

The National Museum of the United States Army: Tradition and Modernity in the Presentation of Historical Military Collections in the Context of Shaping National Identity and Protecting Historical Memory

Jacek Dworzecki, Karol Kujawa, Bernard Wiśniewski,
Izabela Nowicka and Wojciech Horyń

Prof. Jacek Dworzecki, PhD.
Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava
Slovakia
e-mail: jacek.dworzecki@akademiazp.sk
ORCID: 0000-0002-9357-5713

Assoc. Prof. Izabela Nowicka, PhD.
Military University of the Land Forces
Poland
e-mail: izabela.nowicka@awl.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-8974-0803

Ph.D. Karol Kujawa
WSB University, Dąbrowa Górnicza
Poland
e-mail: kkujawa@wsb.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-3035-0151

Assoc. Prof. Wojciech Horyń, PhD.
Military University of the Land Forces
Poland
e-mail: wojtech.horyn@awl.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-9887-5889

Prof. Bernard Wiśniewski, PhD.
WSB University, Dąbrowa Górnicza
Poland
e-mail: bwisniewski@wsb.edu.pl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0011-7271>

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The National Museum of the United States Army: Tradition and Modernity in the Presentation of Historical Military Collections in the Context of Shaping National Identity and Protecting Historical Memory

This article critically analyses the mission, governance, exhibition strategies and security model of the National Museum of the United States Army (NMUSA), focusing on the institution's role in shaping national identity and managing historical memory. The study draws on a March 2026 study visit, participant observation, semi-structured expert interviews and institutional and legal documents. The museum's official statements and staff accounts are treated as empirical material requiring interpretation rather than as neutral descriptions of reality. Using Laurajane Smith's concept of authorised heritage discourse, Tony Bennett's analysis of the museum as an apparatus of cultural governance, Sharon Macdonald's concept of difficult heritage and Robert N. Bellah's theory of civil religion, the article examines how NMUSA legitimises the US Army through narrative selection, inclusive representation, institutional authority and emotional experience. The analysis finds that the museum makes previously marginalised soldiers visible but generally incorporates histories of segregation, discrimination, Japanese American internment and colonial violence into a reconciliatory narrative of loyalty, reform and national unity. Its immersive and multisensory technologies can increase accessibility and engagement, but they also create conditions for identification with the soldier's perspective, the gamification of military action and the marginalisation of civilian suffering and political responsibility.

Keywords: National Museum of the United States Army; critical museology; authorised heritage discourse; difficult heritage; security; immersive technologies; national identity

Introduction

Military museums have never been merely neutral repositories of weapons, uniforms, documents and personal memorabilia. From their nineteenth-century origins, they have selected, ordered and interpreted the past in ways that have supported particular political communities. The Heeresgeschichtliches Museum in Vienna, for example, established in 1856, developed within a dynastic and monarchical framework. Its collections and displays helped legitimise the Habsburg state by emphasising loyalty to the emperor, continuity of military tradition and the integrative role of the army in a multinational empire.¹ The Musée de l'Armée in Paris, established in 1905, performed a different but equally political function. Created in the context of the Third Republic, it linked military history to republican patriotism, national recovery after the Franco-Prussian War and the construction of civic unity. The contrast between these museums demonstrates that military collections may serve different regimes, but they do not cease to participate in the production of political legitimacy.²

Since the 1970s, military museums have increasingly emphasised education, contextualisation, social history and visitor participation. Displays once addressed primarily to specialists have been replaced by interpretive environments that seek to explain the relationship between armed forces and society. Weapons and uniforms remain important, but they are increasingly embedded in accounts of political decision-making, everyday life, technological change, gender, race and the experience of combat. This transformation should not, however, be interpreted as the disappearance of ideology. It is more accurately understood as a change in the techniques through which museums produce authority, emotional identification and a sense of belonging.³

In the United States, the public memory of war was long organised around monuments, national cemeteries, battlefield parks and memorial landscapes. Arlington National Cemetery and Gettysburg National Military Park are prominent examples of institutions that connect military sacrifice with national history. During the twentieth century, separate museums devoted to particular branches of the armed forces and specific conflicts expanded considerably. The National Museum of the United States Army (NMUSA), opened to the public in 2020 at Fort Belvoir in Virginia, represents a culmination of this process. It presents the history of the US Army through artifacts, personal stories, educational programmes and extensive digital and immersive media.⁴

The NMUSA is a particularly important case for critical museology because it combines several characteristics that are often considered signs of a contemporary and socially responsive museum: attention to diverse groups, interactive learning, personal testimony, visitor-oriented interpretation and multisensory technologies. At the same time, it is institutionally embedded within the US Army and the Department of Defense. This dual position raises the central

¹ See: MCISAAC, P. M. Preserving the Bloody Remains: Legacies of Violence in Austria's Heeresgeschichtliches Museum. In: *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Neueren Germanistik*, 2011; BIEDERMANN, B. Collecting and Exhibiting "Austria": A Museological Perspective on Collections from the House of Habsburg to a "House of Austrian History". In: *Journal of the History of Collections*, 30(1), 2018, pp. 153–166.

² MUSÉE DE L'ARMÉE. *Histoire du Musée de l'Armée*. Paris: 2015, pp. 9–18; CHARLE, C. *La République des universitaires 1870–1940*. Paris: Seuil, 2018, pp. 112–118; MUSÉE DE L'ARMÉE. *Histoire du Musée de l'Armée*. Paris: 2015, pp. 9–18; CHARLE, C. *La République des universitaires 1870–1940*. Paris: Seuil, 2018, pp. 112–118.

³ Interview with Olivier Stein, curator of the exhibition of the Bavarian Army Museum in Ingolstadt [obtained on March 2, 2026].

⁴ In the United States, most military museums established after World War II are in areas where the most significant historical events took place. Interview with Tad Schnauffer II, PhD, Strategy and Research Manager at the University of South Florida's Global and National Security Institute [obtained on September 24, 2025].

problem of the article: whether an inclusive and technologically advanced military museum becomes a space of genuinely critical reflection, or whether inclusion and immersion constitute updated methods of legitimising the military institution and the state narratives associated with it.

Research Objective and Questions

The objective of this article is to examine the NMUSA as an institution of public memory. The museum's mission, governance, educational programming, volunteer participation, security arrangements and exhibition technologies are analysed as interconnected mechanisms through which historical authority is produced and the contemporary US Army is presented to the public.

The study addresses four research questions. First, through which selections, omissions, narrative sequences and institutional voices does the NMUSA construct an authorised and state-sanctioned account of US Army history? Second, does the inclusion of African American, Japanese American, Latino and Native American soldiers constitute a sustained confrontation with segregation, internment, discrimination and colonial violence, or does it incorporate these histories into a reconciliatory narrative of patriotic service? Third, how do simulation, virtual and augmented media, three-dimensional visualisation and multisensory design organise visitors' attention and emotional identification, and under what conditions might they gamify or trivialise war and suffering? Fourth, how do Army governance, Department of Defense employment, public funding, veteran volunteering, collection management and security practices reinforce the authority of the museum's narrative?

The article argues that the NMUSA combines genuine educational and commemorative functions with ideological and nation-building work. Its contemporary character does not remove the political function historically associated with military museums. Instead, it changes the language and techniques of legitimation: overt dynastic or elite-centred glorification is replaced by narratives of social diversity, equality, individual testimony, institutional reform, service, sacrifice and shared civic belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Heritage, Power, Difficult Memory and Civil Religion

Research on national museums has repeatedly demonstrated that such institutions are active participants in nation-building processes. Studies by Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius describe national museums as strategic symbols through which states mobilise history, legitimacy, continuity and collective identity.⁵ Fiona McLean and Annie E. Coombes similarly argue that museums do not merely reflect pre-existing identities. Rather, they participate in defining the boundaries of national belonging, identifying foundational events, legitimising particular historical narratives and determining which social differences are made visible or marginalised.⁶

A central concept within this theoretical framework is Laurajane Smith's authorised heritage discourse. Smith emphasises that heritage should not be understood as a passive collection of objects inherited from the past, but as a cultural and political process through which institutions

⁵ ELGENIUS, G.; ARONSSON, P. (eds). *National Museums and Nation-Building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*. London–New York: Routledge, 2015.

⁶ McLEAN, Fiona. Museums and the Construction of National Identity: A Review. In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 1998, no. 3(4), pp. 244–252; COOMBES, A. E. Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities. In: *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. D. Preziosi; C. Farago. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

define what is valuable, authentic, representative and nationally significant. Authorised heritage discourse privileges particular experts, institutions, material objects and interpretive traditions, while presenting the resulting selections as natural, consensual or self-evident. This perspective shifts analytical attention away from the question of whether institutional narratives are simply true or false and toward the mechanisms through which specific interpretations of the past acquire authority. Such mechanisms may include the selection of exemplary historical figures, the sequencing of events, the use of official terminology, the privileging of institutional voices, the treatment of historical injustice and the emotional organisation of the visitor's experience.⁷

On the other hand, Tony Bennett's concept of the exhibitionary complex provides a complementary perspective. Bennett interprets museums as institutions of cultural governance that educate and regulate citizens by arranging objects, bodies, knowledge and modes of observation within a publicly accessible order. Museum power is not exercised solely through explicit political statements. It is also embedded in spatial organisation, exhibition design, classification systems, interpretive language and prescribed patterns of visitor behaviour. In this sense, museums produce disciplined ways of seeing. They encourage visitors to observe history from particular positions, recognise selected social virtues and understand themselves as members of a broader political and moral community. Architecture, ceremonial language, institutional testimony, security practices and interactive technologies may therefore contribute to the normalisation of particular institutions, values and political arrangements.⁸

Moreover, Sharon Macdonald's work on difficult heritage offers a framework for assessing how museums address histories that disrupt celebratory national narratives. Difficult heritage refers to pasts that are socially and politically troubling because they implicate a community, institution or state in violence, exclusion, discrimination or wrongdoing. Such histories cannot be evaluated solely by determining whether they are included in an exhibition. The more important analytical question concerns how they are framed. They may be presented as unresolved structural problems, morally disruptive events, isolated historical deviations or obstacles that have allegedly been overcome through reform and national progress. A museum may therefore acknowledge segregation, persecution, displacement or internment while simultaneously reducing their critical force by incorporating them into a reassuring narrative of reconciliation, inclusion and institutional improvement.⁹

Robert N. Bellah's concept of civil religion helps explain the symbolic vocabulary through which museums may connect diverse historical experiences to a unified national narrative. Civil religion is not equivalent to a particular religious denomination or formal theology. It is a public system of meanings, rituals, exemplary figures, collective memories and moral values through which the nation is represented as a community of sacrifice, obligation and historical destiny. Within museums devoted to political, military or national history, concepts such as service, honour, duty, courage, loyalty and sacrifice may function as civic-sacred categories. They provide a symbolic language through which social diversity can be incorporated into a shared national story without relying on explicit theological claims.¹⁰

⁷ SMITH, L. *The Uses of Heritage*. London–New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁸ BENNETT, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London–New York: Routledge, 1995.

⁹ MACDONALD, Sharon. *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*. London–New York: Routledge, 2009; SMITH, L. *Uses of Heritage*. London–New York: Routledge, 2007.

¹⁰ BELLAH, R. N. Civil Religion in America. In: *Daedalus*, 117(3), 1988, pp. 97–118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20025171>.

The representation of minority groups may have a particularly ambivalent role within such narratives. On the one hand, the inclusion of previously marginalised actors may correct their exclusion from public memory and expand the recognised boundaries of national history. On the other hand, their experiences may be incorporated primarily through examples of loyalty, service, heroism and sacrifice. In such cases, inclusion can simultaneously reinforce a civil-religious narrative in which commitment to the state becomes the principal measure of political belonging. The recognition of diversity does not therefore automatically produce a critical or pluralistic interpretation of the past. It may also provide a more inclusive language for legitimising an existing national order.¹¹

Taken together, these approaches establish the central critical premise of the study: museums should not be assessed against an unrealistic ideal of political neutrality. They should instead be analysed as institutions that select, order, authorise, spatially organise and emotionally mediate the past. The principal question is therefore not whether a museum possesses an ideological dimension, but how its ideological work is performed. This requires examining which voices are granted authority, which contradictions are exposed or contained, which forms of violence are contextualised or depoliticised and whether visitors are provided with interpretive resources that enable them to question the institutions, values and historical narratives represented in the exhibition.

Research Methodology and Limitations

The article is based on a qualitative critical case study of the NMUSA. Empirical material was collected during a study visit to the Washington, DC area in March 2026 and included participant observation of permanent galleries and educational spaces, semi-structured expert interviews and analysis of institutional materials and legal acts regulating the museum's organisation and operation. Interviews were conducted with museum employees and associates, including representatives of communications and visitor services, as well as volunteers who were US Army veterans. Topics included governance, volunteer work, collection management, security, educational strategies, visitor engagement and multimedia installations. Comparative interviews with representatives of European military museums, including Olivier Stein of the Bavarian Army Museum in Ingolstadt, were used to contextualise rather than rank the institutions.

The analytical procedure combined thematic coding with critical discourse and exhibition analysis. Field notes, interview statements, institutional documents, spatial sequencing, labels, selected objects, personal stories and interactive installations were examined using the five categories defined above. Particular attention was paid to discrepancies between declared aims – such as inclusion, education, pluralism and reflection – and the narrative effects produced by selection, juxtaposition, omission, emotional framing and the assignment of visitor roles.

Triangulation was used to prevent the museum's official narrative from becoming the article's analytical conclusion. Institutional claims were compared with observable exhibition choices and with historically conflictual contexts, including Army segregation, the incarceration of Japanese Americans, persistent racial discrimination and federal policies toward Indigenous peoples. Staff and volunteer testimony was used to reconstruct organisational practice and institutional self-understanding, not to verify the museum's neutrality or inclusiveness.

Institutional context formed a separate level of analysis. The fact that staff members are civilians rather than active-duty soldiers was considered alongside their formal employment

¹¹ Ibidem.

within the Department of Defense, the role of the US Army Center of Military History, Army budget funding, and the participation of trained veteran volunteers. Civilian employment was therefore not treated as proof of institutional independence. It was interpreted as one component of a professionalised system through which the Army manages its historical representation without requiring uniformed personnel to perform every curatorial or visitor-facing function.

The study has several limitations. It is based on one intensive visit rather than repeated longitudinal observation, and it does not include a representative visitor survey, reception interviews, eye-tracking or experimental measurement of the effects of immersive media. It also does not provide a complete quantitative content analysis of every label, artifact and digital installation. Claims about audience effects are therefore formulated as interpretations of the positions and emotional possibilities created by exhibition design, not as proof that all visitors respond identically. The conclusions concern dominant institutional patterns observed during the visit and should remain open to verification through future audience research and comparative analysis.

Literature Review

In Europe, the issue of the relationship between museums, collective memory and national identity is primarily explored within the fields of heritage studies, memory studies and critical museology. Among the most important works in this area are: *National Museums and Nation-building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*,¹² edited by G. Elgenius and P. Aronsson, in which national museums are analysed as strategic national symbols and tools of nation-building; and an article by F. McLean, Museums and the Construction of National Identity: A Review,¹³ portraying museums as active participants in the negotiation of identity-related meanings. Also of significant importance is A. E. Coombes's study *Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities*,¹⁴ which demonstrates that the politicisation of museums and their incorporation into the project of national homogenisation has deep historical roots.

In Central Europe, the relationship between museums and the shaping of national identity and collective memory is a significant area of research, particularly in relation to the political transition following 1989. These issues are addressed by authors such as A. Ziębińska-Witek, who analyses the process of “musealising communism” as a tool for constructing national identity through the selective interpretation of the past and the creation of heroic and sacrificial narratives.¹⁵ Other authors who have addressed the issue of the role of museums in shaping

¹² ELGENIUS, G.; ARONSSON, P. (eds). *National Museums and Nation-Building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*. London–New York: Routledge, 2015.

¹³ McLEAN, Fiona. Museums and the Construction of National Identity: A Review. In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 1998, no. 3(4), pp. 244–252.

¹⁴ COOMBES, A. E. Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities. In: *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. D. Preziosi; C. Farago. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004; COOMBES, A. E. Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities. In: *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. D. Preziosi; C. Farago. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

¹⁵ ZIĘBIŃSKA-WITEK, A. Musealisation of Communism, or How to Create National Identity in Historical Museums. In: *Muzeologia a Kultúrne Dedičstvo*, 2020, no. 8(4), pp. 59–72.

national identity include P. Tišliar, V. Kolaříková, and A. Bitušíková.¹⁶

In the United States, the discussion on the role of museums in shaping national identity is further developed in a volume edited by P. Hamilton and J. B. Gardner,¹⁷ which situates museums within the broader context of debates over memory, representation, and the state's role in managing the past. Another important work is J. B. Gardner's book entitled *Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public*,¹⁸ depicting the museum as a forum for public conflict over the interpretation of history. In a similar vein is I. Karp and S. D. Lavine's (eds.) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*,¹⁹ which analyses the political dimension of museum exhibition.

From Dynastic Collections to Contemporary Military Memory

The history of military museums illustrates continuity within change. Nineteenth-century institutions often legitimised ruling dynasties, officer elites and established political orders. Twentieth-century republican and national museums broadened the social basis of military memory, especially after mass warfare transformed soldiers into representatives of the nation as a whole. In the United States, museums connected to military academies and service branches developed from the nineteenth century onward, including collections at the US Naval Academy and West Point. During the twentieth century, branch museums and conflict-specific institutions expanded, eventually creating a dense national landscape of military remembrance.

The most significant transformation at the turn of the twenty-first century was not simply an increase in the number of institutions, but a change in exhibition practice. Static arrangements of objects were supplemented by personal narratives, reconstructed environments, digital interfaces, simulations and experiential learning. These methods broadened access and made complex collections intelligible to non-specialist audiences. Yet the movement from object-centred to experience-centred presentation also increased the museum's ability to organise emotion and identification. Contemporary military museums can therefore exercise ideological influence without relying on explicit slogans or heroic portraits of political elites.²⁰

The NMUSA embodies this transformation. It presents itself as a national institution capable of connecting the history of the Army with the experiences of ordinary soldiers and diverse communities. Its narrative authority derives partly from the scale of its collections and partly from its direct relationship to the US Army. The museum's modernity lies less in abandoning national ideology than in presenting national belonging through the language of participation: the visitor is invited not merely to view the Army's history, but to encounter, simulate and emotionally inhabit selected aspects of it.

¹⁶ TIŠLIAR, P. Museology as a University Subject in Slovakia: History, Program and Course Design. In: *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 2017, 6(1), pp. 159–166; BITUŠÍKOVÁ, A. Kultúrne dedičstvo a globalizácia: Príbeh jednej lokality UNESCO. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2014, 2(1), pp. 9–18; KOLAŘÍKOVÁ, V. National Identity in the Exhibition of the Silesian Museum: A Case Study Based on the Methodology of Dispositive Analysis. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2024, 12(1), pp. 5–27.

¹⁷ HAMILTON, P; GARDNER, J. B. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹⁸ GARDNER, J. B. *Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001.

¹⁹ KARP, I; LAVINE, S. D. (eds). *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2019.

²⁰ MACDONALD, S. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. London–New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 134–140.

Founding, Governance, and Institutional Authority

The NMUSA was created through cooperation between the US Army and the Army Historical Foundation, a nonprofit organisation involved in fundraising and promotion. Successive Secretaries of the Army supported the project during planning, construction and opening, while bipartisan political backing reflected a broader consensus that the public presentation of military history serves educational and patriotic purposes. The location at Fort Belvoir, close to Washington, DC, the Pentagon and major federal institutions, does not merely provide convenient access; it situates the museum within the symbolic and organisational geography of the military state.²¹

This institutional connection is decisive for interpretation. The NMUSA is not an autonomous civic museum that happens to collect military objects. It is an official national museum created within the organisational environment of the US Army, managed through Army historical structures and funded primarily from the military budget. Its location, governance, collection management, funding and declared mission give it privileged authority to define the Army's past and public meaning. In Smith's terms, the museum is a state-backed producer of authorised heritage; in Bennett's terms, it forms part of an exhibitionary apparatus through which military service is normalised as a legitimate, moral and nationally integrative institution.

According to information obtained during the study visit, the museum employs approximately forty-five full-time staff members. These employees are civilians within the Department of Defense rather than active-duty soldiers. This distinction is operationally relevant, but it should not be mistaken for institutional autonomy. Civilian staffing may reduce the direct presence of military command in everyday visitor services, yet the museum remains embedded in the Department of the Army and is overseen within the wider system of Army historical institutions. The absence of uniformed personnel from curatorial positions therefore changes the mode of administration rather than removing the museum from military governance.

The US Army Center of Military History manages the collection and supervises exhibition standards across Army museums. Centralisation supports conservation, consistency and professional standards, but it also places interpretive authority close to the institution whose history and legitimacy are at stake. The resulting narrative should therefore be read as an official and professionally mediated self-representation of the Army, not as an external adjudication of contested military history.

A volunteer corps of approximately three hundred people also plays a major role in the museum's operations. Interviewees estimated that around eighty percent are former Army personnel, many with long service records and experience of the Vietnam War or the First Gulf War. Veteran volunteering has important educational and community functions. It allows former soldiers to maintain a relationship with the institution and gives visitors access to personal testimony. At the same time, veterans constitute an interpretive community whose authority is grounded in lived experience and service. Their presence can humanise the narrative, but it can also reinforce identification with the Army's institutional perspective. Personal memory is not

²¹ KENNICOTT, P. (November 12, 2020). 'Trump Has Tried to Coopt the Army: This New Museum Shows Why That Won't Be Easy. In: *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/national-army-museum-opens-fort-belvoir/2020/11/11/cd07ea06-2442-11eb952e-0c475972cfc0_story.html

automatically identical with official memory, yet within the museum it is selected, trained and organised through institutional procedures.²²

Volunteer recruitment takes place through the museum's channels and veterans' organisations. Training introduces volunteers to exhibition content, operating rules, visitor interaction and institutional procedures. Scheduling is coordinated through a museum application. These practices demonstrate that testimony and interpersonal interpretation are not spontaneous additions to the museum; they are incorporated into its managed communication system.²³

According to museum representatives interviewed during the visit, the institution's total holdings comprise approximately 600,000 items, while selected objects are displayed in publicly accessible galleries. The scale of the collection supports the NMUSA's claim to national comprehensiveness. Donations from soldiers, veterans and private individuals expand the holdings while linking the museum to communities that regard the Army as a central part of personal and family history. Donor recognition and annual events also create a social infrastructure around the museum. These activities are not merely financial mechanisms; they cultivate a constituency that participates in preserving and endorsing the institution's narrative.²⁴



Fig. 1: The “Global War” gallery dedicated to World War II. Source: personal collection.

The Experiential Learning Center provides structured educational activities for children and families. Sessions are conducted by qualified museum staff and use interactive materials to introduce military history through problem-solving and participation. Such programmes increase accessibility and can encourage collaborative learning. From a critical perspective, however, educational innovation must be evaluated together with the historical questions it permits or excludes. Participation becomes analytically meaningful when it enables visitors

²² The National Museum of the United States Army. Volunteer Program, <https://www.thenmusa.org/get-involved/volunteer>; Army Historical Foundation. Volunteer Opportunities at the National Museum of the United States Army, <https://armyhistory.org>; Army Museum Opens Near Washington. *Stars and Stripes*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/army-museum-opens-near-washington-1.651673>; RUANE, M. E. The National Museum of the United States Army Opens at Fort Belvoir. *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-national-museum-of-the-us-army-opens/2020/11/11/>.

²³ Interview with Elizabeth C. Pietrafesa, Assistant Visitor Services Coordinator, National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir, [obtained on March 17, 2026].

²⁴ Interview with a retired marine master sergeant, Ron Malczewsky, volunteer/exhibition docent at the National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir [obtained on March 17, 2026]; The National Museum of the United States Army, <https://www.thenmusa.org/>.

to examine competing perspectives, institutional responsibility and the consequences of war, rather than only to master tasks associated with military action.²⁵

Security and the Performance of State Authority

The NMUSA is protected by an integrated physical and electronic security system. Information gathered during the study visit indicated the use of surveillance, intrusion alarms, controlled access to restricted areas, protective display cases, entrance screening and coordination among museum guards, military police and local law-enforcement services. The facility's security model is understandable given the value of the collections, the symbolic importance of the institution and its location within a military environment.

Security is not the primary subject of the exhibition analysis, but it forms part of the museum's public meaning. The controlled entrance, visible screening procedures and institutional protection distinguish the museum from an ordinary cultural venue and situate it within the security architecture of the state. In Bennett's terms, the museum's authority is communicated not only through labels and objects but through the organisation of space and conduct. Visitors enter a carefully regulated environment in which the Army appears simultaneously as the subject of history and the guarantor of order.

The museum is funded primarily through the US Army budget, supplemented by public grants and private donations. This funding model directly contradicts any interpretation of the NMUSA as ideologically detached from the state or the armed forces. Veteran and donor participation broadens its social base, but does not neutralise its official character. Instead, state funding, military governance, philanthropy and commemorative community-building combine to produce multiple and mutually reinforcing sources of legitimacy: federal authority, professional expertise, personal military experience and voluntary civic support.

Immersive Technologies: Education, Affect and Critical Distance



Fig. 2: *A hybrid exhibition combining a cylindrical projection screen with physical exhibits.* Source: personal collection.

The NMUSA uses a consolidated repertoire of digital and interactive techniques: multimedia interfaces, three-dimensional visualisation, audiovisual environments, vehicle simulators and virtual, augmented or multisensory forms of experience. During the March 2026 visit, interviewees also described planned installations incorporating movement and environmental effects such as wind, water and scent. Listing these devices is not analytically

sufficient. The relevant issue is how they distribute attention, define the visitor's role and mediate the ethical and political meaning of warfare.

²⁵ Interview with Susan L. Smullen, Public Affairs Officer, National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir, [obtained on March 16, 2026] and authors' field observation, Experiential Learning Center, The National Museum of the United States Army, Fort Belvoir, March 17, 2026.

The use of modern technology does not automatically mean that a museum teaches history more effectively. Three-dimensional models, digital screens and simulations can make valuable objects easier to access, explain difficult subjects and attract visitors' attention. Their educational value depends, however, on whether they present events in the proper historical context and encourage independent reflection. Immersive technologies allow visitors not only to observe an exhibition but also to take part in a representation of those events. In a simulator, a visitor may take on the role of a soldier, commander or vehicle operator and complete specific tasks. This can be engaging, but it usually presents war from a military perspective. It may leave out political decisions, civilian suffering, destruction, displacement and the long-term consequences of conflict. As a result, visitors may focus more on completing the task successfully than on understanding the causes and consequences of war.

Simulations do not have to be propaganda, and emotional engagement can support historical understanding. The problem begins when participants are rewarded for speed, accuracy or efficient performance. War may then start to resemble a game, while death, suffering and moral dilemmas move into the background. Sound, movement and other sensory effects may also create a strong impression of realism, even though the installation presents only a selected part of the historical reality. For this reason, museums should explain after each simulation whose perspective was presented and what was left out. They should also include the experiences of civilians, opponents and soldiers who questioned official policy. In this way, modern technology would not replace historical reflection but would help visitors understand the complexity of war more fully.



Fig. 3: *Immersive projection integrated with physical artifacts in the museum's narrative environment.* Source: personal collection.

The museum's technological model performs two inseparable functions. It can improve accessibility and produce memorable encounters, while also increasing the institution's capacity to organise affect and identification. Because the NMUSA is an official Army museum, this affective power has political significance: it can make military history appear immediate, technically compelling and personally meaningful while leaving the state's responsibility, contested policy choices and civilian costs less experientially present.

Minority Soldiers, Inclusion and Difficult Heritage

The National Museum of the United States Army gives considerable attention to groups that were marginalised in earlier national and military narratives. These include African Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos and Native Americans. This is an important change because older accounts of military service focused mainly on the experiences of white male soldiers. However, the mere presence of minority groups in the museum's narrative does not yet amount to a full reckoning with the past. It is also important to examine how their histories are presented and whether the museum addresses the responsibility of state and military institutions for their earlier exclusion and discrimination.

The history of African American military service is presented through, among other examples, the Buffalo Soldiers, the participation of Black soldiers in the world wars, and the 761st Tank Battalion. The exhibition emphasises their courage, combat service and contribution to victory. It also refers to racial segregation and the integration of the armed forces following President Harry S. Truman's decision in 1948. In this way, military history is connected with the struggle for civil rights. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the narrative is fully critical.²⁶

The problem arises when segregation is presented mainly as an obstacle overcome by heroic soldiers. In such an interpretation, institutional racism moves into the background, while the main emphasis is placed on the patriotism and loyalty of Black service members. The narrative proceeds from exclusion, through battlefield success, to later integration. As a result, the Army may be presented primarily as an institution of progress, even though it had previously participated in maintaining segregation. This approach may also understate the scale of discrimination that continued after segregation was formally abolished.

Japanese American soldiers, especially members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, are presented in a similar way. The museum portrays them as symbols of courage and loyalty while also recalling the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Bringing these two experiences together is important, but it may suggest that victims of state injustice had to prove their Americanness through exceptional service and sacrifice. When the central message becomes their loyalty rather than the state's responsibility for incarceration, the injustice is presented mainly as a background to patriotic heroism.

A similar narrative pattern applies to Native Americans, including the Navajo Code Talkers. The museum emphasises their language skills, commitment and importance to the war effort. A critical analysis should also consider dispossession, forced assimilation, boarding schools and state policies aimed at weakening Indigenous languages and cultures. Otherwise, a clear contradiction emerges: the Navajo language is celebrated as a valuable military resource, while the state had long pursued policies that contributed to its suppression.

Moreover, Latino soldiers are also included in the museum's broader narrative of diversity. However, the material collected during the study visit did not allow for such a detailed analysis of their representation as in the cases of African Americans, Japanese Americans or the Navajo Code Talkers. Their presence nevertheless follows a similar pattern: belonging to the national community is confirmed through military service, courage and sacrifice. As a result, the museum creates a more inclusive narrative, but one that is still controlled by a state institution. Minority groups become visible, yet their histories are most often presented through military loyalty,

²⁶ The National Museum of the United States Army. Ruben Rivers, 2026, <https://www.thenmusa.org/biographies/ruben-rivers/>.

heroism and self-sacrifice. On the one hand, this restores public recognition to groups that had previously been overlooked. On the other hand, it may subordinate their experiences to a broader patriotic narrative in which the struggle for justice is overshadowed by demonstrations of loyalty to the state. Inclusion does not therefore necessarily mean the absence of ideology. It may instead represent a contemporary way of expressing it.

Sharon Macdonald's concept of difficult heritage helps explain the difference between simply displaying an uncomfortable history and genuinely confronting it.²⁷ A museum does not address difficult heritage merely by mentioning segregation, incarceration or discrimination. It should also examine institutional responsibility, the lasting consequences of these actions, conflicting memories and the limits of later reforms. At the NMUSA, difficult subjects are present, but they are most often placed within a narrative that moves from exclusion, through heroic service, to integration. This limits their ability to challenge the positive image of the Army.

Laurajane Smith's concept of authorised heritage discourse helps explain how the museum controls the terms under which minority groups are included in official history. Their experiences receive the greatest visibility when they can be presented as examples of loyalty, sacrifice and eventual inclusion in the national community. The Army is therefore shown both as a place of past inequality and as an institution capable of overcoming it. Responsibility for coercion and discrimination is shifted into a past that appears closed and overcome. This does not mean that the presence of minority groups in the museum's narrative is without value. The NMUSA genuinely corrects earlier exclusions and restores public recognition to the service of groups long omitted from official history. At the same time, the museum's narrative often softens the structural nature of these conflicts, presents state injustice as a test of minority patriotism and interprets unresolved problems as evidence of national and military progress.

Secularism and the Civil Religion of Service

Religion is not treated as a separate theme in the NMUSA's exhibitions. References to chaplains, religious practices and spiritual life appear mainly in personal stories connected with particular conflicts. The museum also reflects the religious diversity of the Army and does not present any single faith as the basis of military action. In this sense, the exhibition can be described as secular and pluralistic. However, this does not mean that the museum is free from ideology or symbolic meanings with an almost sacred character. Robert N. Bellah's concept of civil religion is useful here. The museum organises its story of the past around values such as service, sacrifice, honour, courage, duty and loyalty. These values are not linked to one particular church, but they give military history a strong moral dimension. Fallen soldiers, decorated units, veterans' memories and military objects become symbols of shared national values.

The way minority soldiers are presented also strengthens this narrative. African Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are shown as evidence that the national community can overcome social divisions. Their service and sacrifice are presented as a confirmation of national unity and of the moral importance of the state and the Army. However, this raises the question of whether the museum also presents them as people who resisted injustice, or mainly as examples of loyalty to the state. The civil religion present in the

²⁷ For a museological application of the related concept of difficult knowledge, particularly in relation to the presentation of war, oppression, discrimination and other socially troubling histories, see TIŠLIAR, P.; JAGOŠOVÁ, L. Difficult Knowledge as an Exhibition Theme in Small Museums: Case Examples from the Czech Republic. In: *Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts*, 2024, 26, pp. 83–109.

NMUSA can therefore coexist with religious diversity. It does not depend on the dominance of Christianity because its symbolic language is national and civic. The Army is presented as a community in which differences can be overcome through shared service. This helps explain why the museum's narrative still performs an ideological function, even when it avoids open triumphalism and explicit religious symbolism.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that the NMUSA's contemporary features cannot be separated from its ideological function. Professional museology, diverse representation, civilian staff, veteran participation, public education, security and immersive technology together construct an authoritative account in which the Army appears historically central, socially inclusive, technologically competent, morally reformable and indispensable to the national community. These elements do not make the museum a simple propaganda instrument, but neither are they politically neutral.

The authorised heritage discourse operates primarily through selection, sequencing and the unequal distribution of emotional force rather than through complete censorship. Segregation, incarceration, discrimination and colonial violence can be mentioned while their disruptive potential is reduced. Injustice is often positioned before heroic service and subsequent reform; visitors are thus invited to acknowledge wrongdoing without seriously questioning the institution's present legitimacy. The Army becomes the arena in which national contradictions are overcome, even where it participated in creating or enforcing them.

The same logic applies to technology. Immersive media do not merely make exhibitions more attractive. They cultivate bodily and emotional proximity to selected experiences. When the visitor is positioned as a participant in a military task, identification with the soldier can become stronger than reflection on the political system surrounding the task. Without deliberate counter-perspectives, immersion may convert military history into an experience of competence, danger and sacrifice while marginalising civilian vulnerability and contested political judgment.

The museum's institutional structure further supports the narrative. Civilian employment does not remove Army oversight; veteran testimony does not exist outside institutional framing; private donations do not transform the museum into an independent civic forum. Rather, these arrangements diversify the sources of legitimacy available to the institution. The NMUSA speaks simultaneously with the authority of the federal state, professional curatorship, lived military experience, philanthropy and educational innovation.

A more critically engaged exhibition would not require the museum to abandon its commemorative mission. It could preserve recognition of service while making institutional contradictions more visible. Segregation could be presented not only as a condition endured by Black soldiers but as a policy maintained within the armed forces. Japanese American military service could be placed in direct dialogue with the legal and administrative machinery of internment. The story of Navajo Code Talkers could be connected to federal efforts to suppress Indigenous languages. Combat simulations could be accompanied by civilian testimony, political context and structured debriefing. Such measures would transform inclusion from a reconciliatory symbol into a sustained examination of power and responsibility.

Conclusions

The National Museum of the United States Army serves an important educational and commemorative function. However, it is neither a completely independent nor a politically neutral institution. The museum was established at the initiative of the United States Army, operates within the Department of Defense and is funded primarily from the military budget. The way history is presented is influenced by its management model, collection selection, veteran involvement, educational programmes, security system and exhibition organisation. Together, these elements form an official narrative of military history in which the Army is portrayed as one of the most important institutions of the American national community.

The inclusion of African Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos and Native Americans in the exhibits broadens the existing narrative and restores the memory of previously marginalised groups. Their presence, however, is portrayed primarily through the lens of loyalty, courage, service and sacrifice. The museum mentions racial segregation, forced internment, systemic discrimination and colonial violence, but it typically portrays these phenomena as problems of the past that were gradually overcome by the state and the military. As a result, while suffering and injustice are acknowledged, institutional responsibility and the long-term effects of these events are not presented with the same force.

Immersive technologies, such as simulators, projections and multimedia solutions, have both advantages and limitations. On the one hand, they enhance the appeal of exhibitions, facilitate understanding of events and allow visitors to become more emotionally engaged. On the other hand, they can reduce critical distance and lead audiences to view war primarily from a soldier's perspective. Simulations can also make military operations seem like a game and portray conflict as a technical problem, overlooking its political causes, the suffering of civilians and its long-term social consequences. Therefore, their educational value depends on providing the appropriate context, presenting different points of view and creating space for critical reflection after the experience is over.

The broader conclusion is that contemporary military museums continue to serve an ideological function, but they do so in a different way than in the past. In the past, their message was based primarily on glorifying rulers, the officer elite, victories and war trophies. Today, greater emphasis is placed on diversity, personal stories, interactivity, emotions and highlighting the institution's openness and inclusivity. As a result, the ideological message becomes less direct and, as such, may be more effective. The state narrative is no longer presented exclusively in a solemn and triumphalist manner, but as a personal, engaging and seemingly more humanistic experience. Contemporary military museums, therefore, do not abandon the task of building the legitimacy of the state and the armed forces, but rather use more modern and subtle tools to achieve this.

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