

DOONESBURY



The Memory of History

In the last few years, there has been an exponential increase in the number of people involved in what is coming to be called "public history." Often publicly funded, these individuals have been working on historical documentaries, oral histories, archival and bibliographic projects, neighborhood studies and exhibits, policy-related historical research in business and government, and so on. This has led to a flood of new kinds of historical products, generally meant for various public audiences, rather than the usual circle of professional academic specialists.

As both a participant in and observer of this phenomenon, I have become concerned about the relatively casual way in which the public history impulse has been discussed. Simply put, far more attention has been paid to the "how" than to the "why" of public history. The latter question has frequently been met through formulaic appeals to unexceptionable goals, such as encouraging a wider sharing of knowledge and a broader participation in the process of history-making; giving an empowering sense of their own history to groups denied this by the form, dissemination, and structural biases of conventional scholarship; and providing business or government with a sense of the recent past that is usable in complex policy analyses. But these all have the somewhat hollow ring of justification, begging what ought to be prior questions about the very nature of historical sensitivity and consciousness in American society today, and about how, why, and whether this ought to be, needs to be, and can be altered, and if so to what specific ends. These questions have been finessed in a great many public history efforts, including, sometimes especially, those developed in the interest of facilitating progressive social change. Whether top-down or bottom-up, most of the energy in public history

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has been directed toward what could be called the "supply-side" dynamics of the presumably unbalanced market for historical intelligence.

The supply-side reference is only partially facetious. Efforts to supply more and better public history will be no more likely than Reaganomics to redress the inequities and distortions in our public culture unless they manage to address as well some fundamental paradoxes in the way Americans—in all their dominant and not-so-dominant cultures—have managed variously to invoke, revoke, and generally shrink from provoking a serious reckoning with their past.

To put the matter this way—to view the capacity to engage and make use of history as at once structured, variable, and problematic—is to suggest the centrality of the relationship between history and the process of memory, individual and collective. What matters is not so much the history that is placed before us, but rather what we are able to remember, and what role that knowledge plays in our lives. I will argue in this essay that the relationship between history and memory is peculiarly and perhaps uniquely fractured in contemporary American life, and that repairing it needs to be a major goal of a public history concerned with enhancing our ability to imagine and create a different future through a re-use of the past. To see why this is so requires some exploration of the problem of historical consciousness itself, an expedition that may help remove public history from the closed, neoclassical circle of supply and demand.¹

Let me begin this excursion with two stories that are at first glance contradictory but on closer examination make the same point.

The first incident, involving a student who forgot who won and who lost the war in Vietnam, happened during a seminar several years ago. The class had read a good portion of Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*. They came in eager to discuss the book's chilling dissection of America's almost purposeful ethnocentrism as this had contributed to the devastation of Vietnam. None was more stirred than a student who expressed her particular shock at the cynicism with which American military and diplomatic personnel manipulated a succession of South Vietnamese governments. "That's just outrageous," she exclaimed. "Does that *still* go on there? Is our ambassador *still* giving them orders like that?"

There was a stunned silence from the other students; you did not then have to be over twenty or twenty-five to remember vividly the war's end in 1975. Somebody gently pointed out that we didn't have an ambassador there any more, that in fact we had no real influence at all, given that the North and the National Liberation Front had won and taken over. The student was embarrassed. Of course she knew that, and almost immediately she began to recall

and display for the class a series of media images, as if to confirm her knowledge—the helicopter on the roof, the ambassador with the plastic-wrapped flag (an image transposed in memory from the fall of Cambodia), and so on. In the more serious discussion that followed, she noted that although she had followed the war closely while it was going on, on reflection it was clear that she had scarcely thought about it since the day it ended. It seemed important to her to point out that she really did know the history—it was just that her sense of it had become remote, inaccessible, and ultimately garbled. The lapse, she insisted, was only one of memory.

The second story comes from a 1977 television documentary by Bill Moyers, a powerful study of the CIA's secret war against Castro, which focused particularly on the Cuban-exile terrorists trained, financed, encouraged, and then suddenly abandoned by the CIA. The program included a long interview with a former high-ranking CIA official who had played a key policy-making role in these activities. With a liberal's sense of disbelief, Moyers asked him how it could have happened—the cloak-and-dagger Mafia connection, the comic-opera beard-powder operation, and the quite uncomical assassination plots. How could it conceivably be justified under any construction of U.S. policy, given our presumed values and beliefs?

Interestingly, the official—no Gordon Liddy, he—did not attempt to offer any justification. He nodded all through Moyers' litany of horrors, and then replied, in effect (I have no transcript at hand), "Well, it can't be justified or defended. But," he added, shaking his head sagely, "you've got to see it in the context of the period. People back then just had a thing about communism. They were willing to do anything. It was just, you know, the spirit of the times." This, from an official of an agency that had plotted to overthrow Salvador Allende only a few years previously, an agency (and a government) whose subsequent and ongoing response to what it presumes to be communism (especially in Latin America) demonstrates how little it has learned from the darkest days of the 1950s.

These are, then, opposite stories. In one the subject forgets; in the other he remembers well, setting his recollections in supposedly helpful historical perspective. But somehow the result is the same: in each, the past is almost entirely severed from the present, sealed in a kind of protective wrapping, either of forgetfulness or artificial distance. All this is hardly exceptional, of course. The most casual reflection locates these two anecdotes within a broad pattern that can be found extending from popular culture to professional scholarship, a pattern wherein selective amnesia and artificial distance can combine to render even last month's history a two-dimensional caricature. The result, far from coincidentally, is a present that seems to float in time—

unencumbered, unconstrained, and uninstructed by any active sense of how it came to be.

These stories from several years back suggest some of the dilemmas public history needs to be confronting now. Indeed, the problem of how the Vietnam War is coming to be remembered and understood as history is worth closer examination here. If so much that is threatening about this recent history can be blocked out now, with the evidence all around us and the experience still painfully fresh, how can we expect people to relate to the challenging but fragile visions of a more complex past, resurrected and presented by imaginative public history projects? Will they not be ignored, absorbed, deflected, or denatured even more easily, and at precisely the point where they threaten to make a real difference in contemporary life? If public history is to avoid this fate, we need to understand more clearly the processes of denial and disengagement that the current "digestion" of the Vietnam War shows to be well advanced politically, culturally, and intellectually.

In the political arena, for instance, where major conflicts in a democratic society are presumably engaged, the war and its roots were never legitimately discussable. At first these concerns were out of bounds because the war was still going on. Then they were out of bounds because the war was over and needed to be "put behind us." Neither the war nor the entire complex of historical questions it raised about the relationship of the United States to the forces of change in the Third World were directly engaged in any of the five or six presidential campaigns of this era, or in the ones immediately following.² They had to be forced to the surface by an extraordinary, extra-institutional mass movement and faded from view once its immediate objective was achieved. The subsequent invention of the "post-Vietnam syndrome" and, more recently, the posing of the question "Another Vietnam in Central America?"—a question at once imprecise and over-literal—show some of the consequences of this depoliticization of experience for both left and right.

Mass-mediated popular culture offers other insights into how complex historical experience is processed for acceptable public remembering. Films like *The Deerhunter* and *Apocalypse Now* said almost nothing about the real history and impact of the war. But they have an enormous amount to teach, in all their pretentious posturing, about how we have been encouraged to "deal with" such a traumatic collective experience. Each film is willfully and explicitly antihistorical; in a context where the forces of history virtually scream to be noticed, solitary individuals are the heroic focus, men kept deliberately isolated from that history, apparently so they can stand as metaphors for the human condition or some other abstraction the filmmakers imagined might be obscured by contact with the real world.