Several years ago, I was visiting with a friend and colleague, Cary Carson, vice president for research at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. We were talking about some of my recent projects: the contested landscapes of American battlefields, the making of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the debates that raged over the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibition, and a project I had just started, examining the impact and memorialization of the bombing in Oklahoma City. Looking at me with his wry smile, Carson said, “Well, Linenthal, you’ve become quite the ambulance chaser, haven’t you?” I had not, of course, thought of my work in public history in just these terms, but Carson’s comment was not only clever but insightful. Most of my work had dealt in some way with the symbolic resonance of sites of violence, with struggles to memorialize war, genocide, and mass murder.

It would certainly be intellectually elegant, I suppose, to claim that this has been a purely academic interest, one that arose from years of study, research, writing; but it would not be honest. As long as I can recall, I have been fascinated with war, with genocide, with the ways in which the impact of violence shatters old worlds and creates new ones. I recall my immersion as a boy with armies of toy soldiers, wondering, for example, if the armies of Genghis Khan could defeat Napoleon. I remember waiting with eager anticipation for the mail to bring me a Revell model of the USS Missoiri. I recall my first visit to Gettysburg while in high school, how we went to Cemetery Ridge late at night and I felt what one Gettysburg guide had called the “brooding omnipresence” of the place. And like so many other boys of my era, I remember wearing a coonskin cap just like Fess Parker wore on Davy Crockett and imagined myself dying a glorious and redemptive death in a lost cause, be it at Little Bighorn or at the Alamo. While I would not have used the term at the time, when I subsequently read J. Glenn Gray’s The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle, I understood immediately what he meant by “the enduring appeals of battle,” that “astonishment and wonder and awe appear to be part of our deepest being, and war offers them an exercise field par excellence.”

In all of this I was, no doubt, little different from so many boys of my time. Perhaps because I began college in 1965, with controversy over the war in Vietnam beginning to grow, perhaps because I feared transforming the safe attraction of war into the reality of putting my body in harm’s way, I was not moved by the romantic John Wayne image of war and warriors to join the armed forces. And yet the fascination remained, to surface once again in what would become a professionally serendipitous way during my graduate school years in religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Struggling to identify a dissertation topic, my advisor Robert Michaelsen suggested I write about the warrior as a religious figure in American history. As I learned about warriors as sacrificial heroes, cultural models, and indeed sacred figures, I also became fascinated with the evocative landscapes on which rituals celebrating war and warriors were enacted: the nation’s battlefields. When I accepted a faculty position at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, in 1979, my wife and I went to the Custer Battlefield National Monument (now Little Bighorn rather than Custer) on a beastly hot August day during our travels across the country.

The next year, I received research funds to return to Little Bighorn, a trip that ultimately resulted in my book Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields, which examined processes of veneration, defilement, and redefinition at Lexington and Concord, the Alamo, Gettysburg, Little Bighorn, and Pearl Harbor. It was also during this trip that I began what has been for me a richly rewarding, ongoing relationship with the National Park Service (NPS). As I wrote about various contentious issues at NPS sites, I began to appreciate both the promise and perils of doing history in public, a task that demanded a whole other set of questions and strategies than academic historians were used to dealing with. And while I very much enjoyed certain kinds of archival work, I was never interested in being an armchair historian, nor had I any patience for the jargon that made so much academic history inaccessible to the general public. Like public historians on the “front lines,” I cared about communicating with a wide audience.
writing about places and issues that seemed to me important case studies in public history.

Suffice it to say that during my work on Sacred Ground I began to appreciate the public thirst for certain features of American history, revealed in the popularity of living history, battle reenactment, strong regional interest in certain wars or martial figures, and commemorations. Working for the NPS at the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies at Pearl Harbor was my first occasion to witness what I had written about at other sites: the power of fiftieth anniversaries, the last major commemoration at which survivors can hope to implant their memories of the event and its enduring meaning on the site. I will never forget having the opportunity to join NPS underwater archaeologist Larry Murphy in a dive around the USS Arizona, appreciating in a unique way the power of a sacred American relic. (There is still no good written history of sacred national relics in American culture.) And I will never forget the conclusion to a conference on the legacy of Pearl Harbor, held in Honolulu in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies. When a high school choir sang the hauntingly beautiful Civil War song “Tenting on the Old Campground,” American and Japanese veterans of the attack spontaneously made their way to the front of the convention center and stood before us. Whenever I hear the word “reconciliation,” it is this event that comes to mind.

As I was working on the second edition of Sacred Ground in the early 1990s, I was simultaneously immersed in my next project, a history of the making of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Both the late Shaike Weinberg, the museum’s director, and Michael Berenbaum, the museum’s project director, allowed me access to everything: meetings, archives—both catalogued and uncatalogued materials—and I was able to talk freely with the staff during their incredibly intensive formative work in the L street offices. Much of this story was of course not to be found in archival material, but in the remembrances of those who had participated in the project from the founding of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust in 1978 to staff members struggling with so many issues in the making of the permanent exhibition. I also had the opportunity to travel to Poland and talk with museum staff at several of the killing centers. There, I experienced a completely different kind of powerful place, elements of the Holocaust’s toxic landscape that continue to provide historic preservation and interpretive challenges for many European nations.

I wrote about issues of Holocaust location and representation: arguments for and against emplacing a European event on American soil, in what city, in what manner (statue, educational institution, museum, for example), in what location (once Washington, D.C., was chosen). And once issues of location were settled, in what sort of building should the story be told? Should the aesthetic protocols of the Washington Mall affect the message of the building, or should the building be expressive of the event? And what about the museum exhibition itself? Were some photographs too horrible for the American public, for example, and could the exhibition present medical experiments and other horrors without arousing voyeuristic and pornographic emotions? How should the relationship between Jewish and “other” victim groups be portrayed in the museum? Should there be any sort of “redemptive” ending to the story? And what, finally, are the functions of Holocaust memory in American civic culture?

With the help of James Young’s important work on Holocaust memory, I came to better understand what I had been trying to do in these projects. In The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning, Young described himself as a biographer of memorial processes, bringing to life the turbulent history of memorials whose deceptively placid public face hides their own history. This, of course, described so very well my own interests. Better a biographer of memorial processes than an ambulance chaser!

As I was in the last year of my work on Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum, two quite different events helped me continue to understand the world of public history. In 1994 I was asked to deliver the commemorative address at the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor. I had read hundreds and hundreds of commemorative speeches at
various battlefields: ones that were bombastic, ones that strained to connect the event with purported "lessons" germane to contemporary life, jeremiads that lamented the loss of the heroism of whatever greatest generation the speaker was thinking of, and moving speeches that broke through the iron cage of predictable rhetoric to touch something fully human. But I had never given such a speech. My voice was that of a historian, respectful of the commemorative voice, and always interested in analysis of it, but suddenly I was to be a practitioner! What did I, born in 1947, have to say to Pearl Harbor survivors and their families? How could I avoid commemorative cliché, taking the easy way out through repetition of formulaic bromides that would be "safe" but in some ways dismissive of the importance of the occasion? This challenge helped me to better understand the power of the commemorative sensibility, and the inevitable clash between this and the historical voice over all sorts of razor's edge issues.

The second event to expand my understanding of public history was my membership on the advisory committee of the ill-fated Enola Gay exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum, where public outcry by some professional lobbying organizations sparked a national controversy over the interpretation of the past and caused the museum to drastically revise its plans. For well over a year, I was talking constantly with media representatives, writing several opinion pieces, and eventually testifying before a Senate committee about this ugly affair. What I think about this is readily available in my chapter-length history of the event in a book I coedited with Tom Engelhardt, History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past. The impact of this controversy in the world of public history has been significant. Various interest groups, offended by this or that museum exhibition, threaten institutions by declaring that they will turn their objections into "another Enola Gay." Members of Congress, given the opportunity to model for the public responsible civic discourse over a volatile issue, failed miserably, choosing instead to practice character assassination, exhibit the arrogance that comes with celebrity status and power, and offer the effective and cancerous censorious voice as their preferred model of civic disagreement.

Since the spring of 1997, I have been immersed in The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory. During the past four years, I have interviewed approximately 150 people in Oklahoma City, had privileged access to the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation archives, and attended several foundation board meetings and memorial center planning meetings. One of the first archival collections I examined consisted of the spontaneous memorial suggestions that came to the governor's and mayor's office after 19 April 1995. It is an incredible collection, revealing the contents of an American memorial vocabulary, often influenced by the popularity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I also examined representative materials from every category of commemorative offerings left at the fence that surrounded the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building site. As at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, people made this memorial site their own through the materials they left.

This project took me well beyond the recognizable terrain of writing about memorials (although several chapters cover the unique memorial process and the popular acts of memorialization in Oklahoma City) into what were for me new challenges, particularly writing about the diverse impact of the bombing in the city. I examine the "medicalization" of grief, for example, as a therapeutic narrative became a dominant voice and often transformed victims of political violence into patients. I write about narratives of civic renewal, religious redemption, and a toxic narrative through which the story of the bombing and its aftermath were told. I also describe the ideological commodification of the bombing, as it became a useful symbol for those across the political spectrum, "evidence" in ongoing cultural wars over the danger of militias, hate radio, the death penalty, and freedom of speech, for example.

Each of these projects has led me to the next, and each has added to my understanding of the challenge of public history, particularly the challenge of memorializing sites of violence. The Oklahoma City National Memorial Consists not only of commemorative space, but educational and archival space, museum exhibition space, and a research institute. (Courtesy of merryweatherphoto.com.)
Memorial, like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is an example of a new species of activist memorial environments, consisting not only of commemorative space, but educational and archival space, museum exhibition space, and a research institute designed to combat the dangers portrayed in the museum’s exhibition. These memorial environments do much more than just “remember.” They are acts of protest against the anonymity of mass death in the twentieth century. Hence the emphasis on names, faces, life stories. And unlike other sites of mass murder that are often perceived as what cultural geographer Kenneth Foote calls “sites of shame,” and either destroyed or returned to former use, the Murrah site in Oklahoma City is intensely remembered, perhaps unlike any other site of mass murder in the nation’s history.

During the Enola Gay debate, I tried without a great deal of success to convince journalists that when controversy rages over memorials, it does not necessarily mean that something or someone is “wrong,” but that memorial processes open as many wounds as they close, and that controversy often means that people are passionately engaged in the making and meaning of memorials. I have tried to impress this upon students by asking them to form small groups and design both a memorial process and an actual memorial for those killed at Columbine (and one of the issues they have to decide upon is whether or not to memorialize the perpetrators and if so, how). Such an exercise brings students, indeed brings all of us, into the rich, challenging, and volatile world of public history.

After the horrific events of September 11, I was struck by how so many reactions echoed what I had learned about the impact of the bombing in Oklahoma City. The language of “healing process” and “closure,” and the narrative of civic renewal, “yes, it was horrible, but . . . ” sought once again to contain comforting narratives what Hannah Arendt once called “an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.” Once again, tremendous solace was taken in being a member of an imagined bereaved community, as people were “enfranchised” to enter into this shattering event by the pseudo-intimacy of media connection. Bereavement perhaps, is one of the only ways that Americans can imagine themselves as “one,” a condition that seemingly trumps divisions of race, class, gender, and ideology.

It is comforting to think of a nation united in a recognizable landscape of martial enthusiasm against recognizable perpetrators who have committed a crime against humanity. It was comforting to focus on the moving stories of rescue and recovery, stories of tremendous power, whether celebrated in Oklahoma City, New York, at the Pentagon, or in a field in Pennsylvania. And yet there were other, less digestible ways of engaging the events to come. Gradually, the toxic impact of the event on not only family members and survivors, but on rescue and recovery workers, those in the “helping” professions, and among the public will become clear. The ripple effect of 168 dead in Oklahoma City was absolutely stunning. How can we begin to measure the impact of several thousand? And we will become aware—the signs are all around us—that events like this both bring communities together and rip them apart at the same time. For every act of kindness and courage, there is a murder of a Sikh because he was wearing a turban, or the unforgivable commentary of a Jerry Falwell, demonizing whole groups of Americans.

And, just as in the aftermath of Oklahoma City, the event becomes an occasion for a cacophony of voices once again exploring the changed terms and conditions of American identity: the wisdom or folly of past administrations’ judgments in foreign relations, the wisdom or folly of war, the proper balance between security and civil liberty in a newly alien and dangerous landscape.

I, like so many others, turned immediately to the rhetoric of the new and unprecedented, and in some ways, this is appropriate. Technology makes real what could only previously be imagined in apocalyptic consciousness. And yet it is exactly at times of crisis that our historic sites and stories do such valuable work. They can remind us of other new and alien landscapes upon which the nation struggled, some, but not all of them taking shape during war. They can caution us against settling for easy, viscerally satisfying ways of making sense of this alien landscape. They can, ideally, remind us to pay attention to the “better angels of our nature.”

A new species of activist memorial environment has developed in recent decades. These sites do more than just “remember.” They are acts of protest against the anonymity of mass death in the twentieth century.

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OAH Magazine of History • Winter 2002 13