

Interpreting Cold War violence at the Amherst Bunker

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INTRODUCTION

Before we start, I'd just like to say that Meghan, Peter and I worked to develop this material on the Bunker. I will use the first person pronoun sometimes, not to marginalize their role, but for clarity of narrative, and to indicate that some of what follows is my own analysis of what we did. Without further ado...

If a traveler heads south of Amherst, Massachusetts, down route 116 to the feet of the Holyoke range, she will encounter a barely marked gravel road, across from the Notch visitors center, called “Military Road”. Traveling up this road will take her through a metal gate to an open area in the midst of the mountain forests. **SLIDE** Sitting there, jutting out from underneath the mountain is the Amherst Bunker, a former military installation currently serving as the Amherst College and Five College book depository and collections storage. It has no signs pointing towards it, nor any other indicators as to its current or former function. But its presence, so out of place in the seemingly bucolic forests and mountains of the “happy” valley exudes a myriad of feelings, impressions, and interpretations. What might be called the “meaning” of the Amherst Bunker, is not fixed, nor is it inherent in the materiality of the Bunker itself. Rather, its meanings come about through struggle, and through the shifting social relations in which it is enmeshed.

Here is the Amherst Bunker **SLIDE**. All told, it is nearly 26 acres in size—over 44,000 square feet. It contains nearly 500,000 volumes stretching over 8 miles of shelving. While it currently serves as the Amherst College and Five college book depository, it was originally built as part of the geo-political conflict known as the “Cold War”, and understanding its origins in that conflict can give us one signpost to its

material meanings.

We became involved with the Amherst Bunker in the Fall and 2005, as part of a graduate class in the public history program at the University of Massachusetts. In an effort to mark the space on the landscape, we developed interpretive material for the Bunker, in the form of some exhibit panels. Thematically, we tried to highlight the idea that the Bunker *was a landscape of violence*, situated in a complexity of meanings and social relations. We also strove to create an exhibit that was flexible, and in some small way, give visitors some power to engage with the unresolved tensions and memories that the Bunker engendered, and add those to the exhibit. In what follows, I want to briefly situate the Bunker in time, documenting its military uses, as well as its current de-militarized function. I want to discuss our interpretive strategy, paying particular attention to the current social position of the Bunker. Finally, I will conclude with some thoughts on interpreting a landscape of violence, the contradictory concept of a “Cold War”, and some critical examination of our intervention in this history.

CHRONOLOGY

SLIDE After the second world war, the United States alliance with the Soviet Union began to break down. The destruction wrought across Europe by the war, as well as the dismantling of much of the 19th century colonial system in the 1940s and 50s created conditions of great instability, and new threats to developing US hegemony (Hobsbawm 1994: 230-231). Checking Soviet expansion and punishing Soviet alliances became the focal point of US foreign policy, and would remain so for the next 40 years in various forms.

In particular to this discussion, the building and maintaining of a powerful airborne military was integral to this process. The Strategic Air Command, or SAC, developed as part of the US air military during WWII, took on the post-WWII role of patrolling the skies for the US, and B-52s, armed with nuclear

warheads and flying in 24 hours shifts became a central arm of the foreign policy doctrine of “Mutually Assured Destruction”. As the 1950s began, the US government poured millions of dollars into SAC infrastructures, including airstrips, planes, and bunkers, like the one in Amherst. The Amherst Bunker was built as a subsidiary communications facility to the central SAC communications node in Nebraska.

This particular area was chosen for a number of reasons. For one, its proximity to Westover airforce base near Springfield **SLIDE** would more closely link coordination of communications with the deployment of aircraft. Of course, it was also chosen for the flip-side of this; namely that if the Soviet Union dropped a nuclear warhead on Westover, the shock would be partially absorbed by the mountain range, and the bunker’s occupants might be spared. Planning for the facility began in the early 1950s, and construction of the Bunker began in 1957. Though it was ostensibly a secret installation, local labor was used in its construction, including the vast majority of cement trucks in the valley, which, one march week, were lined up along route 116, taking part in a 72 hour cement pour to complete the facility. **SLIDE** The Bunker grew in the 1960s, with construction additions and new personnel. All through this time, the Bunker was a clandestine space, guarded by US troops with machine guns, and forbidden access by any but military personnel. However, its location was apparently common knowledge to many valley residents. Perhaps the high-point of its military use was during the Cuban Missile Crisis, where it served as SAC's eastern communications hub. The bunker was on high alert, with crew on 24 hour shifts, as images and communiqués bounced between the Caribbean based military fleet and Washington.

Vietnam brought transition to SAC and to the Amherst Bunker. The facility was decommissioned in 1973 and sold to the government’s General Accounting Office. From this time, until the late 1980s it stored records for the Federal Reserve bank of Boston. Finally, in 1991 the GAO cleared out, and rather than utilize the facility for some new purpose, the Government **put the Bunker up on the national real estate market**. An ad in local and national newspapers read: “\$250,000, a wild imagination, and its yours!” A variety of offers were put in, including a mushroom farm, a bottled water factory, and a night club. However, eventually, it was purchased by Amherst College in 1992 for use as a storage facility. Since 2002, it has also

become the book depository of the Five Colleges **SLIDE**.

Three years later, we became involved through a graduate course in the Department of History. We worked predominantly with Professors Marla Miller and David Glassberg, as well as with employees of Amherst College and the Five Colleges to develop this material. We spent the semester examining primary documents, interviewing employees, and putting together text and images. In the course of doing this work, a number of things became clear.

First, commemorating the Bunker was not just an exercise in defining something as historically important that had previously not been thought to be so. Employees told us that they routinely received inquiries about the Bunker from all manner of individuals, including former military officers who had been stationed there. Some folks **would even come by**, seeking to reconnect to a place that had been so important in their lives. Others were simply drawn to the general history of the place, and its involvement in world events, while still others were captivated by the technological infrastructure of a military communications facility. The Bunker was historically important, not in and of itself, but because a public existed that continued to reify it as such.

Secondly, we discovered the administration of Amherst College and the Five Colleges had little interest in denoting the Bunker as a historic site, mainly for security and safety reasons. In particular, these institutions stored a number of sensitive financial and administrative documents in the Bunker, and had little interest in allowing the public to wander the facility unsupervised. Issues of public safety were also paramount, especially in a structure so vast as the bunker, with such a small staff. We were told by a number of people that the administrations would rather simply have the Bunker out of public sight.

A third insight... while we met a great many people who were interested in commemorating the Bunker, not all of them were interested for the same reasons. For some, the Bunker was a symbol of American military and technological prowess, and its role in safeguarding the US from communism needed

to be honored. For others, the Bunker stood as a testament to the military-industrial complex and the danger of US military hegemony. Transforming it into a book depository was, as one person said, “swords into plowshares”, and a monument to resistance to war and imperialism. It was clear that the Bunker was part of a contested terrain of memory and experience, and subjecting it to a single, linear narrative would involve silencing that contestation.

We took all of these factors into account as we developed material. From the get go, we knew that we would not have the resources to do a full blown exhibit. Indeed, if we had tried, Administrators would have shut us down immediately. Rather, what we wanted to do was “get our feet in door”, so to speak, with a pilot project that could be expanded at a later date. We wanted to make a small exhibit that could be easily moved, but one that we secretly hoped could be kept in some publicly accessibility area of the bunker, such as the main lobby, or the freight hallway near the main offices. What we settled on was to produce a series of interpretive panels, commemorating the bunker as a landscape of violence, with a focus on the themes of memory and space. **SLIDE** We developed five 2 foot by 3 foot panels, that we eventually compressed into three connected panels and one free wall mounted panel.

Seeing the Bunker as a landscape of violence allowed us to address, rather than sideline, the diverging or contradictory interpretations that we had encountered. As we stated in our wall mounted panel: **SLIDE:**

How do we remember Cold War sites? This question often ends in disagreement – some people want to commemorate these spaces, while others would prefer to obliterate them from the landscape. Conflicting meaning is often generated from the memories a site evokes, and the spaces of the Cold War continue to spark debate.

This exhibit highlights the history of one of these spaces: the Amherst Bunker. Although it has been almost entirely stripped of its military past, the site continues to stir up memories and provoke discussion about the role of the Cold War in American History.

To facilitate more dialog and discussion, we also created an attached blank book, where we asked visitors to share their memories of the Cold War in general, and the Bunker in particular. Further, it was our hope that these memories could be included in the future to alter or transform the exhibit. It, like the Bunker, could contain a variety of meanings and interpretations.

The other three panels focused on the space itself. The first panel **SLIDE** “Building the Infrastructure of Cold War Defense” documented the Bunker's construction and dimensions as a military installation. In particular, this panel highlighted the contradiction of the secrecy of the structure and its common knowledge to local residents who knew about, and in some cases participated in its construction and renovation. The second panel **SLIDE** “Thirteen Days”: The Cuban Missile Crisis at the Bunker”, discussed the use of the space during the heightened tension of this incident, and touched on the psychological violence of “Mutually Assured Destruction” on the American Psyche. The final panel **SLIDE**, titled “\$250,000, a wild imagination, and it's yours...” after the afore-mentioned ad, documented the post-military and current use of the space in an academic context.

The panels are currently being printed, though their future location is uncertain. While we have been guided by sympathetic faculty and staff of the facility, certainly a stakeholder community, it is ultimately the administrators of Amherst College and the Five Colleges, as the most powerful “stakeholder” who hold the keys to the gate. They have the power to make this site visible on the landscape or keep it hidden. The University is still adamant that the Bunker should have as little foot-traffic as possible. In the process, they are taking part in the erasure of an important story in the Connecticut River Valley (Shackel 2003: 3, see also Glassberg 1996: 13). In an ironic historical twist, the secrecy of the bunker, locked and guarded by a powerful institution, has been recapitulated.

POSSIBILITIES

SLIDE This erasure and secrecy of the Bunker keeps alive a powerful regional ideology—the Connecticut River Valley as a peaceful, bucolic, (white) liberal enclave, isolated from and often oppositional to U.S. Hegemonic violence in the world. What little public discussion of the Bunker has taken place has highlighted the previously mentioned “swords into plowshares” story (see Tynan 2002). The Bunker, as a site, reveals some of the cracks in this ideology. The “happy valley” has been involved in the military-industrial complex for a long time, and continues to be, through the Westover airforce base, and through less widely known relationships between businesses, institutions like UMASS, and the military (Labrador 2008). And, if the exhibit could or would be expanded from our initial pilot project, there are a number of stories that might be told about this complex relationship. **SLIDE** For example, as was stated above, local residents knew about and were involved in the construction and maintenance of the Bunker. Others, who did not know, certainly saw the nuclear armed B-52s that continued to fly over their heads on a daily basis. The stories of these experiences, of living in the shadow of a nuclear attack have not been collected or told, nor have the stories of the personnel who worked at the Bunker during its heighday. Stories of acceptance could be accompanied by stories of resistance, particularly of the anti-war movement in the Valley, one of the most colorful and powerful regional anti-war movements in the United States. These local experiences, some of which we had hoped to capture with our memory book, paint a very different picture than the standrard geopolitical history of the cold war, described by historian Thomas McCormick as “bipolar myopia” (1982: 320)

SLIDE At a larger level of abstraction, it will be important to contextualize the Cold War *as a violent conflict*. Although the term itself was coined by a critic of US foreign policy (Sibley 1998: 3), and implicitly tied politically to the seemingly conflict free theories of containment and mutually assured destruction, the low temperature belies a hot and bloody history —particularly in what came to be known, because of the Cold War, as “the third world”. U.S. Military, economic, and political support for violence in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Argentina, Iran, Congo/Zaire, and Angola (to name a few well documented examples), as well as countless other military actions needing further explication and dissemination all occurred during the period in which the Bunker was operating, and which the infrastructure of the Bunker allowed to take place. At the

same time, post WWII US military build-ups and their scaffoldings of ideology were used to ameliorate capitalist economic crises, punish, imprison and harass US citizens, and ideologically suppress racial, class, and gender/sexual movements of resistance under the banners of defeating communism. Thus, the bunker is a landscape of violence not just metaphorically, but materially, and future exhibits could show how it was connected to these processes.

SLIDE Conceiving the Bunker as a historic site certainly has its dangers. I have wondered whether or not, by commemorating the bunker, we are perpetuating the idea that the valley may have once been involved in violence, but is not longer connected to US militarization. Indeed, it is possible that by relegating the Bunker to the past, we are doing a kind of violence in the present. But of course, history only exists in the present. We do not have the past in itself presented to us without impediment, clear in its intent. Rather, the past arrives through struggle, embedded in social relations and materialities like the Bunker. Certainly, in the dangerous world we live in, to which the Cold War was prologue, commemorating the Amherst Bunker as a landscape of violence in the bucolic Connecticut River Valley could serve as a form of transformative public history--a space of community, cognizant of its own role in the world, and perhaps, moved to act on it. Thank you.

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