

LOS ALAMOS STUDY GROUP



The “Manhattan Project National Historical Park”: Moral Failure for America, Danger to Us and the World

The creation of the “Manhattan Project National Historical Park” (MPNHP) represents a triumph of parochial self-interest over the judgment of history, serious national security policy, and basic human morality. The purposeful incineration of cities was then, as it would be now, a heinous war crime. There were, and still are, no extenuating circumstances for that kind of crime, full stop. Will that be the story?

The Nuremberg Tribunal articulated the principle that even those in the military are required to disobey unlawful orders, in cases where moral choice exists. Of course we know the institutionalized impetus to wanton destruction can be very difficult to resist in war for everyone, military and civilian alike. *So we must resist justifying it now, in peacetime.*

We cannot avoid judgment just because we won the war, or hide behind a false moral relativity. It was simply a terrible mistake to build and use the bomb, a mistake in which people were swept along in a kind of enforced, but well paid, group trance.¹ They hand over moral agency to others above them – others who, at the very top, once Roosevelt died, were thoroughly racist, or who saw the coming victory as a great imperial opportunity. There is nothing “great” about the regimentation of thousands of technicians and divorce of science from morality, resulting in state-sponsored mass murder, with strong racist overtones that can be heard down to the present day.

The communities surrounding the three MPNHP sites have been eager for some sort of recognition and

prestige to compensate for the crimes they enabled during the war – and, even more so, to vindicate themselves and their communities for creating the doomsday arsenals that *still* threaten the human race, from which they have profited enormously, both personally and as communities.

Politicians and businesspersons have their own very personal agendas in this matter as well.

Last week the First Committee of the United Nations passed a resolution, by a vote of 124 to 35 with 15 abstentions, affirming that “given the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, it is inconceivable that any use of nuclear weapons, irrespective of the cause, would be compatible with the requirements of international humanitarian law or international law, or the laws of morality, or the dictates of public conscience.” The resolution further states that “given their indiscriminate nature and potential to annihilate humanity, nuclear weapons are inherently immoral.”²

What is there to celebrate here, until the day when the Manhattan Project finally ends in Los Alamos?

The Park Will Be Hostage to Parochial Interests

The political pressure to adopt supportive narratives regarding past and current weapons activities at two of these sites, which involve billions of dollars in appropriations annually, is already overwhelming. There is no reason whatsoever to believe the National Park Service (NPS) can or will be an objective interpreter of current national security issues – which is part of what this Park would implicitly do. NPS will need to work with the Department of Energy (DOE) – the partnership being celebrated today – as well as civic groups, local governments, businesses, donors, and volunteers. Under such conditions, objective interpretation of the Manhattan Project, which involves war crimes for which the U.S. has never apologized, is inconceivable.

The proposed Park sites are near or within active nuclear weapons design, testing, and production sites, underscoring the impossibility of any objective

interpretation at these locations. Multibillion-dollar contracts and projects are at stake. This is not Manzanar.

The “significance” and continuing legacy of the Manhattan Project is politically contentious and disputed. This “significance” is central to the Park idea. The original bill (S. 507, at sec. 2(2)(A)) and SA 2492 at (a)(2)(A)) quotes a “panel of experts” who state that the “the development and use of the atomic bomb during World War II has been called ‘the single most significant event of the 20th century.’” Really.

Creating such a Park inherently endorses the Manhattan Project and its modern-day successor activities as positive national achievements. Indeed that is the purpose of the Park. Supposedly “objective” background materials supporting the Park proposal are already one-sided, significantly incomplete, and/or historically incorrect.

Bechtel National Park?

The balkanization of ownership and control of these sites between federal and powerful non-federal actors ensures, in practical terms, that NPS will be subordinate to these other actors. For example, Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is operated by a for-profit consortium of contractors (Los Alamos National Security, LLC), which annually receives and spends in the neighborhood of \$2.2 billion. LANS and DOE jointly control access, security, safety, and maintenance at LANL. LANS is a highly interest-conflicted party. DOE does not manage these sites.

Quite simply, this proposal aims to use NPS for propaganda purposes, for the state and for its contractors. This will be quite apparent (and jarring) to many domestic and international visitors. The propaganda aspect of the proposed Park is oddly invisible to many well-intentioned supporters.

The Park Adds No Real Value

The proposal does not involve significant natural or national resources and is therefore not harmonious with core National Park missions. The DOE

properties at LANL involved in this proposal are basically worthless, ugly sheds and bunkers.

These sites will not provide a comprehensive picture of the Manhattan Project, which occurred at dozens of sites, not three.

Extensive interpretative museums concerning the Manhattan Project already exist, at Los Alamos and elsewhere. Some are taxpayer funded. Extensive resources are available on the internet for those who are interested.

Few if any of these sites will be tourist draws or provide marginal economic value to the surrounding communities. At LANL, that's a fantasy.

Some sites are already national landmarks. It is not clear there is any added benefit to National Park status.

At Los Alamos, Park status will not add preservation value. These "assets" are already protected.

Some sites will be accessible by the public only rarely and under guard, and public access will interfere with the national security missions underway surrounding those sites. At other sites, public access may interfere with cleanup activities. Public "enjoyment" (referencing here the NPS mission) will be minimal for these locations.

The Park Will Be Costly and Hard to Administer

The cost of the proposed Park, which is not yet fully known, will compete with the massive maintenance backlog in the National Park system. Or, if borne by DOE, these additional costs will compete with other missions. DOE does not have anywhere close to enough funds to clean up its sites, or even tear down its large inventory of abandoned buildings, some of which date from the Manhattan Project.

Given the inherent management problems, it is quite likely that the cost of the proposed Park for the NPS – in dollars and otherwise – will exceed current expectations. It is also quite possible that the chronic problems at some of these sites, combined with the inherent problems in this proposal, will combine to

damage the reputation of NPS, not just in this country but to some degree worldwide.

The sites are small, widely separated, have complicated ownership and boundary configurations and significant safety and security issues, will be rarely accessible to the public in some cases, and in some cases (LANL) are operated by for-profit contractors, not the federal government. As of April 2013, DOE had "not assessed the operational difficulties in terms of security and public health and safety, applicable statutory and regulatory requirements, and the potential new cost of national park designation at our sensitive national security and cleanup sites."

At present, there are no management plans, no budgets, and no appropriations. At present the Park consists only of enabling legislation, the Memorandum of Agreement, and a map of initial DOE locations. As NPS web site says,

Details of the park interpretive themes, park facilities, visitor contact stations, park management structure, and specifics about what eligible properties outside the Department of Energy properties should be included in the park are not included in this agreement and will be identified in future planning efforts.

The Park Glorifies Nuclear Weapons, Undercutting Nonproliferation Norms – and Promoting a Militarized Society

If producing (and using) nuclear weapons was a "great" achievement for one country, why should it not be so for others, and for terrorist groups? We may believe America is "exceptional" in this way but others do not, and it is their views which are important to them, not ours. Why is it in the interest of U.S. national security to establish what amounts to a multi-site "nuclear weapons national park?" There are already other NPS-administered "parks" dating from the Cold War. Because it has the largest

economy, the largest military by far, and the largest cultural influence, the U.S. is a norm-setting state. It is one thing to make terrible mistakes, even great ones; many states have done so. It is quite another to celebrate historic *and continuing* mistakes, as if they happened merely in the past.

The Park Suborns NPS to Serve a Militarized State

This Park is already a "disinformation machine," obscuring present realities as much or more as past ones, thus continuing the work of the propagandists hired by the Manhattan Project in 1945. As such it harnesses NPS to a militarized and corporatized state that creates ignorance and passivity in an increasingly powerless population.

As Stewart Udall wrote in the *Myths of August*, the first big change of the Atomic Age was to alter the American system of government, creating new national security institutions to safeguard atomic secrets. The national security state was born.

Today that militarized security state has metastasized to a scale and degree that would be unrecognizable to the America of 1946 or 1947 in terms of cost, deployments, and in its unquestioned prominence in our society. This Park would not have been proposed or approved in a peace-oriented society. Its existence is as much part of the militarization and authoritarian shift in American life as it is an illustration of the growing moral numbness which has accompanied the application of violence by the U.S. in more and more countries around the world.

Notes:

¹ In this regard see Charles Tart, quoted in Brian Davey, <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2015-11-04/the-attention-seeking-economy-information-and-the-manufacture-of-ignorance>

² For text, background, and votes see links in http://www.lasg.org/press/2015/press_release_06Nov2015.html