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Museums

‘Nation to Nation’: Full of the intriguing, often maddening details of history

A visitor views Wampum belts, fans and other diplomatic tools of the treaty process at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s “Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations.” (Paul Morigi/AP)

By Philip Kennicott September 23 Follow @PhilipKennicott

When the National Museum of the American Indian opened a decade ago this month, the tone, design and scholarship of the exhibitions were unlike anything else in Washington. Disgusted with ham-handed and often condescending treatment from traditional anthropologists, and determined to be the author of their own self-representation in the nation’s capital, the leaders of the NMAI allowed individual tribes extraordinary input and

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power over what viewers saw in the museum's galleries. The results were controversial: It was, in many ways, the ultimate postmodern museum experience, with no central narrative, no omniscient voice and no absolute appeals to the voice of science and history. But from the visitor's point of view, it was also bewildering.

With a new exhibition on the history of treaties between the U.S. government and native communities, the Smithsonian franchise has done a museological volte-face. "Nation to Nation," which opened Sunday, falls squarely in the mainstream of exhibition design: a chronological walk through history, supported by documents, artifacts, photographs and other images, leading to a clear and compelling argument. The history of treaties, like the history of native people on this continent, is a troubled one, full of sincere promise and wretched betrayal; but treaties are ongoing, and just as there are still dynamic native communities all across the country, there are still treaties in force that give them autonomy, dignity and hope for the future.

Judged side by side with other Smithsonian exhibitions, this first foray into a more mainstream presentation is successful. There are small gaffes, but these are easily remedied. In the future, the designers need to attend more diligently to the control and leakage of sound; it can be difficult to read wall texts over the pervasive noise of the videos. They might also reconsider the placement of specially designed lectern-like introductory stations, which weren't the obvious first stop for visitors entering new rooms or thematic groupings. In a few cases, one also

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wished for a bit more identifying material: The 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua, an attempt to secure peace with the Iroquois (or the Haudenosaunee, as they are referred to in the exhibition), includes beautiful photographs of a northern lake, but a map would have helped locate it (Canandaigua is on the northern end of one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York).

But those are things to be tweaked, not greatly regretted. Otherwise, the presentation is clear, comprehensive and full of the intriguing and often maddening details of history. The exhibition is divided into three large chapters: the optimism and apparent goodwill of the early treaties, made by the young republic to secure peace, security and coexistence; the “bad paper” treaties of the 19th century, which were often little more than formalized theft; and the 20th-century legacy, in which native political and cultural leaders used existing treaties to negotiate and secure greater autonomy and independence from federal and state control.

Throughout this larger structure is a consistent use of contrasting “viewpoint” panels, with the Native understanding juxtaposed with the official U.S. or prevailing non-Native view. It’s an effective strategy that allows both for dispassionate presentation and considerable historical complexity. Before learning about individual treaties, visitors are introduced to two radically different worldviews, including leadership styles, different understandings of land and ownership, preferences for spoken or written language and attitudes to diplomacy and promises. Native Americans were deeply connected to land and had a broad sense of territorial possession, but this wasn't formalized in European terms on paper, or through deeds; oral agreements weren't just a lesser or less formal version of the written contract, but more substantial, more binding than the sealed promise; and leadership was highly devolved and decentralized, not concentrated in a single leader or his delegated representative.

The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. (Paul Fetters)

It wasn't, of course, just a matter of cultural difference or miscommunication that led to the 19th-century eviction, dispossession and genocide of native people. It was greed and the deeply embedded American conviction, abetted by the Christian religion and enforced with military might, that the white man had a superior right to the land because he was more civilized and could make better use of it.

After a room detailing the earliest treaties, enacted in the naive belief that perhaps two very different modes of life could be made compatible, a video helps visitors segue to the much darker chapters of Manifest Destiny, the villainous Andrew Jackson (author of so much misery), the recurring tension between the states (always greedy for more land) and the federal government (technically and ethically obliged to honor existing treaties). Negotiation gave way to intimidation, bribery, trickery and lying. Treaties were merely a fig leaf: "They wanted all of it, they wanted everything," says Suzan Shown Harjo, guest curator of the exhibition.

And so we learn that the Cherokee Trail of Tears (another Andrew Jackson production) wasn't exceptional; the 1838 Potawatomi Trail of Death, one of the more egregious and effective campaigns of "removal" that defined 19th-century relations between the U.S. and the Native nations, was just as criminal. Beginning in 1816, the Potawatomi of the Great Lakes region made dozens of new agreements, ceding large amounts of land in exchange for smaller reserves; but by the 1830s they were simply being forced out wholesale, at the point of muskets by armed militias.

The early decades of the 20th century weren't much better. A haunting 1900 photograph, reproduced at large scale, shows Native school girls praying beside their beds at an Indian school in Phoenix. For those who had survived the removals, the forced migrations beset by disease and death, the re-concentration on often desperately inhospitable new lands, and the further encroachment of efforts to privatize reservation lands, there was yet more: religious and cultural extermination. Greed and expansionism were not enough; God's gentle people wanted souls, minds and memory, too. And by the middle decades of the last century came another appalling chapter: "Termination," an effort by Congress to eliminate the independent status of Native tribes altogether.

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Reaction against termination, the curators argue, was the turning point, the beginning of a newly sophisticated Native awareness and resistance, and an embrace of historical treaties as a bulwark against the decimation of culture. By insisting on the treaties' ongoing validity, they also laid the logical groundwork for a new era of economic self-sufficiency, and the legalized gaming that has been so prevalent and lucrative. The inclusion, among the artifacts, of poker chips and playing cards from the Agua Caliente casino in Southern California feels a bit like a joke; but it's a joke rich with sweet revenge, as greed and stupidity become something to harvest rather than fear.

The "feel-good" flavor of the last chapter, the celebration of resurgent Native communities after so much darkness, is a holdover, perhaps, from the earlier presentation, which stressed the ongoing presence of Indians in American life. But there is something celebratory about the tone, and the celebratory is always suspect in a museum; it's too easy to convert history into cheap narrative uplift.

Perhaps it's justified in this case, though it might have been tempered by more directly posing the obvious hard questions that non-Native visitors should contemplate: Has the long history of wrongs been expiated? How do those of us who benefited from the genocide make sense of our own claims to land and property?

For people who have followed the evolution of the National Museum of the American Indian, there will also be a few moments of dissonance. Although the exhibition incorporates multiple viewpoints and understandings, the fundamental perspective is now much closer to the master-narrative style of Western intellectual discourse;

the spoken word gives way to text-dense written panels. With the introduction of a standard museological approach into the NMAI, one begins to miss the old multivalent style of the exhibitions a decade ago.

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But museums need audiences, and the NMAI was struggling to find them. So of course it had to move toward a more traditional exhibition style, toward a more Western discourse, toward a more non-Native centralization and control over the message. It couldn't really have happened any other way. Which is the same, frustrating and deeply unsatisfying answer some of us give to the foundational historic tragedy of the United States.

Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United Statesand American Indian Nations

Through fall 2018. National Museum of the American Indian, Fourth Street and Independence Avenue SW. Call 202-633-1000 or visit nmai.si.edu. Free.

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This article was posted on washingtonpost.com, November 13, 2014