

EXHIBITION REVIEW

A Reimagined Spy Museum in Washington Doesn't Flinch From the Darker Side

Built for \$162 million, the museum features flashy interactive exhibits but also grapples with intelligence failures, out-of-control surveillance and torture.



By Scott Shane

May 6, 2019

WASHINGTON — The intelligence craft in American history and culture is a decidedly mixed bag. It has served up intrigue, genius and heroism, clever undercover operations and brain-boggling gadgetry, making it a linchpin of popular entertainment. Yet the spy trade also has a darker strain: Prone to epic failures and frequently in ethical trouble, the agencies have been embroiled in recent years in scandals involving brutal torture and secret surveillance.

Think Bond and Bourne vs. waterboarding and warrantless eavesdropping.

The challenge taken on by the new, vastly expanded International Spy Museum, opening May 12 in a striking glass-and-steel building not far from the National Mall, was to capture all of these disparate threads. The curators had to appeal to rambunctious 8-year-olds along with somber retirees, tourists whose notion of intelligence comes from “The Spy Who Loved Me” and (given its location) hypercritical visitors from the ranks of the C.I.A., the National Security Agency and all the secret crannies of the security state.

Overall, the new museum, built for \$162 million from private donations and a municipal bond, does a remarkable job. It is more serious and realistic than the original Spy Museum, located a mile away and founded by the same man who financed most of the new museum, Milton Maltz, a television and radio entrepreneur. During its run from 2002 to 2018, the old museum became a popular gathering place for authors and speakers on spying, but some of the displays came across as slick and superficial.

The new exhibits use every technological trick in the modern-museum book to engage visitors. But they also are designed to present complex subjects in ways that encourage thoughtful consideration and debate. The museum is rich with historical artifacts, interactive quizzes and original short films.



A room devoted to interrogation and torture features an actual waterboard.
Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Most impressively, the new Spy Museum faces squarely the most painful and divisive episodes in the recent history of American spying. A room devoted to interrogation and torture features some history (George Washington took a stand against the mistreatment of British prisoners) and an actual waterboard — the notorious torture device used in the Inquisition, by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and by the C.I.A. against Al Qaeda suspects in 2002 and 2003. In accompanying video clips, two architects of the C.I.A.'s “enhanced interrogation techniques” defend them as necessary and effective; a military lawyer, a Navy trainer and others denounce them as useless and starkly at odds with American and civilized values.

In another room, devoted to secrecy and openness, among those who speak in extensive footage are Thomas Drake, a former N.S.A. official prosecuted for leaking to the press about a wasteful, failed program, and Ben Wizner, an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer who advises Edward Snowden, the N.S.A. contractor who gave journalists hundreds of thousands of secret documents. Senior intelligence officials also get their say, but they do not monopolize the discussion.

The museum takes a forthright look, too, at intelligence failures, dissecting the catastrophically mistaken estimates about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and pairing the attacks on Pearl Harbor and on Sept. 11, 2001, in illuminating ways. A creepy set of rooms depicts East Berlin as a surveillance society gone out of control.

“Here, we cover the dark side,” said Anna Slafer, the museum’s vice president of exhibitions and programs. In the old museum, she said, “We didn’t really address controversy. It was spy-lite.” Given the

fierce debates and moral quandaries in the news since 9/11, such an approach was no longer defensible, she said.



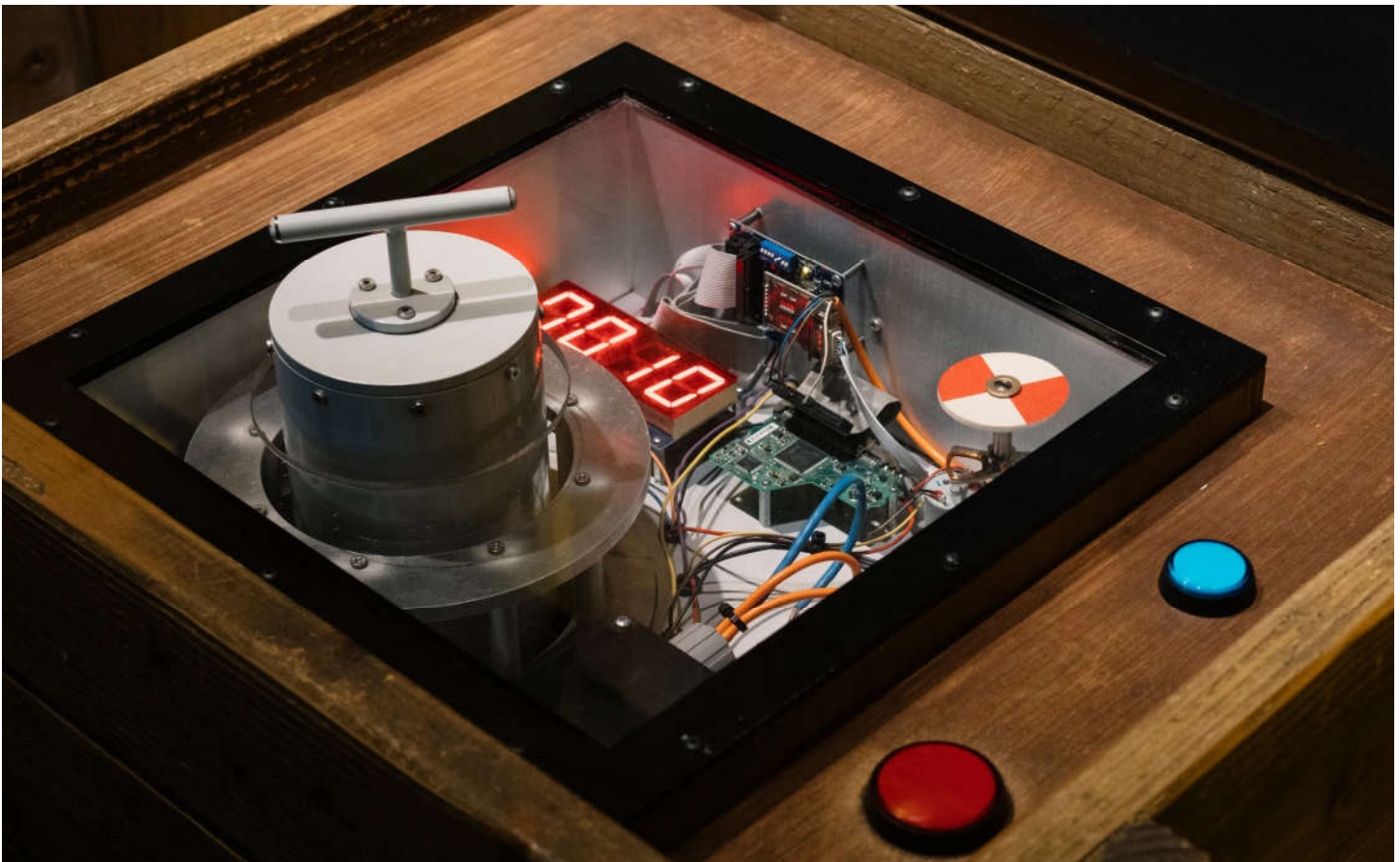
In one exhibit, a Danish former jihadist, Morten Storm, recounts his terrifying adventures infiltrating Al Qaeda in Yemen. Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



Morten Storm's passport.
Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



A fake pregnancy suit and other disguises are on display.
Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



One of the interactive exhibits at the museum lets you try to save the world. Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Of course, if the old museum was “lite,” this one is not by any means all heavy. There are hundreds of items from the unrivaled spy-artifact collection of H. Keith Melton, who has advised the C.I.A. on historical matters and donated his finds to the museum. There’s a Soviet camera hidden in a glasses case, an East German microdot message in a hollow tooth, a fake-pregnancy suit for female C.I.A. spies and a fake scrotum concealing a transmitter for the men. There are excursions into the huge place of spying in popular culture, but fictional stories are not allowed to predominate.

Alexis Albion, the lead curator, who worked on the 9/11 Commission staff and at the State Department, said that after consulting a panel of historians beginning about five years ago, designers decided “to tell fewer stories but in more depth.”

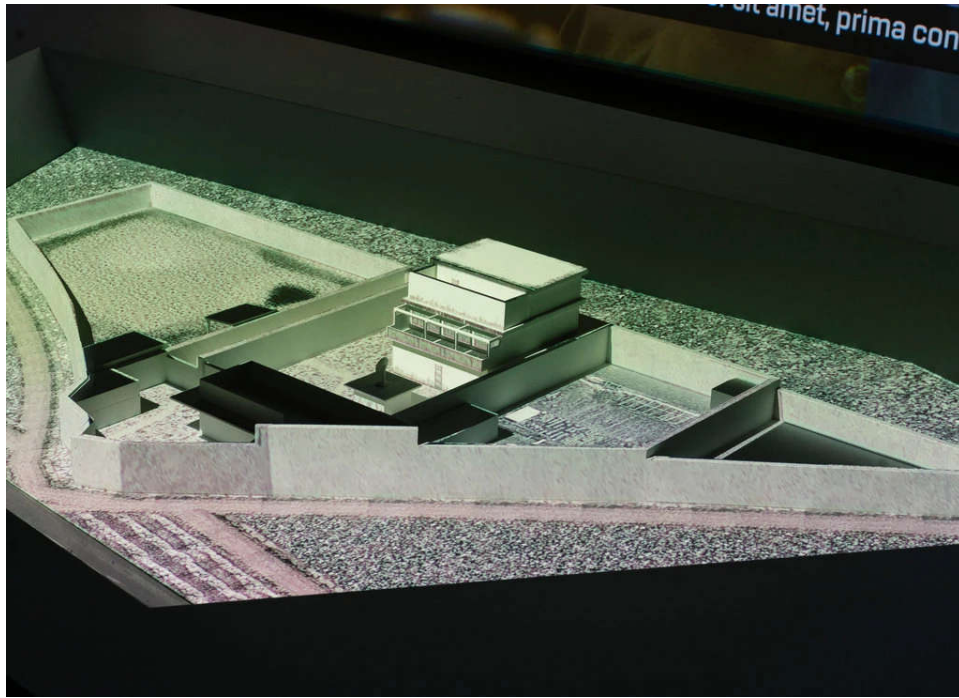
“You don’t want to be pedantic, but you do want people to understand what this work is really like,” Ms. Albion said. “People think spying is sexy and fun. But sometimes it ends badly. We always thought it would be wonderful if some people came out of the exhibits and said, ‘I couldn’t do that.’”

In keeping with the “international” in its name, the new museum seeks to expand beyond the American and British experience. Among the spies whose stories are told in detail are ones from China, Russia and Israel. A Danish former jihadist, Morten Storm, recounts his terrifying adventures infiltrating Al Qaeda in Yemen.



In another interactive display, the museum presents the elaborate puzzle C.I.A.

analysts faced at the end of the hunt for Osama bin Laden.
Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



The exhibit includes a model of the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, that lights up to indicate clues. Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Few movies are built around the work of intelligence analysis. But the museum manages to bring the subject vividly to life with an elaborate presentation of the puzzle C.I.A. analysts faced at the end of the hunt for Osama bin Laden: Was the man living behind the walls of the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the Al Qaeda founder? Or was it the home of a crime boss, a drug kingpin or a reclusive businessman?

Visitors watch Michael Morell, a former deputy director of the C.I.A., present the known facts on video. A model of the compound lights up to indicate clues: A balcony is surrounded by a high wall; trash is burned rather than put out for collection; a tall man paces the grounds.

At another station, amateurs can assess the social media posts of a suspected terrorist, trying their hand at a daily challenge for the F.B.I. and C.I.A.: Is the person a mere blowhard and fantasist? Or does he really pose a threat of violence?

At some two dozen interactive displays, each visitor, identified by an electronic identification card worn on a lanyard, can test their skills at spycraft. At the end of their tour — about two and a half hours on average, curators predict — visitors get a sort of report card on their aptitude for various intelligence specialties. They can follow up on a website for a more detailed “debrief.”





Visitors are identified by an electronic identification card worn on a lanyard and can test their skills at spycraft throughout the museum.

Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

That will strike some people as hokey — and others as cool. The museum, about halfway between the mall and Washington’s waterfront, seeks to serve all comers, staking its claim to become a must-stop attraction for the hordes of tourists who land in the capital every year. Though the museum is a nonprofit, it’s pricey, in the way of new museums — \$24.95 per adult (\$2 off for online purchases), with discounts for seniors, military members and children.

“Intelligence is probably the least understood and most misrepresented of the professions,” Allen W. Dulles, the C.I.A.’s longest-serving director, wrote after his retirement in a 1963 book. Indeed, only when Dulles had been dead for several years, in the mid-1970s, did the Senate’s Church Committee help the public understand some of what the agency had been up to during his tenure — a stew of assassination schemes, drug experiments and domestic spying.

With the shock of 9/11 still vivid, the United States is unlikely to pare back its sprawling, powerful intelligence complex anytime soon. No part of the government is more in need of informed, democratic oversight. The Spy Museum will give tourists a fascinating few hours, but it will also help Americans understand what the secret agencies do in their name and with their money.

Correction: May 6, 2019

An earlier version of this review misspelled the surname of the former deputy director of the C.I.A. He is Michael Morell, not Michael Morrell.

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