



## Who Owns America's Past?

*Robert C. Post*

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In 1994, when the National Air and Space Museum announced plans to display the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 sent to destroy Hiroshima with an atomic bomb, the ensuing political uproar left the museum's parent Smithsonian Institution entirely unprepared. As the largest such complex in the world, the Smithsonian cares for millions of objects and has displayed everything from George Washington's sword to moon rocks to Dorothy's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*. Why did this particular object arouse such controversy? From an insider's perspective, Robert C. Post's *Who Owns America's Past?* offers insight into the politics of display and the interpretation of history.

Never before has a book about the Smithsonian detailed the recent and dramatic shift from collection-driven shows, with artifacts meant to speak for themselves, to concept-driven exhibitions, in which objects aim to tell a story, displayed like illustrations in a book. Even more recently, the trend is to show artifacts along with props, sound effects, and interactive elements in order to create an immersive environment. Rather than looking at history, visitors are invited to experience it.

*Who Owns America's Past?* examines the different ways that the Smithsonian's exhibitions have been conceived and designed—whether to educate visitors, celebrate an important historical moment, or satisfy donor demands or partisan agendas. Post gives the reader a behind-the-scenes view of internal tempests as they brewed and how different personalities and experts passionately argued about the best way to present the story of America.

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