of violence and then encourages them to take up the challenge of preventing it from happening again. Fran Sterling, a program associate at Facing History and Ourselves, a non-profit organization that offers guidance to teachers interpreting difficult historical events including the Holocaust, emphasized that museums, as public institutions, have a responsibility to present exhibitions that have a didactic component.\textsuperscript{90} Museums including the Oklahoma City National Memorial and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum use artifacts so that visitors can identify with the horrific events they interpret, which educates and inspires them to prevent such violence from being repeated in the future.

The recent focus in the museum world on community involvement and civic engagement also reveals itself in the wake of tragedy. Edward Linenthal observed that the museum can be a neutral place for civil dialogue away from the political rhetoric found in the media and other areas of American life,\textsuperscript{91} while Sterling underscored the museum’s role as an advocacy organization. By presenting the views of the community, museums can inspire and advocate for change and action on a personal level. Likewise, Chinn stressed that museums can voice the underrepresented views of the community.

\textsuperscript{90} Fran Sterling, personal interview with author, Hayward, Ca., 19 December 2003.
\textsuperscript{91} Edward Linenthal, telephone interview with author, 30 April 2004.
In responding to events such as September 11, museums should think carefully about what visitors are looking for in their institutions. Crane asserts that individuals come to museums with specific expectations of their visit and reminds us that there are consequences when those expectations are thwarted. Hamilton believes that visitors come to museums to become closer to an event in order to better understand and come to terms with it. People also come to remember and reflect on events and learn how others reacted to them. Chinn observes that the public trusts museums and holds them in high regard; therefore, people come to museums seeking truth. In the midst of the barrage of conflicting media reports, they expect to find the real story as told through the artifacts, which serve as evidence.

The history of representing tragedy in American museums illuminates the emotional and political difficulties of interpreting horrific events. This is to be expected. Museums, as repositories of our nation’s historical artifacts, have become sites of memory in America’s cultural landscape. In writing about the difficulty of these representations, Edward Linenthal notes that “the more volatile the memory…the more intense
This is a struggle that has become particularly poignant following the events of September 11. As the most devastating terrorist attack on U.S. soil, 9/11 tests museums to find appropriate ways to present the events in a relevant and meaningful manner.

While challenging in these aspects, the events of September 11 also provide a tremendous opportunity for museums to prove how vital they are in our national life. The response of museums to the tragedy of September 11 has been overwhelming. Across the country, museums have developed hundreds of programs and exhibitions designed to help the public cope with the difficult events. Through the examination of past events we can come to a greater understanding of the future issues that museums will face in the interpretation of September 11. By studying contemporary museum exhibitions about 9/11, we can see how different institutions have learned from the past and negotiated the difficulties of these representations. In the next section I will explore September 11 exhibitions from a variety of museums, including in-depth cases studies of exhibitions at two different institutions whose interpretations reflect the evolution of the role of the American museum and its capacity to represent tragic events.

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92 Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 52.
FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

I have found one thing to help me get through day by day. I have been
telling my story to anyone who wants to hear it.

—Lisa Lefler,  
World Trade Center Survivor

We are caretakers of sacred ground.

—Barbara Black, Curator,  
Somerset Historical Center, PA

The events of September 11 prompted responses from museums
across the nation. A review of journal and newspaper articles since that
day offers a glimpse at these diverse reactions and many of the struggles
and successes that museums have experienced in the process of
representing a large-scale tragic event through exhibitions. Interviews
with museum staff and other professionals provide insights into the many
ways in which museums can offer solace and understanding to a grieving
public during a difficult period. An analysis of these perspectives affords
a revealing look at the many roles of the museum in a time of crisis and
how these roles are embraced by the public and negotiated internally by
the institutions themselves. It also illuminates many of the challenges and
opportunities inherent in the representation of tragedy in the museum.

A look at many museums after September 11 offers a broad view
of how they respond to tragedy, while case studies bring to light the
individual stories and lessons from institutions that presented 9/11

93 The Somerset Historical Center has collected the offerings left at the crash site of
Flight 93 for a future memorial.
exhibitions. While the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History based its exhibition on the need of visitors to see and connect with objects from the attacks as a way of processing and healing from the traumatic event, Seattle’s Wing Luke Asian Museum presented two highly political exhibitions to represent the experiences of ethnic and religious minorities after September 11. Though differing greatly in focus, the development process of these two institutions shares several common traits that resulted in powerful and thought-provoking exhibitions. The ways in which September 11 will be remembered and represented will change as time goes on; however, both institutions offer models for the development of meaningful exhibitions about tragic events.

**Literature Review and Interviews**

*Museums Respond to September 11*

The most immediate reactions to September 11 were from those museums that found themselves in the midst of the historical event. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York decided to help the steady stream of people walking away from lower Manhattan by offering food, water, and first aid to those who needed it. The Liberty Science Center, located in New Jersey just two miles away from the World Trade Center, donated first aid supplies to local authorities, offered a safe place
for commuters leaving Manhattan to rest, supported media teams covering the events, and set up the Family Assistance Center for families of the victims.

Those museums that did not act as social service centers nonetheless provided safe places for people to gather. It was in this way that the healing power of the museum after a tragic event became evident. Seeking a safe haven from the relentless media images, many people found refuge within the walls of museums. New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman reported increased attendance at museums in New York City, including the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. During an unstable time, museums provided reassurance to the public. As one visitor to the Met said, “today it’s comforting to come back and see everything still here. All this beauty. And to see the good that people do.”

Responding to these needs, many museums offered free admission the weekend of September 15 and 16, including a consortium of children’s museums in New York City.

Still others provided a space for visitors to share their thoughts and feelings. Kidspace, a children’s museum in Pasadena, gave children the opportunity to write cards and letters to police and firefighters. All Smithsonian Institution museums left comment books for visitors to write

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in. The Museum of the City of New York displayed a large painting of the World Trade Center from its collection with memory books, paper, pens and crayons so visitors could express their personal feelings about the events. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York presented a concert series entitled “Sounds of Solace: Music for Reflection, Inspiration, and Hope.”

Beyond offering activities for visitors, several museums mounted exhibitions devoted to the subject of September 11. Rather than attempting to explain the events and their impact, the majority of these exhibitions were designed to be commemorative in nature, created so that visitors would have an opportunity to quietly contemplate the events. Photographic exhibitions comprised the majority of these initial September 11 exhibitions. These displays allowed visitors to reflect quietly on different views of the events and their immediate aftermath, as opposed to watching the endless loops of disturbing video footage on television.

The New-York Historical Society presented the exhibition New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers, consisting of photographs taken by members of the professional photography association. Many Magnum photographers, already in New York for a September 10 meeting, individually documented a range of scenes from around the city,
including not only the destruction of the World Trade Center but also the individual reactions of New Yorkers to the tragedy and the temporary memorials and gatherings that sprung up across the city. This need to publicly memorialize the events was also fulfilled by the *September 11 Photo Project*, which opened at a SoHo gallery and displayed photographs of the tragedy and its aftermath submitted by members of the public. This exhibition subsequently toured the nation.

Wary of collecting the many makeshift shrines and memorials that people created throughout New York City, for fear of removing these personal expressions before the public was ready to see them leave, several museums instead preserved these objects through photography. The Municipal Art Society in New York exhibited the photographs of Martha Cooper, who documented many of these expressions of mourning. The independently-organized exhibition *Missing: Last Seen at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001*, toured the nation and featured photographs of the missing-person posters placed across New York City, putting faces to the enormous tragedy. Some museums, including the New-York Historical Society, were contacted by fire stations and other members of the public to preserve these offerings by accessioning them into their permanent collections. The Historical Society subsequently displayed several of these memorials in the exhibition *Missing:*
Streetscape of a City in Mourning, designed to highlight the outpouring of emotion and artistic expression amongst New Yorkers after the tragedy.

Many museums believed that they could provide a source of strength for visitors during a difficult time. Several museums in New York City presented exhibitions designed to highlight the resiliency of their city. The Museum of Modern Art presented *Life of the City*, an exhibition in three parts that included images of New York from its permanent collection, a changing display of photographs submitted by New Yorkers that expressed their relationship to the city, and monitors displaying a continuous stream of photographs of the events of September 11 taken by members of the public. Photographs of the New York skyline were displayed at the Museum of the City of New York in the exhibition *The City Resilient: Photographs by Joel Meyerowitz*, which also included photographs of rescue and recovery efforts at Ground Zero.

Museums with a more specific mission and focus used their exhibitions to highlight how the events of September 11 affected their particular communities. The New York Fire Museum presented photographic exhibitions and a changing display of memorials dedicated to the firefighters that lost their lives in the World Trade Center. *All Available Boats: Harbor Voices and Images 09.11.01* at the South Street Seaport Museum told through oral histories and images the stories of the
port workers who worked tirelessly to transport passengers fleeing lower Manhattan. The Skyscraper Museum and the National Building Museum presented a history of the World Trade Center and photographs of the towers, respectively.

The museum’s role as a space for civic engagement was also realized. Several institutions encouraged public dialogue to further the understanding of the events of September 11. A consortium of museums in Philadelphia presented a series of programs entitled “A Nation Challenged: Museums Respond” to discuss topics including the history of Islam, civil liberties, and the history of Afghanistan. To include visitors in the dialogue, the Field Museum in Chicago hosted a series of programs in the month after September 11 modeled after town hall meetings in which panelists and audience members discussed the context and consequences of the attacks.

Promoting tolerance was also important to several institutions in the wake of hate crimes targeting Arab and Muslim Americans. Irene Hirano, Director of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, asserted that it was important for museums to address issues of concern to the community.95 Her institution drew on the history of Japanese-American internment to reach out to the Arab-American

community and present programs that promoted tolerance and cross-cultural awareness. The Museum of the City of New York delayed the opening of its exhibition *A Community of Many Worlds: Arab Americans in New York City*, originally scheduled to open in November of 2001, until March 2002 so that it could add a section that focused on the life of Arab Americans after September 11 to promote an appreciation for their culture.

Museums dedicated to the interpretation of tragic episodes in American history presented exhibitions that offered some historical perspective on the events of September 11. The Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas is an institution devoted to the assassination of John F. Kennedy and is located in the building from which Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly shot the president. The museum presented an exhibition entitled *Loss and Renewal: Transforming Tragic Sites*, which explored the physical sites of incidents including the Oklahoma City bombing and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln to showcase the common ways in which Americans have mourned and memorialized various tragic events.

The Oklahoma City National Memorial mounted *A Shared Experience: 04.19.95-09.11.01*, which explored the common themes of the two historic events, including rescue, recovery, and the healing process. Though the two tragedies differed in scale, Collections Manager Jane Thomas said that the museum wanted to underscore the similarities
between the two incidents to provide some much-needed perspective.

“Oklahoma City is hope for New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. We have survived and have rebuilt since the attacks,” she emphasized. Telling the story of Oklahoma City’s experience shows the resiliency of the human spirit and proves that though the wounds never fully heal, life does move on.

Representations of September 11 Now and in the Future

Less than four years after the attacks of September 11, the number of exhibitions devoted to the events has dwindled. As the nation slowly heals, the need for memorial exhibitions is lessening. Museums are now beginning to take a step back and look at the events in a different light. Though for most institutions it is still too soon to think about how to represent a more removed or even critical perspective of the tragedy, the enormity of the event makes it impossible for museums to ignore. Time will be the most important factor that affects how the nation’s views of September 11 will change, but it is still an event that Americans continue to reflect on and live with daily.

For the many institutions that own September 11 artifacts, the responsibility of acknowledging the events is felt strongly. Thus far, the

96 Thomas, telephone interview.
trend for these institutions seems to be towards representing the events in
the larger context of other topics. For instance, in the Fall of 2004 the
National Museum of American History will present an 18,000-square-foot
exhibition on the history of American military force entitled *The Price of
Freedom*. Objects from the museum’s September 11 collection, including
a twisted steel beam from the World Trade Center, will be displayed in the
section that tells the story of recent American military action in
Afghanistan and Iraq. Curator David Allison recognizes that it is difficult
to put these events into context because of their recent nature. However,
the museum felt strongly that it was important to include the story to show
the continuity of our country’s military history.\(^97\)

The Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) is currently in the
process of reinstalling sections of its permanent exhibition space. In doing
so, it is integrating the events of September 11 into the context of New
York City’s history. MCNY staff created previous September 11
exhibitions around three themes: commemoration, resiliency, and
tolerance. The themes of resiliency and tolerance were chosen because the
museum believed them to be recurring themes in the city’s history, and
September 11 will be explored in this context in the future as well. The
terrorist attacks’ importance as an historical event in the city’s history will

\(^{97}\) David Allison, telephone interview with author, 23 April 2004.
also be referenced. For instance, 9/11 will be depicted in a gallery devoted to the history of fire in New York, while the creation of the World Trade Center will be explored in an exhibition examining the history of the Port of New York. Henry observes that “at times goes by, there is more of an obligation to reconstruct the events in order to teach.”

These two institutions have recognized the significance of the events of September 11 by continuing to represent them in their institutions, but have also acknowledged the difficulty of explaining or interpreting their meaning until we achieve some distance from the attacks. “We assume 9/11 was a turning point, but it’s too soon to tell,” observed Gardner. As military action in the Middle East and changes in domestic policy including security and the USA PATRIOT Act are ongoing, the political consequences of September 11 continue to unfold. The enduring emotional nature of the event also makes its representation difficult. “The first two or three years are the hardest,” reflected Thomas on her experience at the Oklahoma City National Memorial. “Five years later, you can begin to reassess the event. Eight or nine years later, people have remarried, children have grown up, and the physical wounds have healed.”

98 Henry, telephone interview.
99 Gardner, telephone interview.
100 Thomas, telephone interview.
Though many museums are hesitant to create a permanent narrative of September 11 for these reasons, plans are currently in development for memorials at the sites of the World Trade Center in New York and the Flight 93 crash site near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, both of which will incorporate artifacts from the tragedy. Similar to the creation of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, little time has passed between the actual events and the memorialization process. Due in part to the large scale of the tragedy and the many local agencies and companies that have a stake in the future of the World Trade Center site, the process in New York has been particularly contentious, as family members, survivors, rescuers, and city organizations have all expressed different opinions on how the memorial should look and what it should convey to the public.

Current plans for the World Trade Center Memorial include an underground space where objects from the event will be displayed for public viewing. This decision was based in part on the understanding that views of the attacks will change over time and that a permanent and unchanging memorial could not capture every aspect of September 11 and its impact. The memorial’s jury released a statement acknowledging that “whatever further issues this memorial may need to address over time (such as artifacts and the narrative history of that day) will be made part of
the underground interpretive center.” Similar to the Oklahoma City National Memorial, the World Trade Center’s interpretive center will no doubt evolve to incorporate different aspects of the attacks and their meaning.

The Challenges of Representing September 11 to the Public

Though the wounds created by September 11 are slowly healing, the task of interpreting the events is still problematic. Since the attacks, many museum professionals and historians have articulated many of the challenges of representing these events, from the difficulty of collecting of artifacts and planning exhibitions to the interpretation of how the events have impacted diverse communities. Only by acknowledging these difficulties will museums be able to create thoughtful and meaningful exhibitions relating to the tragedy.

For those institutions that have collected September 11 artifacts, the responsibility of safeguarding these objects is both daunting and awe-inspiring. As Henry of the Museum of the City of New York noted, the “task of ushering the tragic present into the historical past proved to be a professionally and personally trying one.” Recovering the artifacts themselves was a duty that could not have been previously comprehended

by museum staff, as they found themselves working alongside rescue
workers and federal investigators in the quest to salvage history. “I was an
academic historian,” said Henry, “and I never thought I would be up to my
ankles in toxic mud and picking up shards of people’s lives and then
throwing away my clothing when I got home.” Katherine Adamenko,
curator at the New York City Police Museum, said of the artifacts, “I can’t
talk about them without having tears in my eyes.” The sacred quality of
these objects—which originated from mass gravesites—has resulted in a
heightened sense of responsibility for these institutions, which wrestle
with the question of how to sensitively approach the display of these
objects without seeming macabre or exploitative.

Museums also face difficulties when attempting to frame the
events of September 11 in an historical context. In fact, many historians
warned against trying to treat the event as history so soon after its
occurrence. Robert MacDonald of the Museum of the City of New York
argued that “we do not know at this moment how [September 11] is
defining, what will be important…that takes time and distance from the
events.” Others cautioned against drawing larger lessons from the

103 Quoted in Glenn Collins, “Tangible Reminders of September 11 Get Pride of Place in
104 Ibid.
105 Jonathan Mandell, “History is Impatient to Embrace September 11,” New York Times,
18 November 2001, p. 2.1.
events. Edward Linenthal expressed his suspicion of the term “lessons,” noting the impossibility of “extract[ing] from these great traumatic events some set of easily accessible and digestible truths that we can then just put into practice.”

The subject of patriotism as a theme in the representation of September 11 also arose. Following the attacks, the American flag became a ubiquitous symbol of national mourning. However, James Gardner of the National Museum of American History reminded museums that their responsibility was to achieve balance and perspective in their institutions, and warned against getting swept up into an uncritical wave of patriotism. The *Washington Post*’s Philip Kennicott observed that as the nation’s grief eased, “politicians are increasingly comfortable drawing larger, public lessons from 9/11.” He cautioned that the public must be able to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism, especially as our country prepared for war.

After a nationally traumatic occurrence, it is natural for individuals to cling to patriotic beliefs. Psychology professors Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg have examined the responses of people following September 11 by using Terror Management Theory

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(TMT), a framework for understanding psychological reactions to terrorist acts.\textsuperscript{109} In addition to the effects suffered by those who witnessed the event firsthand, the authors also delve into the “distal reactions” of other Americans who were also psychologically impacted by the tragedy. Faced with the reality of their own mortality after 9/11, Americans “strove to re-establish their damaged sense of security by reaffirming their faith in the American way of life.”\textsuperscript{110} This was evidenced by the sudden omnipresence of the American flag, the proliferation of patriotic songs on the radio and on television, and most notably in the great increase in approval ratings for President George W. Bush and his administration. Sadly, this rise in patriotism is often accompanied by an increase in intolerance and bigotry towards others perceived as different or threatening. The fear and anxiety resulting from feelings of insecurity often means that for many individuals, “tendencies to stereotype and reject those who are different from themselves are likely to be exaggerated.”\textsuperscript{111} However, for those already committed to fighting injustice and intolerance, terrorist acts can “intensify positive prosocial action” and

\textsuperscript{109} Pyszczynski et al, \textit{In the Wake of 9/11}.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 105.
altruistic tendencies.\textsuperscript{112} These activities boost self-esteem and thus provide a sense of purpose and security.

Based on research by Columbia University, the ways in which the media and the government portray national tragedies do not adequately reflect the complexity of these psychological responses to such acts, nor the ways in which individual memories and official accounts of the event interact and intertwine. The university’s Oral History Research Office and Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy created the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project just days after the attacks occurred. Project members interviewed nearly 400 people (many of whom will be interviewed again over a period of three years) to understand how the event had changed their lives and to study how individual memories will come to differ from the dominant historical narrative of the attacks over time. Mary Marshall Clark, Director of the Oral History Research Office, reports in the project’s initial findings that almost all of the people interviewed experienced fear, confusion, and disorientation following the events.\textsuperscript{113} Though many interviewees spoke of patriotism and their love for America, they also feared that the U.S. would use the events of September 11 to justify using even greater

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 108.
violence against others through military action. They expressed a strong desire for peace.

Another important finding came from refugees and immigrants, many of whom reported the double trauma of first experiencing the events of September 11 (especially distressing to those who had fled their countries due to war and terrorism) and then living in the climate of fear produced by the aftermath of the attacks. These interviews revealed “the frightening degree to which terror continued to dominate their lives,” an aspect of the events not fully reported by the media. These subjects reported stories of discrimination, threats, and attacks due to their skin color and/or dress. Similarly, a California State Senate report on the impact of post-9/11 policy summarizes “instances of cruel and illegal treatment of Muslims by federal authorities” and the fear this has engendered in California’s Muslim and Arab communities.

These interviews offer a revealing glimpse into the ways in which September 11 has affected ordinary Americans and illuminate the differences between their experiences and the ways in which the media and the government have portrayed the attacks and their aftermath. Clark warns that these findings “reveal the complex and delicate ways in which

114 Ibid., 573.
September 11 still stands outside history as we know it.”

Though the temptation to draw lessons from the events is strong, it is one that should be carefully examined. Clark’s findings underscore the need for museums to look beyond the quickly forming national narrative of the attacks to explore their effects on individual Americans of all backgrounds.

While Columbia’s study informs us of many of the consequences of September 11, it must be acknowledged that the ability to discuss such consequences has become increasingly difficult in the climate of fear and distrust prevalent in the aftermath of September 11. In her book of essays exploring post-September 11 America, U.C. Berkeley Professor Judith Butler asserts, “Since the events of September 11, we have seen both a rise of anti-intellectualism and a growing acceptance of censorship within the media.”

This became clear only a week following the terrorist attacks, when President Bush, in a national address to a joint session of Congress and the American people, uttered this oft-quoted phrase: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

Though his comment was targeted at foreign countries that may be harboring terrorists, many understood it to be implicitly directed at those who would oppose the

actions of his administration. Indeed, many who have sought to publicly explore and question the origins of such a horrific attack and the possible connections to U.S. foreign policy have been called un-American and accused of sympathizing with the perpetrators of 9/11.\textsuperscript{119}

When exploring the complexity of the issues surrounding September 11, controversy is, at least in our current political climate, unavoidable. Many museums will no doubt be hesitant to approach the contentious topics of discrimination and American foreign and domestic policies; however, there are many museum professionals who believe that their institution’s responsibility to present an accurate public history trumps the possibility of attracting negative attention. According to Oakland Museum of California curator Marcia Eymann, “Controversy cannot be avoided—and it shouldn’t be. Controversy feeds learning.”\textsuperscript{120} Similarly, Fran Sterling of Facing History observes that the interpretation of controversial subjects “allows the historical narrative to continue to unfold.”\textsuperscript{121}

For some museums, the stakes are high. The public profile of the Smithsonian Institution, for example, makes it difficult to address contentious subjects within its museums. Gardner of the National

\textsuperscript{120} Marcia Eymann, personal interview with author, Oakland, Ca., 5 December 2003.
\textsuperscript{121} Sterling, personal interview.
Museum of American History observed that it would be challenging for his institution to explore the causes of the attacks of September 11. “Our nation’s innocence is questioned—we have caused enormous distress for other cultures. Can you imagine anyone in Congress who would want to see us discuss the weaknesses of American culture?”

NMAH curator David Allison agrees that the Smithsonian has to be careful when approaching controversial topics, but believes that by including a variety of viewpoints in exhibitions, a balanced perspective can be presented without the museum taking a stand on the issue.

Others argue that museums cannot remain dispassionate and impartial on such issues. “To be neutral is to be disengaged and not relevant to the community,” says Wing Luke Asian Museum (WLAM) Director Ron Chew. “Sometimes you have to take a stand—you pay a price for not doing so.”

Presenting unpopular topics and viewpoints is sometimes necessary. “Americans have a myopic view of the world—we see ourselves as the good guys,” says Eymann. “History museums often want to present a ‘happy history’, but what is the mission of a museum? To entertain or to inform?”

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122 Gardner, telephone interview.
123 Allison, telephone interview.
125 Eymann, personal interview.
In interpreting a divisive subject, “the goal is still to increase understanding and build bridges between communities,” says Chinn of the WLAM. “You have to be savvy, though, and expect to run into problems.” Others observed that in these cases, there are strategies museums can employ to avoid completely alienating visitors. Linenthal notes that “museums can speak in many different voices—as long as they are clear about it. Curators should share their struggles with the public and pose questions rather than answer them.” Likewise, Lois Silverman affirms that “it’s great when museums are open with the public about the wrestling process.”

**Case Studies**

The challenges inherent in the representation of September 11 were faced by many museums that organized exhibitions about the terrorist attacks. An in-depth study of the development process of these exhibitions offers a revealing look at the ways in which these institutions handled both the difficulties and the many opportunities that such interpretations afford to museums. The National Museum of American History and the Wing Luke Asian Museum, two institutions with very different missions and audiences, approached the interpretation of

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126 Chinn, telephone interview.  
127 Linenthal, telephone interview.  
128 Silverman, telephone interview.
September 11 in ways that offer model practices for other museums that wish to create exhibitions about tragic events.


The National Museum of American History (NMAH) is widely recognized as “America’s museum.” Its location in the nation’s capital, as well as its affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, gives it a high profile in America’s cultural landscape. NMAH’s collection of over three million artifacts includes objects as diverse as the 1813 flag that inspired the Star Spangled Banner, Archie Bunker’s armchair, and other artifacts representing the past five centuries of American political, industrial, economic, and social life. The museum also acknowledges the importance of collecting objects from America today. As an institution with a national focus and perspective, documenting contemporary life is recognized as part of its mission.

NMAH’s exhibition *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* was born out of its collections. Following the attacks, many museums in New York and Washington, D.C., began to think immediately about the possibilities for collecting artifacts. The circumstances, however, were quite challenging. Institutions were unsure of how to proceed with collecting so soon after such a traumatic event. Many felt squeamish
about gathering objects while recovery efforts were still underway on sites considered to be mass graves. On the other hand, museum staff also feared that if they collected nothing, the objects would be lost forever.

To confront some of these issues, James Gardner of NMAH and Sarah Henry of the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) co-chaired a conference held at MCNY beginning on October 4, 2001. Not since the meeting of art museum directors after the bombing of Pearl Harbor had the field gathered to discuss the functions of the museum so soon after a tragic event. The conference, entitled “The Role of the History Museum in a Time of Crisis,” included over seventy attendees representing thirty-three institutions. Participants discussed the role and obligation of the museum to the public following the tragedy and ways to approach the collection of artifacts.

Conference members agreed on the need to preserve objects for future generations, and also agreed that collecting should involve a collaboration of efforts from different institutions. To further this initiative, representatives from NMAH and MCNY convened a steering committee that met in New York in early November of 2001. The fast-paced destruction and removal of the remains of the World Trade Center led members to draft a resolution to the Port Authority (owners of the World Trade Center) recommending that officials set aside objects that
could be included in museum collections. Museums were particularly interested in everyday objects that would evoke the daily life of the inhabitants of the World Trade Center and damaged artifacts that evidenced the destructive forces of the attacks. Conversations between museum staff and local agencies led to a collaborative effort to collect these objects.

In early January of 2002, representatives from some institutions, including NMAH and MCNY, were granted permission to enter Fresh Kills landfill, where the rubble of the World Trade Center was eventually taken. With cooperation from a variety of local, state, and federal agencies, museum staff worked alongside FBI agents to identify and collect objects that could help tell the story of the World Trade Center, its inhabitants, and the devastating results of the terrorist attacks. Such objects include damaged bicycles still attached to bike racks, a crushed and melted filing cabinet, a smashed fire truck, and pieces of the buildings themselves. These artifacts have subsequently entered the collections of several institutions including NMAH and MCNY, as well as the New York State Museum, the New York Fire Museum, the Library of Congress, and the New-York Historical Society.

Recognizing the importance of saving objects from the disaster and the leadership role that the museum had assumed in this regard, Congress
named NMAH as the official repository for September 11 artifacts in December of 2001. As a national museum, NMAH collected artifacts from all three disaster sites: the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the crash site of Flight 93 near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. NMAH’s close relationship to the federal government made navigating through the bureaucracy of the myriad federal agencies coordinating clean-up efforts easier. Some of the objects that have entered the museum include a damaged stairwell sign from the 102nd floor of the World Trade Center, the clothing from two Pentagon employees who rushed back into the burning building to assist in rescuing survivors, building fragments from both the Pentagon and World Trade Center, and an airphone that survived the wreckage of Flight 93.

Initially, the museum had not intended to display any of the artifacts from this collection right away. As a history museum, NMAH staff felt that their responsibility was to interpret and represent historical events. As Gardner questioned, “Is it history after one year? Can you really interpret and explain September 11 one year later?” The recent occurrence of the tragedy and its emotional impact on the nation left little distance with which to contextualize the attacks and represent them historically. However, due to Congress’ decree and the museum’s

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129 Gardner, telephone interview.
collecting efforts, the artifacts in the collection gained more and more attention from the public. Just a few months after the events, the museum began receiving several calls and requests to put the objects on view.

The number of requests made it obvious that the public was expecting some sort of response from the museum regarding September 11, especially as the first anniversary of the events neared. In February, therefore, the museum decided to begin planning an exhibition to open on September 11, 2002. However, museum staff members were still unsure of how to approach the representation of such a tragedy. Accustomed to handling events from the past, they felt uncomfortable presenting a detached perspective following the attacks. It became clear to curators that creating a typical historical exhibition was impossible, so they began thinking of ways to approach the events from a different perspective.

Though the subject matter of *Bearing Witness* represented a departure for the museum, its development process was typical in that it involved a team of curators as well as education staff members to assist with the exhibition’s creation. As soon the museum decided to create a September 11 exhibition, its education department completed a front-end survey of NMAH visitors in March 2002 to gauge their reactions to the idea. Visitors were asked whether or not they felt it was appropriate to present an exhibition about the events on its one-year anniversary. Of the
sixty visitors interviewed, eighty-seven percent believed that NMAH should present the exhibition. NMAH also questioned individuals as to how they felt about the inclusion of specific objects (such as airplane parts and personal artifacts related to victims), and what they believed should and should not be presented. Overall, visitors did not want to see graphic images related to the tragedy (such as dead bodies) and did not want objects or stories connected to the terrorists to be included. Many interviewees mentioned that they wanted to see artifacts related to rescue workers including police and firefighters, personal stories, and a place to share their own individual reflections.

The survey reaffirmed the museum’s decision to present the exhibition. During planning, exhibition team members turned to a variety of individuals for guidance, including Edward Linenthal, the historian who chronicled the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial, staff from the Holocaust Memorial Museum, and mental health experts from the Red Cross. These consultations helped NMAH staff think about how to approach a traumatic and emotional event. Initially, staff had resisted the notion that they were creating a commemorative exhibition. They felt that their museum was an

historical institution, not a memorial, and they did not want to glorify or romanticize the events in any way. However, speaking with Linenthal allayed this concern. He pointed out that museums were one of the few places where the public could come to reflect on the events, to relive them, and ultimately, to begin healing from the tragedy. Approaching the attacks as a historical event, therefore, would be ignoring the emotional needs of visitors.

Once curators decided to proceed with a commemorative exhibition, they still felt that they needed a theme to pull the exhibition together. As planning progressed, curator Kathleen Kendrick noticed that when talking to people about September 11, they always spoke about where they were and what they were doing when the attacks occurred. It was this realization that September 11 was a shared event, experienced by all Americans, which led to the title of the exhibition, *September 11: Bearing Witness to History*. Though dedicated to the victims, survivors, and rescuers of the attacks, Kendrick found that “the idea of being a witness to history became the linchpin that brought the exhibition together.” Curators wanted visitors to understand that September 11 connected all Americans in a single, shared moment and that they were a part of history in the making.

131 Kendrick, telephone interview.
Choosing objects for the exhibition was a difficult task. Curators knew that they needed to approach the topic with extreme sensitivity, so as not to upset visitors and especially survivors and family members of victims. Sarah Henry of the MCNY noted that there is a difference between remembering an event and reliving it\textsuperscript{132}—a distinction of which NMAH curators were clearly aware. Due to the graphic nature of much of the museum’s collected materials, there were many discussions relating to the inclusion of specific objects in the show. For example, staff debated whether or not including airplane parts in the exhibition would be too disturbing for visitors. Approximately half of the people surveyed about the exhibition said it would be appropriate to include the plane parts.\textsuperscript{133} In the end, the museum decided to include them because they felt it was the only object that would represent the experience of the passengers on board the four flights that were hijacked.

The design and construction of the exhibition itself reflected its sensitive subject matter. While most NMAH exhibitions contain a large number of artifacts, curators of Bearing Witness consciously chose only forty-five objects to display. “There was a sense that the objects needed space,” explained Gardner, “that they were powerful objects and that

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\item Henry, telephone interview.
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people should interact with them.”134 Designers utilized specific materials in the exhibition to reference the structures of the damaged buildings, including wood, metal, and limestone from the same quarry used to rebuild the façade of the Pentagon. The blue-gray color used for the walls recalled the smoky skies over Washington, D.C., and New York City on September 11 and created a quiet and somber mood in the exhibition. Due to its emotional nature, designers also made sure to create open spaces and plenty of seating for visitors who needed a break from the heavy content of the exhibition.

Curators decided that the primary stories in the exhibition should be linked to the objects in the collection, which were directly related to the three impact sites (see Appendix B for images of some of these artifacts). These included stories of survivors, rescuers, victims and their family members, the people who documented the events, and those who donated their efforts to assist in clean-up and recovery efforts. This object gallery comprised the first and largest section of the exhibition. *Bearing Witness* also included a visitor response area, interactive kiosks, and a video documentary.

The exhibition began with the following introduction:

134 Gardner, telephone interview.
This exhibition presents a selection of images, objects, and stories from September 11. It revisits that unforgettable day through the eyes of many different witnesses. Far from a complete account, these are fragments of a much larger story. As you look back and reflect, we invite you to share your own story—to bear witness to history.\footnote{National Museum of American History, September 11: Bearing Witness to History, exhibit label, Washington, D.C., 11 September 2002 to 6 July 2003.}

As visitors entered the exhibition, they wandered through a maze-like pattern of large photographic panels, which included images of each of the impact sites and pictures of people witnessing the destruction (see Appendix C for exhibition images). The first section of the exhibition, “Capturing History through the Lens,” was a photo gallery that highlighted those who documented the historical events, oftentimes risking their own lives. It included images taken by photographers at each of the impact sites, including the damaged camera and press passes of photographer Bill Biggart, who lost his life while photographing the destruction of the World Trade Center. The last photograph found in his camera was taken just seconds before the collapse of the second tower. Other objects in this section included the camcorder and video recording taken by brothers Jules and Gedion Naudet, who filmed the only image of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center and footage from inside the first tower after the attack.
The next sections in the object gallery chronicled the experiences of survivors and victims of each of the impact sites. “Escape from the World Trade Center” included the story of survivor Lisa Lefler, whose battered briefcase (found days later after surviving the 103-story fall from her office) was displayed. This section also featured the squeegee handle of window-washer Jan Demczur, who used the handle to free himself and five others trapped in a smoke-filled elevator in the World Trade Center. Also included in the gallery were a smashed television screen and tin of melted coins from the Pentagon, as well as the uniforms of two Pentagon employees who assisted in rescue efforts. Rubble from both the Pentagon and World Trade Center was included to underscore the destructive aspect of the attacks, including a twisted steel beam from the WTC that visitors could touch. Curators represented the destruction of Flight 93 through memorial objects left at the crash site.

The object gallery also included the stories of family members of victims, through artifacts such as the office telephone donated by U.S. Solicitor General Ted Olson, who used the phone to answer calls from his wife while she was on board the hijacked Flight 77 that ultimately crashed into the Pentagon. This was another object that museum staff initially did not want to display in the exhibition; however, they felt it was the only way to represent the experience of family members who were left helpless,
waiting to hear about the fate of their loved ones. Stories and objects from rescue workers and those who assisted in clean-up efforts were also exhibited, including equipment from firemen, canine rescuers, and iron workers. The only artifacts that had any explicit political connotation were the bullhorn used by President Bush in his address to recovery workers at Ground Zero and the FDNY baseball cap and cell phone of New York City Mayor Giuliani used by him in the days following the attacks.

To represent the viewpoints that were not included in the object gallery, curators decided to use kiosks that would feature several different stories of people directly and indirectly affected by the events. Designers of this section sifted through hundreds of stories before choosing twenty-five, which were spread over five terminals that contained both text and images. They consciously chose a variety of different perspectives, from both men and women and people of different ages and occupations. Exhibition planners hoped that visitors would be able to recognize something close to their own experience in these stories. They also decided to display a variety of modes of expression in the kiosks, including poetry, diary entries, and music.

The kiosks contained stories including those of a rescuer from the Pentagon, military personnel called into action after the attacks, an Arab-
American college student concerned about anti-Muslim sentiments in America, the slow and painful recovery of a burn victim from the Pentagon, and the experience of passengers whose flights were diverted and were stranded for days in Canada. One terminal also included an audio component, so visitors could hear the voice of Nikki Stern, widow of a World Trade Center victim, read excerpts of her diary that helped her cope with her loss. This kiosk also contained recordings of heart-wrenching answering machine messages left by frantic friends and relatives of people in New York, waiting to hear that their loved ones were safe.

As its title suggests, the idea of September 11 as a shared experience is a central theme in *Bearing Witness to History*. From the beginning, the exhibition team recognized the need to include a response area in the exhibition where visitors could tell their own stories about September 11. This area, entitled “Tell Us Your Story,” invited visitors to answer two questions: “How did you witness history on September 11, 2001?” and “How has your life changed because of that day?” (See Appendix D for these response cards.) Visitors could write their responses on these cards or use telephones to record their stories. Exhibition curators included this area for two reasons: to allow visitors to recognize the healing power of sharing their stories and to showcase the importance
of documenting history for future generations. During the run of the exhibition at NMAH, visitors completed over 20,000 cards, which have entered the archives of the Smithsonian and are also available for viewing online.\textsuperscript{136}

Initially, staff was very concerned about visitor reaction to the exhibition. “We wanted to help ease people’s pain,” explained Kendrick, “not contribute to it.”\textsuperscript{137} However, these fears proved to be unfounded. Staff who contacted survivors and family members during exhibition planning found that they were quite willing to cooperate with the museum. Before the exhibition opened to the public, the museum did a preview of the show for those directly affected by the tragedy. Knowing it would be emotional, the museum asked mental health volunteers from the Red Cross to be present at the preview. The response from the viewers, however, was grateful. Being included in a Smithsonian exhibition validated their experiences and ensured that their stories would not be forgotten.

During the ten months that the exhibition was on view at NMAH, \textit{September 11: Bearing Witness to History} attracted over one million visitors. The high attendance and volume of responses to the curator-posed questions indicates the level of interest and engagement in the

\textsuperscript{136} These responses are posted at http://www.911digitalarchive.org/smithsoniancards/.
\textsuperscript{137} Kendrick, telephone interview.
exhibition. Staff reports that visitor feedback has been extremely positive. Though difficult to view, visitors appreciate the chance to see the objects firsthand and especially to share their stories. The Smithsonian, often accused of not engaging the public, created a powerful exhibition to which visitors could connect on an emotional level. Gardner mentioned that Bearing Witness was also the first time that Secretary of the Smithsonian Larry Small was truly interested in the museum’s activities and was proud of what it accomplished. The popularity of the exhibition prompted Congress to provide funds to tour the exhibition nationwide. The exhibition is currently booked through 2006.

Though successful, the creation of the exhibition did take a toll on staff. Not only had they watched the Pentagon burn on September 11, they had to deal with the tragedy every day during the planning of Bearing Witness. Their job required them to collect and accession the artifacts, contact survivors and family members of victims, and watch graphic video footage of the attacks over and over again. However, there was also a rewarding aspect to the process. Kendrick reported that the experience gave her an appreciation for her museum and its role in our nation’s life, noting that she felt extremely proud of the exhibition and of her fellow staff members. Gardner observed that the process brought museum staff closer together than any of the museum’s other exhibitions.
NMAH staff took a chance on creating an exhibition that did not historicize an event. Despite its popularity, though, Gardner does not think that the museum will create exhibitions like this very often. The one-year anniversary of the attacks of September 11 was a special instance in which the staff stepped outside of their normal roles as historians. At a time when the nation needed to unify, they felt it was not appropriate to present a September 11 exhibition in a political context, especially with the inclusion of such emotionally-charged artifacts. In fact, not all staff members are pleased that the exhibition is still touring the nation, as they feel that the exhibition was made for a specific time and place and that it may lose meaning as time progresses.

Though not intended by its curators as a political statement, the Smithsonian’s location in Washington, D.C. and its relationship to the federal government infuse many of its exhibitions with political undertones. September 11: Bearing Witness to History was no different in this regard. In fact, at the exhibition’s opening, this relationship was made explicit through the speeches of politicians including Secretary of State Colin Powell, New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, and First Lady Laura Bush. Their addresses emphasized the strength and resolve of America to unify and fight terrorism and also posited the museum as a primary player in communicating this message to the public. Both First
Lady Bush and Secretary Powell asserted the museum’s importance in remembering the events of September 11. Mrs. Bush noted that *Bearing Witness* acted as “a growing repository of our collective memories,” while Powell stressed that “it is important to the American people that this moving exhibit of objects, sights, sounds and stories from September 11 should be displayed here among the collections that constitute our national memory.”

In addition to the creation of national memory, Secretary Powell also noted that the exhibition reflected “history in the making.” In referring to a (seemingly objective) historical narrative, he chronicled the ways in which he believed September 11 would be recalled by future generations:

> History also will show that to their everlasting credit, President Bush and other leaders throughout our nation resisted the impulse to lash out in blind rage, choosing instead to guide us onto the path of principled action...We recognize the terrorists and their abettors for what they are: international criminals inimical to all civilized societies.

> History will describe how the civilized nations of the world came together as one to declare terrorism a threat to international peace and security, a menace which all

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140 Ibid.
countries have the obligation to fight. And history will describe how President Bush marshaled a great global coalition that liberated the men and women of Afghanistan from terrorism's grip and began the long, hard task of eradicating terrorism worldwide.

The time of trial ushered in by September 11th will not soon be over, but when its last chapter is written, I believe that it will be counted among those magnificent moments in history when the nations of the world rose up to triumph over great evil, and in the process, brought new freedom and fresh hope to mankind. I am sure that will be the case.\textsuperscript{141}

These remarks by Powell are particularly revealing in their explicitly political overtones. Though curators had intentionally avoided taking a stand on America’s political and military responses to September 11, Powell is clearly creating his own narrative from the exhibition and using it to justify the actions of his administration.

While many museums following September 11 stressed their role as cultural mediators by fostering understanding of Muslim and Arab culture, Powell declared the reverse when he proclaimed that NMAH “is more than a national treasure; it is an invaluable diplomatic asset. The tens of thousand of foreign visitors that tour the Smithsonian collections every year return to their home countries with a better sense of who we are as Americans.”\textsuperscript{142} In his remarks, Powell underscored the importance of

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
the museum exhibition as a tool for not only international diplomacy but also as a way in which to justify American foreign policy. Indeed, Congress’ decision to fund a tour of the exhibition nationwide may have also been related to the belief that it could boost public opinion of the “war against terrorism.” Even the imagery associated with the exhibition—such as the damaged flag used as the promotional image for the exhibition—seemed to make a political statement of America as a wounded nation (see Appendix E for an example).

Though these overtones may have been unintended by exhibition curators, NMAH asserts that in the future, it does plan to examine the terrorist attacks in an historical context. The museum is also looking to increase its collection in this regard. “There is a sense that our collection is not complete,” Kendrick acknowledges. The museum is searching for a variety of objects, including ones related to the loss of civil liberties and to the terrorists themselves. While the more political aspects of September 11 were not included in the exhibition, they were discussed at the museum as part of a series of programs entitled “Crossroads.” These lunchtime discussions broached the subjects of Islamic extremists, American foreign policy, and the loss of civil liberties since the attacks.

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143 Kendrick, telephone interview.
Eventually, these aspects will be incorporated into future exhibitions at the museum.

The success of *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* is due to the museum staff’s willingness to step outside of what they considered to be the normal role of their institution. The severity of the events prompted an emotional rather than an historical response, one that was embraced by visitors to the exhibition. NMAH recognized that it could provide a healing space for the American public in which visitors could begin to come to terms with the tragic attacks of September 11. For survivors and family members of victims, the exhibition validated their experiences and provided a safe space in which to tell their stories and remember the events.

The most critical aspect of the show was the fact that curators willingly relinquished their authoritative voice in favor of a more open-ended and multi-vocal approach. By letting survivors share their own experiences, visitors could connect to the events on a much more personal level. The “Tell Your Own Story” section also empowered visitors to become a part of the exhibition by sharing their feelings and memories with others. The museum affirmed their roles as important witnesses to history and allowed them to have a voice in the exhibition. Visitors responded in a variety of ways to the questions posed by the exhibition.
Some were angry, others sad, some spoke of politics. All responses, however, were valid within the context of the exhibition.

_Bearing Witness_ was also successful due to the power of the objects themselves, which provided the core of the exhibition experience. Though many of the artifacts included were ordinary—a camcorder, an office telephone—their context and associated stories imbued them with a sacred quality. The inclusion of only forty-five objects was just enough to represent the many stories associated with the tragedy while at the same time not overwhelming. For visitors who may have only seen the events of September 11 on television, the objects provided a strong connection to the event that helped them to process it. As curator Helena Wright noted, September 11 “really happened—it wasn’t just something that people watched on television…The objects and the collection will make the significance and the reality of the event survive.”

Compared to other NMAH exhibitions, staff noticed that visitors to _Bearing Witness_ were unusually quiet, somber, and often emotional. Compared to other NMAH exhibitions, staff noticed that visitors to _Bearing Witness_ were unusually quiet, somber, and often emotional.

Like museums after Pearl Harbor, the National Museum of American History responded quickly to the events of September 11.

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Unlike World War II exhibitions, the museum eschewed blatant and uncritical patriotism and gave its visitors a voice. In this way, the exhibition transcended the political overtones and messages imposed by some members of our government. In a time of crisis, NMAH listened to its audience and created an exhibition that was thoughtful, sensitive, and meaningful to a diverse group of visitors, demonstrating the immense power of the museum to provide a space for healing and reflection after a tragic event. In a country in which television had provided the majority of information about September 11, the museum offered a quiet space in which visitors could process and digest the information and share their own stories and memories.


While the Smithsonian presented a commemorative response to September 11 at NMAH, a small ethnic-specific museum on the other side of the country explored the politics of the attacks and their effects on specific communities. The Wing Luke Asian Museum (WLAM), located in Seattle’s Chinatown/International district, is the only pan-Asian-American museum in the U.S. WLAM presents the history and culture of Asian immigrants and their descendants in the state of Washington and strives to “engage the Asian-Pacific-American communities and the public
in exploring issues related to the culture, art, and history of Asian Pacific Americans.”

The museum is named after Seattle city councilman Wing Luke, the first Asian-American elected official in the Pacific Northwest, who died in a plane crash in 1965 at the age of forty. Following his death, supporters founded the museum as a tribute to Luke, who had always hoped to create a cultural institution dedicated to Asian Americans. In 1991 the museum was infused with new energy and a new vision thanks to the addition of Ron Chew as Executive Director. Chew, a journalist who had extensive ties to Seattle’s Asian-American community, offered a new perspective on the civic role of the museum and hired staff who believed in his vision of the museum as a vital community center.

Since the arrival of Chew, WLAM has become an important resource for the Asian-American community in Seattle. The museum has become a model for its process of community engagement, which involves members of the community in every step of museum activities, including exhibition and program planning and implementation. Exhibitions including If Tired Hands Could Talk: Stories of Asian Garment Workers have earned the museum countless awards, including the 1995 National

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Museum Service award and the honor of being named an official Smithsonian Institution affiliate.

Believing that museums can facilitate dialogue around important issues and build bridges between communities, Chew advocates for the development of exhibitions and programs that address contemporary concerns. During the past few years, he has spoken extensively about the need to move beyond the traditional and academic process of exhibition development, which can take up to five years, to a more agile model that is quick, flexible, and addresses the needs and concerns of the community. This “journalistic approach” encourages museums to actively engage the public in the timely discussion of social issues. As journalists work under tight deadlines to report on current topics, so can museums help visitors understand contemporary, prominent issues. The quick-response exhibition also benefits from community participation and involvement, allowing the museum to give voice to underrepresented communities. At a time when museums are encouraged to make meaningful connections with their constituency, this agile model of exhibition-making ensures that museums remain relevant and engaging to their audiences.

In 2000, WLAM set out to put these ideas into practice by establishing the New Dialogue Initiative. The museum gathered people

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together to help bring the initiative to life. This committee, consisting of a
diverse group of community members who had not previously been
involved in WLAM projects, worked with the museum to brainstorm ideas
for programs and exhibits and choose the basic format and selection
criteria for these projects. The group decided that New Dialogue Initiative
exhibitions and programs would present current issues and events (less
than a year old) in a timely manner so as to respond to issues as they
happen. They affirmed that exhibitions must have community support and
come from a collective voice that can bridge different generations and
various Asian Pacific American communities. They also believed that
programs and exhibitions should be participatory in nature and encourage
action from visitors. The vision statement for this initiative asserts that:

The New Dialogue Initiative is a multi-strategy program,
including multi-sensory exhibits, that addresses
community concerns and urgent needs about contemporary
social issues and current news events, giving voice to
underrepresented ideas and opinions from the Asian
Pacific American community. The New Dialogue
Initiative desires to proactively initiate dialogues around
key issues and needs in the community, and creates a safe
space for mindful, dynamic dialogues that advocate for
community empowerment, establish leadership and action,
and bring new levels of understanding through unique and
creative presentations.¹⁴⁸

While NMAH’s *Bearing Witness to History* was primarily curator-driven, WLAM’s September 11-related exhibitions were created by advisory committees with input and logistical assistance from museum staff. Planning began when WLAM received funding from the Nathan Cummings Foundation to develop New Dialogue Initiative exhibitions in early 2003. The advisory group suggested a number of topics that affected the Asian-American community, including anti-immigrant sentiments after September 11, battling stereotypes, and becoming American. Eventually, the common theme of what it means to be an American after September 11 shone through in the discussions. The committee created the exhibition *I Am American: A Community Journal* that opened on July 23, 2003.

The purpose of the exhibition was to ignite dialogue about what it means to be an American in contemporary times. It addressed issues of patriotism, discrimination, and identity in post-September 11 life in America and in the midst of the war on terrorism. Familiar with the history of Japanese-American internment, the Asian-American community recognized quite well the fear of Arab and Muslim Americans of retaliation and discrimination following the attacks of September 11. In addition, many Asian Americans were targeted due to their appearance.
Sikh Americans, who originally hail from South Asia, have been confused with Arab and Muslim Americans due to their skin color and dress.

The display was divided into two areas. The first section consisted of copies of newspaper articles and quotes related to the topic of the exhibition. These included a story of a college basketball player who refused to salute the flag during a game, reports of hate crimes against Arab Americans, patriotic stories that expressed support for American policy, and discussions of the loss of civil liberties after September 11.

The second section of the exhibition was a visitor response area. The museum placed a digital camera in the exhibition area so that visitors could take pictures of themselves and each other. After printing out their picture, viewers were invited to answer the question, “What does it mean to be an American?” Visitors then posted these pictures and responses on a large bulletin board, so that their ideas and opinions could be read by others and spark additional dialogue around this topic. In conjunction with the exhibition, WLAM also hosted a panel discussion with leaders from various communities to discuss what it means to be an American from an individual and community perspective. The program was videotaped and subsequently placed in the exhibition for visitors to watch and discuss.
It did not take long before the response area was filled with the images and opinions of WLAM visitors. Each visitor’s response revealed a slightly different perspective, from immigrants happy to have the privilege of living in a free country, to American-born visitors of color who spoke of racism present in the U.S., to those who questioned the legitimacy of our government’s foreign and domestic policies (see Appendix F for selected responses). Whatever the differences, each visitor seemed eager to express his or her feelings and add his or her own face to the “wall of Americans.” As it grew in size, the wall itself became a visual statement of changing American demographics (see Appendix G for images of the exhibition).

For the next installment of the New Dialogue Initiative, WLAM worked with youth participating in the 2003 Community Leaders Program, a program of the Asian Pacific Islander Community Leadership Foundation (ACLF). Community leaders founded ACLF in 1998 to encourage and teach leadership development amongst Asian Pacific Islander youth. The dozen members of the exhibition committee worked with the museum to do outreach and surveys to see what issues were most prominent in people’s minds. Committee members learned that discrimination, racial profiling, and civil liberties post-September 11 were still hot topics in the community.
To approach the subject from a different angle and to give their argument more weight, the committee decided to examine post-September 11 policy in an historical context. The goal was to raise the issues surrounding the USA PATRIOT Act and prejudice against Arab and Muslim Americans by referencing historical events that involved state-sponsored discrimination. Entitled *The Veil of Patriotism*, the exhibition aimed to show that “tragic events in history have demonstrated that governments in our century impose a ‘veil of patriotism’ (for the good of society) to justify inhumane acts against specific populations.”¹⁴⁹ The exhibition asked visitors to examine the actions of the United States among other countries in which intolerance was perpetuated by those in power.

*The Veil of Patriotism* provided visitors with a list of definitions of terms used in the exhibition, examples of nine historical events from various countries, a color-coded map outlining where these events took place, and a response area. The definitions, included to make the display accessible to a wide audience, included terms such as apartheid, civil rights, hate crime, patriotism, and terrorism. The list of historical occurrences consisted of two- to three-paragraph explanations of the nature of the events, when and where they took place, and approximately

how many people were affected (see Appendix G for images of this display).

The nine events chosen for the exhibition were Japanese-American internment during World War II in the U.S., the Nanking Massacre in China by the Japanese, the Great Famine and The Great Purge in Russia under Stalin, the Holocaust in Europe during WWII, Aborigine genocide in Australia, ethnic wars in Rwanda, Apartheid in South Africa, the Pinochet government in Chile, and East Pakistan independence. A color-coded map in the exhibition highlighted the geographic location of each of these events and provided a graph that illustrated approximately how many people were affected. Two events from the present were also included: discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities in the U.S. after September 11 and the USA PATRIOT Act.

The exhibition presented discrimination in America after September 11 by including a quote from Dale Minami, a lawyer and civil rights leader, who recalled discrimination in America after the bombing of Pearl Harbor:

I saw a great number of similarities. There was ensuing hysteria of a people whose once omnipotent country suddenly became vulnerable...Each group was subject to stereotype and demeaning media images. Neither was politically powerful, and came from cultural, social and
political traditions that Anglo-America was largely ignorant about at the time.\textsuperscript{150}

The label continued:

Following September 11, many innocent people in the United States have become the victims of misguided hate and a misguided sense of patriotism. The victims, including Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, Sikh Americans and Asian Pacific Americans, shared in the national grief, outrage and horror, but because of their appearance and beliefs, they also have become targets of a backlash of violence.\textsuperscript{151}

Following this statement, the museum listed statistics on the number of discrimination and hate crime incidents reported to Arab-American and Asian-American organizations and law enforcement agencies since September 11.

An explanation of the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) of 2001 was placed on a separate text panel in the exhibition and included a list of some of the legal rights affected by this legislation. These include freedom of association, freedom of information, right to legal representation, and freedom of speech, among others. Two quotes representing opposing views of the Act—one from an Illinois senator and another from a civil rights

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
attorney—were included on the label. A binder for visitors to peruse, filled with newspaper articles, included both positive and negative opinions regarding the PATRIOT Act and its effect on Americans.

The response area of the exhibition encouraged visitors to voice their opinions about the PATRIOT Act and also to take political action. Visitors were asked to respond to the following questions: “What can we learn from the past? What can we do to stop the veiled terror from repeating itself, here in the United States, or throughout the world?” Cards and pens were provided and participants were able to post their thoughts on a bulletin board for other visitors to see. The second activity encouraged visitors to do more than just share their opinions with each other. Postcards with an American flag and the text “USA PATRIOT Act” and a directory of local legislators were included in the exhibition to invite visitors to voice their thoughts and concerns with their political representatives.

Exhibition planners were aware of the highly political nature of The Veil of Patriotism. Though they included other viewpoints of the PATRIOT Act, and encouraged all visitors to share their opinions (positive or negative), it is obvious that the museum was representing an opinion of its own. “It’s impossible to be neutral,” says Cassie Chinn, project coordinator for the New Dialogue Initiative. “We try to present
viewpoints from both sides, but the museum doesn’t shy away from taking a stand on issues.” The goal of the exhibition, she explains, was to increase dialogue by educating visitors about these issues so that they could have an informed discussion. The museum aimed to provide a safe venue for each side to share their own viewpoints and learn from one another.

The Wing Luke Asian Museum never set out to develop exhibitions relating to September 11; however, an important part of its mission is to represent the interests of Asian Americans and provide a place for their voice to be heard. The museum’s own experience interpreting Japanese-American internment influenced its decision to portray the effects of September 11 on minority communities. Following the attacks, victims of Japanese-American internment spoke out, warning the nation not to punish people based solely on the color of their skin or their religious beliefs. Several social service organizations, including the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, as well as cultural institutions including the Japanese American National Museum, made explicit connections between Japanese-American internment and post-September 11 prejudice. WLAM’s New Dialogue Initiative exhibitions were designed in the same vein, to raise awareness of these issues in an

historical context and warn visitors about the potential to repeat Japanese-American internment. *The Veil of Patriotism’s* discussion of the PATRIOT Act made the connection between intolerance on an individual basis and how that can lead to state-sponsored discrimination that perpetuates prejudice on a broader level.

Minority communities first founded ethnic-specific museums because mainstream museums had consistently excluded them from their narratives. Though great strides have been made on the part of mainstream museums nationwide, these communities and their concerns often remain underrepresented to this day. “Museums have the role of providing a venue for empowerment,” says Chinn. “Giving people a voice is an act of power.” As reported in the initial findings of the September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, the discrimination against Arab and Muslim Americans and the fear prevalent in immigrant communities has not been fully explored by the mainstream media. WLAM believes that its role is to represent the interests of these communities and allow them to express their perspectives and educate others. “During World War II, nobody talked about Japanese internment,”

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153 Ibid.
Chinn observes. “Today, museums have a responsibility to present multiple perspectives.”

Many visitors have added to the discussions by writing their own comments and opinions and posting them on the provided board in the *Veil of Patriotism* exhibition. The displays have clearly had an impact on at least a few of these visitors. “Consider this exhibit when you vote in 2004—I will!” exclaimed one visitor. Feedback regarding both exhibitions has been generally positive, although the parents of one student visitor did complain angrily to staff members that *The Veil of Patriotism* was un-American. However, the museum remains undeterred. In fact, touring versions of these two exhibitions are being developed so that other communities will be exposed to these issues and invited to join the dialogue.

WLAM does not have a specific agenda or strategy in developing programs and exhibitions related to life after September 11. “Our programming is based on community relationships and what is happening in people’s lives,” says Chinn. “Hate crimes are still out there and the need to discuss them has heightened after September 11.”

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154 Chinn, telephone interview.
156 Chinn, personal interview.
institution. The museum eschewed the dominant narrative of the September 11 attacks—that of an innocent and heroic nation attacked—to expose the less-flattering view of American culture from those who deal with fear and discrimination on a daily basis. In doing so, it has given a voice to an often muted community and challenged its visitors to take action.

Conclusions

Following the attacks of September 11, museums across the nation offered programs and exhibitions designed to come to the aid of a mourning populace. As evidenced by these diverse reactions, museums today have myriad functions and responsibilities in the wake of national tragedy. Lonnie Bunch, president of the Chicago Historical Society, captured this when he affirmed that:

Museums are developing programs and exhibitions that demonstrate that cultural institutions are of value to their community in good times and invaluable during times of pain and crisis. Museums all over the country are working to create opportunities that allow visitors to see our institutions as places of healing, education, affirmation, and reflection; cultural entities that are ripe with contemporary resonance; and sources for historical knowledge—helpful tools for people wrestling with despair and uncertainty.157

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These responses reveal how the functions of the museum have changed tremendously over the past several decades and how they continue to evolve. In any way that they could, museums found ways to help—by opening their doors to rescue workers and local authorities, by offering a space for social gathering and communal healing, or by providing information and historical parallels for those seeking answers. As the media coverage reduced citizens to passive observers of the tragedy of September 11, museums were places where members of the public could actively reflect, share their stories, and participate in a national remembering of 9/11. Through their innovative and timely actions, museums created new paradigms in the quest to remain relevant and valuable institutions.

In the aftermath of September 11, museums looked to their mission and resources to decide on an appropriate course of action. In the immediate hours following the tragedy, many museums in the New York area, such as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Liberty Science Center, realized that they could be most useful by offering their services to rescue workers and the general public. Others, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, offered concerts to provide comfort and solace. Community forums and town hall meetings emerged from several
other institutions, which allowed the public to voice their questions and concerns in a safe environment.

For those institutions that presented exhibitions, the results were equally diverse. A comparison of the two exhibitions presented in this project showcases how museums with different missions and audiences utilized their resources. The Wing Luke Asian Museum drew on its community contacts and commitment to voicing underrepresented viewpoints from its constituency to explore aspects of September 11 not widely discussed in the media. WLAM has dedicated resources to the timely discussion of community concerns, ensuring a quick turnaround time for their exhibitions. In addition, staff at this small, ethnic-specific museum is not afraid to present highly political topics and take a stand on big issues. Even though this may cause controversy, WLAM believes that it has a social responsibility to spark dialogue. To do so is seen as an integral part of the museum’s mission to educate the public.

WLAM’s exhibitions are also significant because they illustrate the close relationship the museum has with its community. I have already summarized how in the immediate aftermath of September 11, many people went to museums to find comfort and solace. What was not studied at that time, however, was who those visitors were. Cassandra Chinn of WLAM raises an important question by asking, “Who finds
museums comforting? Those historically excluded from museums—largely ethnic and religious minorities—may not find that museums are institutions in which they feel welcome or at ease. WLAM offers an environment in which its constituency feels comfortable voicing their opinions. Though small, the museum provides a safe place for its community to gather.

The National Museum of American History, on the other hand, is a large national institution dedicated to preserving the history of America for future generations. To research, plan, and design an exhibition in less than seven months on a topic of such a recent nature was unprecedented. The events of September 11, however, were so unparalleled that a response from the museum was necessary. In planning the exhibition, staff focused on their greatest resource—the immense power of the objects they had collected, many through contacts with other federal agencies—to tell the story of 9/11 through the eyes of those who witnessed the event. To place these artifacts in a commemorative exhibition invited people to reflect on the event in order to come to terms with it. Allowing visitors to share their stories offered a healing and restorative experience.

As a national museum, NMAH would have had immense difficulties in discussing the political aspects of 9/11, especially in our

\[158\] Chinn, telephone interview.
current political climate. However, both its exhibition and those of WLAM reveal how the function of museums has changed over the past half century. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and throughout World War II, museums offered a range of programs and exhibitions intended to prepare citizens for life during a war and to justify America’s participation in an international conflict. While these responses were no doubt useful for much of the public, the jingoistic aspect of these offerings precluded a deeper understanding of the consequences of American involvement in such a campaign.

It is true that any interpretation of a national event is inherently political; we have only to look at the speeches of Colin Powell and Laura Bush at NMAH to see how an exhibition can be used to justify the actions of an administration. For museums today, however, the possibilities for mounting blatantly propagandistic exhibitions such as MoMA’s 1942 *Road to Victory* are limited and perhaps unthinkable. In this post-modern age, a growing number of historians and scholars reject the idea that a universal and absolute truth exists. As such, it has become more and more difficult to present one version of history without acknowledging the presence of diverse viewpoints and experiences. Though many politicians base their actions on what they claim to be a higher moral authority, as scholar Stanley Fish points out, “there are no such universally accepted
values, priorities, and moral convictions. If there were, there would be no deep disputes.”

Museums are now more aware than ever of the ways in which national events impact different communities and are more sensitive to representing these perspectives within their walls. Following September 11, museums responded to tragedy in ways that were generally more reflective and tolerant than their World War II counterparts.

A new role that has emerged since World War II is that of the museum as a place for communal healing. Bearing Witness to History illustrates how museums can contribute not only to American intellectual life but also to the public’s psychological well-being. The recognition that museums can act as healing environments is not entirely new. However, never have so many institutions embraced this role as they have after September 11. Some staff at NMAH worried that their commemorative exhibition Bearing Witness to History would lose its relevancy as it toured the nation over the years; in fact, its continuing popularity indicates that it is still meaningful and therapeutic for those who experience it. The exhibition’s invitation for visitors to share their own stories is vital for those only just beginning to be ready to deal with their feelings about September 11. “Memorial exhibitions are important,” affirms Lois Silverman. “If you live through something momentous, you will always

want to tell your story. It’s hard to imagine that people will ever lose their desire to talk about 9/11.”

The healing potential of the museum was only widely recognized after September 11. However, other responses to the tragedy affirm what a 2002 Smithsonian report declared in an analysis of the roles of national museums in the twenty-first century. The publication asserted that museums can fulfill the functions of facilitators of civic engagement, agents of social change, and moderators of sensitive social issues. Both Bearing Witness to History and the two New Dialogue Initiative exhibitions at WLAM illustrate the commitment of many museums to developing innovative ways to realize these new museological roles. As Robert D. Putnam reports in his book Bowling Alone, the decline of social activities that once brought together diverse participants—such as churchgoing, PTA meetings, and community volunteer societies—has resulted in the deterioration of social capital, an essential component of a healthy community. Involvement in such activities, Putnam argues, leads to economic development, better public education and services, and increased civic engagement. In an age of dwindling public spaces,

160 Lois Silverman, telephone interview.
162 Putnam, Bowling Alone, 19.
museums can become centers of civic life where individuals from all backgrounds can come together to discuss the issues that matter to them. In the wake of tragic events, museums can provide a safe place for the public to gather to heal and to explore and debate contentious topics.

Of course, the negative effects of social capital cannot be ignored by museums. While many benefit from the personal networks that social capital engenders, those in marginalized communities may find themselves unable to reap such rewards. Sociologists Alejandro Portes and Patricia Landolt note that the “same strong ties that help members of a group often enable it to exclude outsiders.”163 The demand for conformity and restrictions on individual liberties are likewise a troubling aspect of many close-knit groups. A natural response to the events of September 11, as with any national tragedy, was the strengthening of personal relationships in many communities. However, those considered to be outsiders (including immigrants and Arab and Muslim Americans) were targeted or ostracized by others. Museums should look to the promising benefits that social capital can create in a community, but without overlooking its potential pitfalls, either.

After September 11, Don Hazen, Executive Director of the Independent Media Institute, declared that:

The best antidote to paranoia is discussion and realistic assessment of the potential of danger. Many of our country’s institutions—houses of worship, civic groups, town meetings—are forums for just such discussion. Much of the initial response to the crisis of 9/11—the cooperation, generosity and community that were evident—provides a foundation for a sane world and gives people strength in the face of fear.¹⁶⁴

It is through these beneficial aspects of social capital that museums can have the most impact on their communities, by bringing together individuals of diverse backgrounds to forge mutual respect and understanding. In the wake of September 11, museums have a unique opportunity to foster cross-cultural awareness and address global issues of war, terrorism, and intolerance. Though little reported in the media, instances of discrimination and hate crimes have risen drastically amongst Muslim and Arab-American populations, as well as in the Asian-American community. Through programs and exhibitions at institutions including the Wing Luke Asian Museum, The Museum of the City of New York, and the Japanese American National Museum, museums have used the events of September 11 as a springboard to educate visitors about the

Muslim faith, Arab-American culture, and intolerance and discrimination in our own country. This function will become no less important in the coming years.

Though the events of September 11 offered many opportunities to museums, the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of tragic events are daunting. Representing an event so soon after its occurrence is hard, but the true challenge for many institutions will be how to present September 11 in the future. As the events of 9/11 fade from memory into history, museums will be expected to provide historical perspective to explain and analyze the terrorist attacks. In doing so, museums will unavoidably find themselves confronting a range of contentious issues. Certainly, their interpretations will be no less political than the myriad controversies surrounding the interpretation of other events of profound national import, such as World War II. The attacks touch on highly divisive topics, including American foreign policy, religion, racism, and global politics.

At the heart of American democracy is the right to publicly question authority and the actions of our government. However, the powerful emotions attached to tragic occurrences make it difficult for many people to tolerate other perspectives. The collective nature of September 11 makes it even trickier to approach. Through the medium of television, the events of that unforgettable day were witnessed and
experienced by all Americans, regardless of their physical location at the
time of the attacks. As such, all Americans feel that they have a stake in
the story of September 11. Museums tread on unstable ground when
attempting to create an historical narrative of such a momentous event.

Tragic events place museums at the crossroads of memory, history,
politics, and emotions. We have seen how the attempt to negotiate
between these complex forces causes inevitable friction and contention.
Ironically, though time is said to heal all wounds, it is the passing of the
years that causes the memory of tragic events to become increasingly
sacred, as an aging generation uses their memories to justify and validate
their actions and experiences. These memories can collide with
institutional representations of historical events, often with disastrous
results. The controversy over the exhibition of the Enola Gay is perhaps
the most famous example of this tension between history and memory, as
veterans protested the National Air and Space Museum’s historically
revisionist interpretation of the end of World War II. Its occurrence fifty
years after the bombing of Hiroshima indicates that the greatest difficulties
in representing September 11 may lie well ahead of us.

As contributors to both history and national memory, museums are
particularly vulnerable to difficulty in the negotiation between the two. As
public institutions, they present institutional and historical narratives
aimed at educating the public that are most commonly presented from a detached, omniscient perspective. As Susan Crane maintains, museum visitors arrive in possession of certain expectations of what a museum trip will afford, developed through memories of past visits and a belief that as trusted public institutions, museums represent an official and “correct” historical narrative. When visiting museums, therefore, they expect that their own memories and version of history will be affirmed. It is not just revisionist history that creates controversy in museums; the public is well aware that differing accounts of historical events exist. It is that the public does not expect to find such accounts in museums. When their expectations are thwarted, visitors feel frustrated, angry, and betrayed.

At the same time, museums that eschew an historical narrative in favor of a commemorative display face other difficulties. In their attempt to balance history and emotions, memorial museums and exhibitions raise questions about the reliability of their narratives. Can commemorative representations provide the public with an objective, historical perspective? As evidenced by institutions including the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial, the desire to memorialize an event can create an impulse to exclude or sanitize certain stories. Both institutions limited the amount of space devoted to the discussion of the perpetrators of each event. However, limiting an in-
depth exploration of the Nazi regime and the terrorists who bombed
Oklahoma City’s federal building arguably denies the public of a broader
understanding of the origins and consequences of such events. Memorial
exhibitions, while useful and meaningful in the aftermath of tragedy, can
lose their value if they do not include an in-depth examination of the more
difficult and complex aspects of a tragic event. The challenge for
museums will be how to undertake this discussion while still remaining
sensitive to the emotions involved.

As asserted by WLAM Executive Director Ron Chew, museums
that avoid the discussion of important issues risk becoming irrelevant to
their communities. Museums today are conscious that their expanded
civic role translates into the increased possibility of controversy in the
interpretation of national tragedies such as September 11; however, they
are also aware of their social responsibility to tackle these subjects. As
reported, experts in the museum field are not deterred by these risks.
They have learned from past controversial exhibitions—such as the
display of the Enola Gay—how to be more sensitive when approaching
controversial topics, by engaging in conversations with stakeholders,
developing community advisory committees, and eliminating the
omniscient curatorial voice in exhibitions.
Through national initiatives such as AAM’s *Excellence and Equity* and *Museums and Communities*, museums have been encouraged to realize their full potential by taking on a number of new responsibilities. However, the diversity of museums in the United States makes it difficult to prescribe a universal role. Elaine Heumann Gurian asserts that “even if we agree that museums have an overarching public responsibility, they are not and should not be programmatically uniform.” Not every museum is able to respond to a particular event in the same way, nor should they try. These responses will be dependent on the mission, audience, and resources of each particular institution. What is clear, however, is the immense range of options for museums to stay true to their mission while also remaining a vital and contemporary resource to the community. We have seen that the needs of individuals following a tragic event—interpersonal contact, reflection, validation, information, education, and a safe place to voice their opinions—can be provided by museums. What is not yet universally recognized by those outside the field is that these functions can and are being fulfilled by museums. The test will be for museums to broaden their horizons and reach new audiences in this process.

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In the future, these responsibilities of the museum in interpreting September 11 to the public will become no less important. Jane Thomas of the Oklahoma City National Memorial recalled that it took five years to gain any sort of perspective on the bombing of her city’s federal building. As we approach that landmark anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., museums will begin to think of new ways in which to approach this tragedy again. As evidenced in these findings, such interpretations present many opportunities but also difficulties and challenges. Based on an analysis of these findings, the next section will offer recommendations for museums that plan to interpret September 11 or other tragic or difficult events in the future.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Different museums will approach the topic of September 11 or other tragic events in unique and diverse ways. These recommendations are not meant to provide strict guidelines for how to represent such events but rather to offer proposals designed to encourage critical thinking about how to address the challenges and opportunities of such representations. Critical thinking is especially important in developing September 11 exhibitions due to the heightened emotions surrounding the events and their political nature. As evidenced in this project, the negotiations involved in the interpretation of national tragedy are numerous and complex. There are no easy solutions to the challenges of developing an exhibition about September 11. What follows, however, are steps that curators, exhibition developers, educators, and others planning such exhibitions can take to ensure a sensitive and meaningful display. Though these recommendations do not assume a particular style of exhibition development, a team-based approach, incorporating the viewpoints of a variety of staff members, was used by the museums featured in this study
and is a method that has proved useful and meaningful to a wide range of institutions.

1. **Recognize that telling the story is important.**

   Following September 11, many institutions were unsure of whether or not they should attempt to represent the events in their institution. Initially, curators at the National Museum of American History did not know if visitors were ready to see September 11 artifacts. However, the ensuing success of its exhibition *Bearing Witness to History* erased the previous doubts of its staff. Over a million people visited the exhibition while it was in Washington, D.C. and the show has been breaking attendance records at many of the institutions where it has toured. Clearly, the public needs and wants to see such exhibitions.

   Our nation’s leaders encouraged us to move forward after September 11, to attend to business as usual. Healing and coming to terms with such traumatic events takes time, however. Museums can play an important role in this regard by offering perspective and an opportunity for visitors to be reflective. Healing can occur when people gather together to remember and reflect on the tragic events. For many people, museums exist in an historical vacuum, where only the distant past is displayed. Museums should take the opportunity to be relevant to their community
during such a time. To pretend that the issue does not exist or that people are not thinking about it is to ignore the needs of the public.

Such emotional exhibitions should not be forced, however. Museums should think carefully about what they can offer to the public during such a time, as presenting a response simply for the sake of doing something will not provide a meaningful experience for visitors. Institutions must also be sensitive to the fact that it takes time to be able to view events such as September 11 from a removed perspective; they cannot pretend to fathom their full significance or consequences now or any time in the near future. When approached sensitively, however, museums can provide a safe space with resonant representations where the community can gather to discuss and reflect on the events.

2. **Listen to your audience and involve them in the process.**

The exhibitions presented by the Wing Luke Asian Museum and the National Museum of American History differed greatly in their focus; however, both institutions did outreach to potential visitors during the planning of their exhibitions. The front-end evaluation conducted by NMAH staff members was invaluable in guiding the development of its exhibition. Museums cannot assume that they know what their audience wants to see or what they can handle in an exhibition about September 11,
so front-end surveys should be employed to discover how potential audiences feel about the topic. Museums should move from outside their institution to the inside, not vice-versa—a strategy that is always beneficial for exhibition development, especially when dealing with an emotional and sensitive topic. Instead of beginning with a list of themes that curators want to address in an exhibition, staff must find out what the community is thinking and feeling and move onto planning from there.

Including visitors in museum discussions is crucial to an exhibition’s success. It is during this time that institutions can discover what their audience wants to know and what their concerns are regarding the display of emotional and sensitive subjects and materials. Involving community members in the exhibition planning process will assist greatly in efforts to develop a sensitive and meaningful exhibition. Advisory committees are an ideal way to involve the community in such a way. Culled from volunteers, staff contacts, and local community organizations, they can assist in providing feedback on exhibition themes and public programs.

Though welcoming the input of visitors is important, museums must also be careful to set boundaries in this regard. Especially after a tragic event, people feel a need to express themselves and want to offer advice to institutions that are planning to interpret or memorialize an
event. After the Oklahoma City bombing, for example, the city received hundreds of plans and ideas for memorials from members of the public. Emotions can run high, so it is easy to hurt people’s feelings. Museums must take this into account when soliciting advice and input from their audience. If an advisory committee is created, the museum must set clear guidelines for its project and communicate them to everyone involved from the beginning. For instance, a list of the roles of the committee and committee members as well as addressing the question of who has the final word on the exhibition components should be developed and distributed at the beginning of the process. Finally, museums should not follow the advice of its committee or constituency if it is not in line with its mission or if staff feel that they have a responsibility to present a particular viewpoint or topic.

3. **Ask for help from other experts.**

No museum has to struggle blindly with the representation of a difficult topic—there are many museums that deal every day with the interpretation of tragic subject matter that can offer their assistance. The Oklahoma City National Memorial, the Holocaust National Memorial Museum, and the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas are a few among several institutions dedicated to interpreting and memorializing tragic events.
These are the types of institutions that can provide the best advice on how to approach the topic of an event such as September 11. They can offer their perspective during a difficult time and give their expertise on what artifacts and stories are the most effective to display to the public. Individual experts from outside the museum world can also provide their unique point of view regarding exhibitions, including historians, psychologists, and victims and survivors of tragic events.

Following September 11, many museums sought assistance from other institutions. The National Museum of American History approached the Holocaust Memorial Museum, mental health experts from the Red Cross, and historian Edward Linenthal to help in the planning of its September 11 exhibition. Specifically, NMAH curators were looking for strategies to assist in approaching a delicate topic in a way that was both thoughtful and sensitive to the emotions caused by revisiting the event.

Following September 11, museums needing logistical assistance turned to staff from the Oklahoma City National Memorial, which helped many museums in New York City collect artifacts and negotiate with the numerous agencies involved in recovery efforts to preserve the objects related to the attacks.

Community organizations can also be a valuable resource. Depending on the focus of a museum’s exhibition, social service
organizations and other non-profits can connect museums to key stakeholders and gatekeepers in the community. Such assistance can offer valuable perspectives for exhibitions that deal with the effects of tragic events on specific communities. For example, the Wing Luke Asian Museum forged relationships with Arab-American community organizations as well as the Sikh community through the organizing of collaborative programs relating to hate crimes after September 11. In doing so, it gained a valuable perspective on effects of September 11 on those communities, which it referenced during the development of its own exhibitions. Museums should not be afraid to ask other institutions for advice. Staff members at most museums and other organizations are more than willing to offer their expertise to assist others in a difficult time.

4. **Don’t court controversy, but don’t be afraid of it, either.**

   It is inevitable that the interpretation of September 11 will become controversial in the future. The debates over the causes and consequences of the terrorist attacks, including effects on American foreign policy, politics, and civil liberties, will be debated for many years. Add to this the high level of emotion surrounding the attacks and the fear of many citizens of further terrorist retaliations, and the subject becomes increasingly difficult to address. Museums that tackle the representation of difficult
events risk controversy. Those who do nothing, however, risk becoming irrelevant. If museums are to remain important to their communities and a vital part of national life, they must address issues that are current and pressing in the community.

Museums must first acknowledge that many politicians and world leaders are using the attacks of September 11 to further their own political agenda and recognize that they need to avoid making the same mistake in their own institutions. Identifying the biases of museum staff is an important step in this process. Everyone has his or her own personal opinions on the issues surrounding the events. Recognizing what these are will allow museum staff to be open to including other viewpoints in the exhibition. This is an important step in creating a thought-provoking exhibition to which everybody can relate.

Museums should not be afraid to take a stand on an issue. However, if they do so, they must be sure to communicate their intentions to their audience. It is important to set clear goals for what an exhibition will and will not address and to tell this to visitors. The omniscient voice, used so often in exhibitions, should be eliminated. Many museum controversies, including the exhibition of the Enola Gay at the National Air and Space Museum, were caused in part because curators did not inform their audience that their exhibition represented one interpretation,
not the only interpretation, of a national event. Instead of providing answers, museums can share authority with their audience by posing questions and including them in the process of exploring a multi-faceted topic.

5. **Include multiple perspectives and personal stories.**

The inclusion of multiple perspectives in an exhibition not only decreases the risk of controversy but also provides visitors with an enriched and educational experience. Despite efforts of the media and the government to forge simplistic narratives of the events of September 11, such tragic and large-scale events remain inherently complicated and take time to fully understand. Museums can offer a broader perspective of historical events by including several different viewpoints to expose visitors to the stories not always told in the public sphere.

The incorporation of personal stories in addition to expert opinions in exhibitions is the most effective way to present multiple points of view on a subject. Personal narratives create empathy by allowing visitors to view the world through someone else’s eyes. Pairing a personal story with an artifact is an especially powerful way to reach visitors. The National Museum of American History successfully used personal stories and objects in tandem in its September 11 exhibition to demonstrate the
powerful effects of the tragedy on a wide range of individuals. In doing so, the museum changed what had been a faceless tragedy for many into one that personally resonated with visitors.

Museums must recognize how many people have a stake in the story of September 11 and involve some of these key stakeholders in the exhibition development process. This includes people whose opinion may not be shared by curators or other museum staff. There are a variety of people who, indirectly or directly, were affected by the events of September 11, including not only survivors and family members of the attacks, but also those who experienced discrimination in their aftermath, military personnel that were sent to Afghanistan and then Iraq, and those abroad affected by changes in U.S. foreign policy. Museums must discuss who the key stakeholders in their exhibition are, which may vary based on the theme of the exhibition. For NMAH, it was the family members and survivors who were the primary stakeholders; for WLAM, it was those who experienced discrimination in the aftermath of the attacks. By including these stakeholders in the development process and providing a venue in which individuals can share their stories, museums can empower visitors and underrepresented communities while simultaneously expanding the outlook of visitors.
6. Use the opportunity to expand your visitors’ horizons.

The interpretation of September 11 provides an opportunity for museums to foster an awareness of some of the important global issues raised by the events. Museums have a unique opportunity to reach visitors in new ways to create empathy and understanding of different cultures. For a country that previously felt impervious to foreign attack, September 11 shocked Americans into the realization of what it means to live in fear of acts of war and terrorism. Such a realization can be used as a powerful entry point for Americans to understand and appreciate the experience of people who live in countries around the world that are constantly threatened by violence and war. As Oakland Museum curator Marcia Eymann noted, Americans often have a myopic, U.S.-centered view of the world.\footnote{Eymann, personal interview.} The emotional impact of September 11 can be used by museums to create increased cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

Museums can also use the events of September 11 to expose prejudice and intolerance in our own nation, as the Wing Luke Asian Museum did in its visitor-response exhibitions. The stories of Arab and Muslim Americans can give greater understanding into the plight of immigrants and people of color who deal with discrimination on a daily basis. Museums can also use their resources to present the culture and
history of such groups to encourage a greater appreciation for the many cultures that comprise the United States. In such a way, museums can promote tolerance in our own country as well as for other cultures in other parts of the world.

Museums can move beyond the events of September 11 to create insight into the impact of politics, intolerance, and violence across different nations and cultures. The Holocaust National Memorial Museum and the Oklahoma City National Memorial are effective because they not only memorialize those events but also explore the causes and effects of violent and destructive tragedies. John Durel, former Director of the Baltimore City Life Museum, asked after September 11, “Beyond our passive role of offering places for solace and togetherness, will we become active in building a better world out of this tragedy?” By using the events of September 11 to raise awareness of the issues surrounding war and violence to create cross-cultural understanding and tolerance, museums can do just that.

7. Learn from the past.

The examination of historical events can lead to a greater comprehension of events in the present. Museums, as institutions that

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preserve and interpret the past, are uniquely positioned to provide this kind of perspective to the public. Both the Oklahoma City National Memorial and the Sixth Floor Museum used their experience in dealing with the interpretation of tragic events to approach the attacks of September 11 through an historical lens. Other institutions, including the Wing Luke Asian Museum, used Japanese-American internment to explore discrimination against Arab and Muslim Americans. Exhibitions that draw comparisons between the terrorist attacks and events in America’s past can succeed in giving visitors greater insight into the events and their consequences. They can also offer hope to a grieving public by portraying the resiliency of Americans and how they have coped in the past during difficult times.

Museums should use the past not only for their audience’s benefit, but for their own as well. A glimpse at museum responses to other national tragedies illuminates the successes and pitfalls in the process of interpreting these topics. To prevent the same mistakes, museums must examine the propagandistic exhibitions during World War II so as to avoid uncritical patriotic indoctrination in the wake of September 11. However, the ways in which museums in the 1940s responded so quickly to the needs of their public can serve as a model for museums today, as well as institutions such as WLAM that have implemented quick-response
exhibition strategies. Museums that study the past can gain a balanced perspective and ensure that they represent September appropriately and sensitively.

8. **Provide an area where visitors can share their feelings and opinions.**

   One of the most successful aspects of the exhibitions at both NMAH and WLAM was the visitor response area. Both institutions recognized the importance of allowing and encouraging visitors to share their own thoughts and feelings. As Red Cross psychologist Susan Hamilton noted, people have a natural need to tell their own story following a tragic and traumatic event. Museums can aid in the healing process by providing a safe environment in which people can express their feelings.

   The display of visitor comments also allows museums to share authority with their audience. No longer providing the final word on a topic, museums are valuing the thoughts and opinions of their visitors and including them in the story. To engage visitors, museums should pose questions to their audience to elicit more thoughtful responses. Asking specific questions can focus attention on an issue and spark dialogue.

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168 Hamilton, telephone interview.
amongst audience members—for instance, NMAH asked visitors how the events of September 11 had changed their lives. Museums should also be sure to develop rules regarding the display of these comments and communicate these to the audience. For example, WLAM did not post any comments that used profanity or that did not thoughtfully contribute to the discussion (i.e., “Bush is stupid”). Museums now provide one of the few public areas in which citizens can voice their opinions and feel safe in doing so. By providing this space, museums prove their relevance and necessity in public life.

9. **Recognize what you can and cannot accomplish in an exhibition.**

Museums must be realistic in their expectations of what can be accomplished in an exhibition. Not every aspect of an historical event can be examined and not every story can be told. Institutions must look to their mission and set clear goals and expectations for exhibitions about September 11. Exhibition developers should commit to one big idea and a few supporting messages to convey to their audience. Unlike other topics, however, the emotional content involved in representing a tragic event is an important factor in the exhibition development process. If the purpose of the exhibition is to provide a space for reflection on a tragic event, the

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169 Chinn, personal interview.
big idea does not have to be especially strong. For instance, the
developers of the NMAH exhibition *Bearing Witness to History*
consciously chose a diluted message for their exhibition due to the
emotional and commemorative nature of the exhibition. Curators should
use their discretion once exhibition goals have been set.

Not every museum should present an exhibition regarding
September 11—individual institutions must closely examine their
missions and resources to gauge the effectiveness of such a display.
Exhibitions are costly and time consuming to develop. In addition, even
temporary exhibitions are regarded by the public as concrete and
authoritative statements and are therefore more susceptible to controversy.
Museums should be aware of what the public is ready to see in an
exhibition and what is better explored in public programs. NMAH
reserved the discussion of the more political and potentially controversial
aspects of September 11 for a series of public forums and discussions. For
many institutions, the development of public programs to explore an event
such as September 11 is more effective and realistic.

The representation of September 11 will not become easy for
museums anytime in the near future. However, their responsibility as
trusted public institutions to provide a safe place in which to explore and
understand tragic episodes means that it is imperative for them to think of appropriate and effective ways to respond to these events both in their immediate aftermath and in the future. As American museums strive to become relevant and engaging to diverse audiences, they must pay attention to current events and how they affect different communities across the nation. A study of how museums’ responses to tragic events have evolved over time and a glimpse into the process of successful September 11 exhibitions provides guidance for museums in the future.
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APPENDICES

A. Interview Questions

B. Artifacts from the September 11, 2001 Collection, National Museum of American History
   1. Damaged Stairwell Sign from the World Trade Center
   2. Twisted Steel from the World Trade Center
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   1. Exhibition Entrance
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F. I Am American: Visitor Responses

G. Exhibition Images, Wing Luke Asian Museum
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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Interview Questions (General)

1. What do you think is the role of the museum in responding to and interpreting tragic events such as September 11?
2. What do you think the public is looking for in these responses?
3. What would you tell a curator who wanted to develop an exhibition about 9/11, either now or in the future? What are the issues that he or she must face?
4. Do you think that the interpretation of September 11 could become controversial? If so, how should museums approach the subject?
5. Though many museums responded immediately in some way to the attacks of 9/11, other institutions felt that there was not adequate perspective to represent the event in a museum. Do you think museums should wait before mounting an exhibition about such a tragic and emotional event? Why or why not?
6. Do you know of any exhibitions about September 11 that were particularly interesting or well done?
7. Did your institution think about mounting a September 11 exhibition?
8. Do you have any suggestions of other people with whom I should speak about my topic?

Interview Questions for 9/11 Exhibition Developers

1. How was the idea for this exhibition generated?
2. What kind of experience were you looking to create?
3. What did you want visitors to take away with them?
4. What were the struggles and challenges you faced when developing it?
5. In creating this exhibition, did you look to past exhibitions at your museum for guidance, or did you look at any models from other institutions?
6. Were you worried that your exhibition would be controversial? Why or why not?
7. Did you talk to potential visitors during the exhibition’s development? If so, what were your findings?
8. How does your exhibition reflect your museum’s mission and primary audience?
9. What has been the public’s and the media’s response to your exhibition?
10. Do you anticipate that your institution will develop additional exhibitions about September 11 in the future? If so, what have you learned that would affect how you approach such future exhibitions?
APPENDIX B

Artifacts from the September 11, 2001 Collection
National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Damaged Stairwell Sign from the World Trade Center
Gift of the Police Department—City of New York
World Trade Center Steel—Column End
Gift of Hugo Neu Schnitzer
American Flag found at the World Trade Center
Transfer from the Federal Bureau of Investigation
Pentagon Fire Truck Panel
Transfer from the U.S. Department of Defense
Briefcase Recovered at the World Trade Center
Gift of Lisa Lefler
Flight 93 Crew Logbook
Recovered from Crash Site near Shanksville, Pennsylvania
APPENDIX C

Exhibition Images, *September 11: Bearing Witness to History*

Exhibition Entrance
Bellevue Wall panel case
My Witness Room, Three Terminals
Tell Us Your Story Room
APPENDIX D

Response Cards, September 11: Bearing Witness to History

How has your life changed because of September 11, 2001?
How did you witness history on September 11, 2001?
Tell us your story. Feel free to write or sketch.
Tell us about yourself

1. What is your age? .................................................................

2. Where do you live? ............................................................... 

3. You are  □ Female    □ Male

4. May we post your comments in the exhibition or on our website?  
   □ Yes           □ No

We appreciate your help in documenting this event for future generations.

Your response will be sent to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, Behring Center, where it will become part of a permanent archive of September 11 stories collected from people across the country and around the world. It may be posted in the exhibition and on the project’s website, http://americanhistory.si.edu/september11. For more information about the project, please visit the website.

September 11: Bearing Witness to History was developed by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, Behring Center, and is circulated by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). The national tour of this exhibition is made possible by the support of the Congress of the United States.

Smithsonian Institution
APPENDIX E

Promotional Rack Card for *September 11: Bearing Witness to History*

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January 31 – April 25, 2004
The East Tennessee History Center
601 South Gay Street
Knoxville, Tennessee

Free Admission

Smithsonian Institution
What does it mean to be an American?

“I am an American; I therefore have the right and responsibility to question the acts of my government. Dissent open to a true essential democracy.”

“Being an American is having the freedom to be who you are.”

“Being an American means blending as humans in our place to worship freely and without inhibitions this life that is grand to us.”

“Being an American means…being able to be friends with people of different backgrounds.”

“Being an American means being allowed to have an opinion, whether learned or ignorant, which you can discuss with these around you. It also brings opportunity and choice.”

“What means being American to me means Diversity which mean is a whole bunch of people from different cultures.” – Jessica, 11 years old

“Being American means having the opportunity to live as an independent woman!” – Virginia, 26 years old

“Freedom – I hope we continue these rights and work for continual improvement” – Thao, 25

“Being American is the responsibility and ability to choose and challenge our leaders. Holding them accountable to act responsible with compassion and integrity. Furthermore we should all act expecting the same from ourselves.” – Steve, 37 years old

“Being an American means that I have responsibility to treat others with the dignity I am provided by our laws & constitution.” – Kathryn
“AGHERICA”

“We are Americans, diversified and true”

“The freedom to do what you want, when you want. You can make your own choices and we can speak the truth.”

“America is a journey, not a destination. With its imperfections, it remains the dream of many to one day be Americans.” – Bill Runyan

“Always striving for more…equality, hope & opportunities.”

“It take equal rights and freedom.” – Adam P. Krely, 10 years old

“Strength from our differences. From many, one. The whole is more than the sum of its parts.” – Tom & Ginnie

“It means we have an opportunity to help other people from here and everywhere else.”

“Freedom, Diversity. That’s what it to be an American, You will be free.” – Andrew, 13 years old

“It means to be peaceful and cool. To be an American and to be confident.”

“To be a person of color in America means to be race conscious in a country that believes in ‘white supremacy.’ To be a Pilipino-American means to understand our history, to transform the community we live in, struggle with joy.”

“Being an American means to be free but still do the right thing.”

“To be an American is to be curious and open-minded about our own immediate world, while accepting that we are no more important on a global scheme than anyone else and that our knowledge is greatly limited by our own experience.”
APPENDIX G

Exhibition Images, Wing Luke Asian Museum

The Wall of Americans,
*I Am American: A Community Journal*
Close-up, Wall of Americans
*I Am American: A Community Journal*
Response area and mailbox

*Veil of Patriotism*
World Map locating State-Sponsored Acts of Discrimination

*The Veil of Patriotism*
PRODUCT

Exhibiting Tragedy: Museums and September 11

Article for submission to History News,
Quarterly publication of the American Association for
State and Local History (AASLH)
In everyone’s lifetime, an event occurs that seems to rupture the delicate fabric of history. For many it was the day that Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor, for others it was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Today, it is hard to imagine that any American would not name September 11, 2001, as a day that changed history. There have been other tragic events in our past—and there are sure to be more—but, as Professor Marita Sturken observes, we can’t help but believe that this day “will be forever understood as one that marks the end of one era and the beginning of another, indeed that September 11, 2001 will be remembered as the beginning of the new world of the 21st century.”

Such a momentous event is one that cannot be ignored by museums; yet, many institutions were left to wonder how to even begin to approach such a sensitive and complex subject. In speaking of the struggle to interpret September 11, James Gardner of the National Museum of American History noted that the rawness of the circumstances had “placed museums in the uncomfortable position of working at the intersection of grief and history.”

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public programs and exhibitions, to represent such tragedy asked museums to explain an event that was unfathomable to a mourning nation.

However, it was to museums that many people turned in the wake of the terrorist attacks. New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman reported just six days after the attacks that New Yorkers were flocking to their city’s museums to find comfort and solace. Many museums, though, wanted to do more than simply offer themselves as quiet spaces for reflection. The enormity of the terrorist attacks forced museums to rethink their public role and challenged them to find appropriate and meaningful ways to address the tragedy in their institutions. A look at how other tragic events have been portrayed in the museum as well as the development of recent September 11 exhibitions can offer recommendations for how museums can respond meaningfully to such events—both in their immediate aftermath and in the years to come.

September 11 was not the first time that museums found themselves reacting to a national tragedy. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, museums across the nation rushed to boost public morale and prepare the citizens of America for wartime through educational programs, demonstrations, and exhibitions. The New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented daily “Safety for the Citizens” film

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programs, which educated visitors on civilian security during wartime. The Cincinnati Art Museum hosted Red Cross First Aid classes while the Brooklyn Botanic Garden presented programs on planting victory gardens.

L. Hubbard Shattuck, Director of the Chicago Historical Society, asserted in 1942 that “in their own communities, historical museums should become the shrines of true Americanism.”

Certainly, museums during World War II were not impervious to the rampant jingoism present in every aspect of American life during the 1940s. In 1942, MoMA presented *Road to Victory*, a blatantly propagandistic exhibition that displayed images of wholesome American life threatened by treacherous Japanese forces. A visceral response to the horror of Pearl Harbor, the exhibition was meant to assure visitors of their nation’s illustrious past, their innocence in the face of international attack, and the inevitability of American victory.

Though they offered a wide range of useful programs and exhibitions throughout the war, museums’ singular focus on patriotic messages left little room for other viewpoints. The interpretation of World War II in American museums since the 1940s has been no less political. Especially following the Vietnam War, the battle over World War II’s

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representation in the public sphere has been fierce. The USS *Arizona* Memorial at Pearl Harbor became a contentious site during the 1980s as many visitors and veterans protested the presence of Japanese naval ships, the inclusion of Japanese artifacts in its museum, and the proliferation of visiting Japanese tourists. In 1995, the infamous controversy over the exhibition of the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum pitted veterans and politicians against historians and curators in a battle over the interpretation of America’s most notorious aircraft. The museum’s unsuccessful mediation between history, memory, scholarship and commemoration resulted in the cancellation of the originally planned display.

The representation of World War II in American museums foreshadows many of the challenges inherent in representing nation-defining tragedies such as September 11. In their immediate aftermath, these emotional events are difficult to contextualize and represent sensitively; in later years, the navigation between history, politics, and memory often results in controversy. However, tragedies such as September 11 also highlight the importance of museums in national life. Following the attacks, Professor Edward Linenthal noted that “our historic sites—always sites of nourishment, education, reflection, refuge, and more recently sites of civic conversation about so many issues—provide sites of
orientation in this new landscape.”

Museums can encourage critical thinking, provide historical perspective, and promote cross-cultural understanding and communal healing in the interpretation of national tragedies.

Examining two institution that presented September 11 exhibitions, the National Museum of American History and the Wing Luke Asian Museum, illuminates the diverse ways in which museums have successfully approached the representation of such a difficult event. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (NMAH) created its exhibition *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* based on its collection. In December of 2001, Congress named NMAH as the primary repository for September 11 artifacts. As a museum with a national focus, the museum collected objects from each of the three impact sites: the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the crash site of Flight 93 near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Prompted by public requests to display the objects, the museum decided to present an exhibition on the one-year anniversary of the attacks.

To develop an exhibition about events still fresh in American memory, however, was a daunting task for NMAH staff. Accustomed to dealing with the distant past, curators felt uncomfortable presenting a

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detached perspective on events that were still very emotional. As an historical institution, staff initially resisted the notion of creating a memorial exhibition; however, it soon became clear that it would be impossible to place September 11 in any sort of historical context. As exhibition Project Director James Gardner asked, “Can you really interpret and explain September 11 one year later?” Curators decided to approach the events from a more personal perspective, concentrating on individual stories and avoiding an authoritative, historical voice.

One of the toughest challenges for staff during the development of the exhibition was to represent the topic sensitively and appropriately. The debate over which artifacts to include in the exhibition was especially difficult as even the most ordinary objects were emotionally charged due to their context. While most NMAH exhibitions contain a large number of artifacts, curators of Bearing Witness consciously chose only forty-five to display. “There was a sense that the objects needed space,” explained Gardner, “that they were powerful objects and that people should interact with them.” The museum also consulted visitors through front-end surveys to determine what objects would be appropriate to display in an exhibition about September 11.

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7 Ibid.
When visitors came to the exhibition they encountered the stories and artifacts of survivors, family members of victims, and rescue and recovery workers (Figure 1). Objects included the damaged camera and press passes of photographer Bill Biggart, who lost his life while documenting the destruction of the World Trade Center, a smashed television screen and tin of melted coins from the Pentagon, memorial artifacts left at the Flight 93 crash site in Pennsylvania, and a twisted steel beam from the World Trade Center (Figure 2). To include more diverse viewpoints that could not be represented by objects, the museum developed five kiosks that contained the stories of a variety of individuals, including military personnel called into action after the attacks, an Arab-American college student concerned about anti-Muslim sentiments in America, and the slow and painful recovery of a burn victim from the Pentagon. One terminal also included an audio component, so visitors could hear recordings of heart-wrenching answering-machine messages left by frantic friends and relatives of people in New York, waiting to hear that their loved ones were safe (Figure 3).

In the “Tell Your Own Story” section, the museum invited visitors to share their own feelings and memories by answering two questions: “How did you witness history on September 11, 2001?” and “How has your life changed because of that day?” Visitors wrote responses on cards.
or used telephones to record their stories. This section allowed visitors to recognize the healing power of telling their stories and showcased the importance of documenting history for future generations.

Initially, staff was very concerned about visitor reaction to the exhibition. “We wanted to help ease people’s pain,” explained curator Kathleen Kendrick, “not contribute to it.” However, these fears proved to be unfounded. While on view at NMAH, *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* attracted over one million visitors, and the exhibition is breaking attendance records wherever it travels. Though difficult to view, visitors appreciate the chance to see the objects firsthand and especially to share their own memories.

In the future, NMAH curators acknowledge that they must present a more historical view of September 11 to explore its causes and consequences. One institution that has already dealt frankly and dialogically with the political and social effects of September 11 is the Wing Luke Asian Museum (WLAM) in Seattle, Washington. While NMAH approaches historical events from a broad national perspective, WLAM is a small, ethnic-specific institution that has achieved wide recognition for its community-oriented approach to exhibition and program development. Executive Director Ron Chew has recently

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8 Kathleen Kendrick, telephone interview with author, 23 April 2004.
advocated for a more agile model of exhibition development that is quick, flexible, and addresses the needs and concerns of the community. This “journalistic” approach can help visitors understand contemporary, prominent issues and can give voice to underrepresented communities.\(^9\)

In 2000, WLAM put these ideas into practice by establishing the New Dialogue Initiative, which aims to create quick-response exhibitions and programs that deal with current community issues. Since funding became available, WLAM has presented two exhibitions under this initiative: *I Am American: A Community Journal* and *Veil of Patriotism*. Both exhibitions were created in response to surveys and community advisory group meetings that outlined the most pressing issues and concerns in the Asian Pacific American community. The exhibitions addressed issues of patriotism, identity, discrimination, and civil liberties in post-September 11 life in America and in the midst of the war on terrorism.

*I Am American: A Community Journal* questioned visitors on what it means to be an American after September 11. Divided into two parts, the first section contained excerpts from newspaper and magazine articles that included reports of hate crimes against Arab Americans, patriotic stories that expressed support for American policy, and discussions of the

loss of civil liberties after September 11. The second section of the exhibition was a response area in which visitors took pictures of each other using a digital camera. After printing out their images, viewers were invited to answer the question: “What does it mean to be an American?” Soon, this “Wall of Americans” was filled with the images and responses of WLAM visitors. As it grew in size, the wall became a visual statement of changing American demographics (Figure 4).

For its second exhibition, WLAM collaborated with the Asian Pacific Islander Community Leadership Foundation (ACLF). ACLF took the *I am American* idea a step further by placing the recent political climate in America into an historical context by referencing historical events that involved state-sponsored prejudice. As explained in the introductory label, *Veil of Patriotism* aimed to show that “tragic events in history have demonstrated that governments in our century impose a ‘veil of patriotism’ (for the good of society) to justify inhumane acts against specific populations.” The exhibition included a map and explanations of some of these major events in world history, including Apartheid in South Africa, Japanese-American internment during World War II, and Aborigine genocide in Australia. The second section explored discrimination in post-September 11 America, from individual acts—hate
crimes against Arab, Muslim, and Asian Americans—to state-sponsored forms of discrimination, including the USA PATRIOT Act.

The response area of the exhibition invited visitors to voice their opinions about the PATRIOT Act and also to take political action. It asked visitors: “What can we learn from the past? What can we do to stop the veiled terror from repeating itself, here in the United States, or throughout the world?” The museum also included postcards and a directory of local legislators to encourage visitors to share their views with their political representatives (Figure 5).

In both exhibitions, WLAM included diverse viewpoints and invited all visitors to voice their personal opinions in efforts to create a thought-provoking dialogue. However, the highly political nature of both exhibitions made it obvious that the museum was representing an opinion of its own. “It’s impossible to be neutral,” says Cassie Chinn, project coordinator for the New Dialogue Initiative. “We try to present viewpoints from both sides, but the museum doesn’t shy away from taking a stand on issues.”

Much of the outrage over hate crimes and the loss of civil liberties after September 11 stems from the museum’s own experience interpreting Japanese-American internment and the fear of the Asian-American community that history would be repeated following

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September 11. Unlike NMAH, whose prominence and national status make it difficult to take a stand on political issues, WLAM is committed to representing the often unheard voices from its community. “Our programming is based on community relationships and what is happening in people’s lives,” says Chinn. “Hate crimes are still out there and the need to discuss them has heightened after September 11.”¹¹

Both the National Museum of American History and the Wing Luke Asian Museum represented the events of September 11 in thoughtful and meaningful ways, though they each approached the tragedy from very different perspectives. NMAH represented the event from a national viewpoint, by telling the stories of diverse individuals and their reactions and responses to September 11. Realizing that emotions ran high and that it would be difficult to place the events in any sort of broad historical context, the museum refrained from taking a political stance on the events, choosing instead to create a memorial exhibition that focused on personal stories. WLAM, however, took the opportunity to address pressing issues in the community surrounding the impact of September 11 on its community. Its marginal status afforded it the opportunity to explore more radical and political views on the consequences of September 11, presented to incite dialogue and political action amongst its visitors.

¹¹ Ibid.
Despite their differences, however, both exhibitions received a positive reception by the public and attracted little controversy.

As these exhibitions evidence, museums are in a unique position to provide a space for reflection as well as an increased understanding of the domestic and global consequences of tragic events. In an age of dwindling public spaces, museums offer safe places for civic dialogue. As we slowly gain more perspective on the events of September 11, these responsibilities become even more vital but no less difficult. Is it possible to explore such tragedy from an historical perspective while remaining aware of its complex emotional aspects? Can museums present political viewpoints on the attacks of September 11 without inciting controversy? How can museums sensitively approach the interpretation of national tragedies?

The diversity of museums in the United States makes it impossible to prescribe a universal role or approach to an event like September 11. Institutional responses will depend on the mission, audience, and resources of each particular institution. What is clear, however, is that telling the story is important. Susan Hamilton, a mental health expert with the Red Cross, notes that “it’s important for people to learn about tragedy and how people overcome it. Museums are giving back something to the
community when they approach these events."\textsuperscript{12} Controversy is a concern, but as Ron Chew has noted, museums that avoid the discussion of important issues risk becoming irrelevant. To ensure sensitive displays and to deflect negative attention, museums should include multiple perspectives and personal stories in their exhibitions and should eliminate the omniscient curatorial voice. Above all, museums must recognize the power they have to promote understanding, tolerance, and cross-cultural awareness in the wake of national tragedy.

In the aftermath of September 11, museums responded proactively to provide places of healing and mourning, of discussion and dialogue, and places where people could come together to share their feelings. These responses illustrate how museums are adapting to current events in the quest to remain relevant and vital institutions. Though museums have succeeded in many ways, their obligations will become no less challenging in the future interpretation of the terrorist attacks. If they continue to be as creative and innovative as they have been, however, the results will be no less fascinating and meaningful.

\textsuperscript{12} Susan Hamilton, telephone interview with author, 30 April 2004.
Figure 1. Exhibition Entrance, September 11: Bearing Witness to History

Figure 2. World Trade Center Steel—Column End
National Museum of American History, Gift of Hugo Neu Schnitzer
Figure 3. My Witness Room, Three Terminals

Figure 4. Close-up, Wall of Americans
Figure 5. Response Area, *Veil of Patriotism*