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## **Pulling together the threads of our past**

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Washington

In near darkness, it appears almost as an apparition. Like reliquary, the tattered flag is displayed behind glass in a new temperature- and light-controlled chamber, the bones not of a saint but of a nation.

So these are the broad stripes and, once, bright stars. So this is the flag that withstood the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air. So this is the star-spangled banner that yet waved after a night of bombing, its survival signaling that the nation, too, had survived and inspiring Francis Scott Key to write what would become the national anthem.

Starting tomorrow, the nearly 200-year-old flag, hand-sewn in a Baltimore rowhouse and flown over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812, returns to public display at the National Museum of American History. For the past two years, the Smithsonian museum has been closed for renovations, the centerpiece of which is a new gallery to house the fragile, faded flag. It was dedicated yesterday, in a ceremony whose participants ranged from President George W. Bush to five new Americans who took their oaths of citizenship in an airy atrium that leads to the star-spangled banner.

At a time when flags are nothing if not ubiquitous, flying football-field-size over car dealerships or thumbnail-tiny on politicians' lapels, the star-spangled banner has a quiet, yet palpable power. In its darkened gallery, with Key's words projected on the wall above it, the flag seems to float in both space and time. It seems both historic and eternal, both untouchable and inviting.

"You almost don't want to leave," said Gov. Martin O'Malley, among those invited to yesterday's dedication. "It has a magnetism.

"I came around the corner, and I started getting choked up seeing her displayed like that," said O'Malley, who had seen it as needleworkers were painstakingly repairing it. "Illuminated like she is, it's not only a patriotic experience, it's almost a religious experience."

Maybe it's the timing of the museum's reopening, coming as it does during this neither-here-nor-there period, after the just-concluded presidential election but before the inauguration. Maybe it's the fact that one of the sillier "issues" of the campaign was why then-candidate and now President-elect Barack Obama didn't wear a flag pin, and why he sometimes started wearing one. Maybe it's just weariness over how the flag gets used by those who want to prove that they love the country more than you do.

Whatever the reason, seeing the restored star-spangled banner came as an antidote. For all the flag-waving, for all the more-patriotic-than-thou divisiveness of a presidential campaign, here finally was authenticity - "the real thing."

That is how historian David McCullough described it during the dedication ceremony - not just the star-spangled banner, but the entirety of the museum's holdings: The microphone that FDR used for his fireside chats, Thomas Edison's light bulb, even Mr. Rogers' cardigan sweater.

"They are all," he said, "the real thing."

Surely, there is something uniquely American about the museum's wild mix of possessions. Can there be any other country that in a single building displays the flag that inspired its national anthem and Dorothy's ruby slippers? Clara Barton's ambulance and the desk at which Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence? Julia Child's kitchen and George Washington's military uniform?

It is heady company, and yet the star-spangled banner has pride of place, taking center stage of the \$85 million renovation.

It is a story that is familiar - or should be familiar - to every Baltimore schoolchild, how Maj. George Armistead, commander of the forces at Fort McHenry, commissioned Mary Pickersgill to make him a flag "so large that the British will have no difficulty seeing it from a distance." At 30-by-42-feet, it certainly was that, and so large that Pickersgill and her assistants had to take their fabric, needles and thread from her home on East Pratt Street and complete it at a nearby brewery.

Flying over the fort, it survived bombardment by the British (not to mention, in later years, the scissors of souvenir seekers, one of whom clipped out a star). Seeing the banner wave the next morning, Key was inspired to write his now-famous words.

"Today, nearly two centuries after they were composed," Bush said yesterday, "his words are written on the heart of every American and written into our law as our country's national anthem."

Bush went on to draw a thread through some of the museum's exhibits and American history. He noted that he was speaking on the very day, 145 years later, that President Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, and that the White House's copy of the speech, in Lincoln's hand, has been lent to the museum for display until early January.

Among those Americans inspired by Lincoln were four black college students who in 1960 sat down at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., Bush said, which now also has a place in the museum.

"In the lives of Francis Scott Key, Abraham Lincoln and those brave students in Greensboro," he said, "we see the best of America."

Soon, the mall on which the museum is located will fill with people, maybe millions of them, drawn to Washington for what is already being called a historic event - the inauguration of the first African-American president. (That, of course, is another legacy of our times - we now predict history, unlike in the past, where it had to happen first and only later declared as such.)

Hopefully, some of the visitors will take the chance to drop in on the newly renovated museum, and see the sweep of what came before our very own history-as-it-happens. McCullough practically begged those gathered in the atrium to get kids reading and visiting museums as a remedy to what he called several generations of historical illiteracy.

"How can we love our country," he asked, "and take no interest in our story?"