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# History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's *Enola Gay* Exhibition

Richard H. Kohn

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The cancellation of the National Air and Space Museum's (NASM) original *Enola Gay* exhibition in January 1995 may constitute the worst tragedy to befall the public presentation of history in the United States in this generation. In displaying the *Enola Gay* without analysis of the event that gave the B-29 airplane its significance, the Smithsonian Institution forfeited an opportunity to educate a worldwide audience in the millions about one of this century's defining experiences. An exhibition that explored the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan—an event historians view as significant in itself and symbolic of the end of World War II, the beginning of the Cold War, and the dawn of the nuclear age—might have been the most important museum presentation of the decade and perhaps of the era. The secretary and the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian abandoned this major exhibition for political reasons: Veterans' groups, political commentators, social critics, and politicians had charged that the exhibition script dishonored the Americans who fought the war by questioning the motives for using the bombs, by portraying the bomb as unnecessary to end the war, and by sympathizing too much with the Japanese killed by the bombs and, by implication, with the Japanese cause. Thus one of the premiere cultural institutions of the United States, its foremost museum system, surrendered its scholarly independence and a significant amount of its authority in American intellectual life to accommodate to a political perspective.

The full implications of the cancellation are still far from clear, but an interpretation deeply disturbing to historians and museum professionals has begun to emerge. Smithsonian secretary I. Michael Heyman has suggested that the institution should

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perhaps eschew such controversial exhibitions and that its exhibitions cannot combine commemoration and celebration with scholarship. He has put on hold several projects, including a NASM exhibit on air power in the Vietnam War that avoided almost every controversy about that divisive war. He has promised to revise exhibits that have angered viewers, one by treating science and technology negatively, others by criticizing or seeming to disparage American character, society, or behavior. Anecdotal evidence suggests that elsewhere, planned commemorations of the end of World War II—even scholarly events—have been modified or abandoned.<sup>1</sup> These troubling developments have led some observers to label the cancellation political censorship. If such a famous and prestigious cultural institution cannot present scholarship to the public, they ask if there can be any displays, exhibitions, or programs that offend politically powerful or vocal groups. American museums and other publicly—and perhaps privately—funded organizations may find it intimidating to offer anything controversial for public consumption, no matter how significant or sensitively portrayed. If the idea that everything is politics now colors American cultural life, civic discourse could succumb to the suppression characteristic of the totalitarian regimes Americans have fought and died to defeat. Unable to explore their past openly or critically, Americans might endanger their political system and damage the liberty on which that system is based, and which it is designed to preserve. George Orwell's warning—that those who control the past control the future and those who control the present control the past—could come to pass.<sup>2</sup>

Before history and museum professionals conclude that responsible scholarship and the pursuit of truth on controversial topics are too dangerous to attempt in public forums, we need to subject the *Enola Gay* exhibit episode to historical examination. It is early to attempt an investigation, the evidence being fragmentary and our perspectives hardly impartial. But little can be learned, and similar experiences cannot be averted, until we reconstruct exactly what happened. Without that reconstruction, we may draw mistaken lessons and act to the detriment of the historical profession and the public.

The *Enola Gay* conflict began at least two decades ago. The controversy comprised at least five stories; they fused together in 1994 to set off the national explosion

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Budiansky et al., "A Museum in Crisis: The Smithsonian Heads into Rough Times after the Enola Gay Debacle," *U.S. News & World Report*, Feb. 13, 1995, pp. 73–75; *Washington Post*, Feb. 24, 1995, p. C2; Martin Harwit to Richard H. Kohn, Feb. 6, 1995 (in Richard H. Kohn's possession).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 1995, p. A14; *Miami Herald*, Feb. 23, 1995, p. 13A; Barton J. Bernstein, "Guest Opinion: Misconceived Patriotism," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 51 (May/June 1995), 4; John W. Dower, "How a Genuine Democracy Should Celebrate Its Past," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 16, 1995, pp. B1–2; Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York, 1995), ch. 5; American Association of University Professors Resolution, "The Smithsonian Institution and the Enola Gay Exhibition," *Academe*, 81 (July–Aug. 1995), 56; and Mike Wallace, "The Battle of the Enola Gay," *Radical Historians Newsletter* (no. 72, May 1995), 1–12, 22–32. Although Wallace's article contains characterizations and interpretations with which I disagree, it is the most complete and analytical narrative of the controversy yet published. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; London, 1987), 37.

that resulted in cancellation of the exhibition. The first story traces planning for the exhibition in a museum whose staff was increasingly determined to apply professional, scholarly standards in a previously celebratory institution. The second concerns the uneasy relationship between the museum and many in the military aviation community. The third, of course, tells of the larger culture wars and the reaction of the museum to its critics. The fourth and fifth concern the appointment of a new secretary of the Smithsonian Institution just when political power in Congress shifted, for the first time in almost two generations, from Democrats to Republicans. Although what follows treats some of the stories at greater length than others, each was crucial to the character and timing of the outcome.

The first and most basic ingredient was the exhibition script itself, a product of the National Air and Space Museum and its history over the last twenty years. Since its opening in the mid-1970s, Air and Space had gained a worldwide reputation for breathtaking artifacts, huge and laudatory crowds of visitors (the highest numbers in the world, as many as 10 million in some years), but little intellectual or scholarly content. Indeed, Congress appropriated money to construct the building on the Mall largely on the promise of what the historian Alex Roland has called “good, old-fashioned celebration of American achievement . . . enshrinement, pure and simple.” Five years after the building opened, an observer characterized the museum as “largely a giant advertisement for air and space technology.” Air and Space was criticized for memorializing individual inventive genius and the corporations that create the machines, “equat[ing] technological advance with social progress,” and “desir[ing] to promote aerospace activities”—all of which cost it respect in the Smithsonian community. When, in the mid-1980s, Air and Space’s director was forced out, the criticism of his leadership included charges of hostility to historians and to analytical scholarship. Even the museum’s displays and exhibits seemed to command less respect among aerospace museum professionals than did the size and comprehensiveness of its collection of air- and spacecraft and associated artifacts. “Give me that collection and a building on the Mall and I could have ten million visitors easy,” the chief curator of another museum told me in the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

The appointment in 1987 of Martin Harwit, a respected astrophysicist from Cornell University with a longstanding interest in the history of science, seemed to promise a solution to many of the problems. The first academic and scholar to head the museum (his predecessors had been scientists, engineers, or aviators), Harwit was selected by Robert McCormick Adams, secretary of the Smithsonian from 1984 to 1994. Very much an academic, Adams eschewed such Washington power folkways as dark suits and the trappings of office. He managed the institu-

<sup>3</sup> Alex Roland, “Celebration or Education? The Goals of the U.S. National Air and Space Museum,” *History and Technology*, 10 (nos. 1–2, 1993), 86; Joseph J. Corn, “Tools, Technologies, and Contexts: Interpreting the History of American Technics,” in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana, 1989), 241–44.

tion in a style that Smithsonian insiders characterized as “laissez-faire in a funny way . . . like academia,” “collegial,” and an effort “to stimulate more independence.” But his management was also criticized, from within and without. Adams’s priority was research. He aimed to put the institution on the cutting edge of scholarship, or at least to modernize exhibits and programs where the institution had fallen behind—in Adams’s words, “deepening the intellectual structure of the place.” Adams aimed to encourage critical scholarship in an institution whose reputation for scholarly leadership had waned as its reputation for uninspired establishmentarianism flourished. One role of the Smithsonian, as Adams saw it, was to “put on exhibits that make people uncomfortable,” so it was no accident that the four Smithsonian exhibits most criticized in recent years for “counterculture” “political correctness” — “The West As America,” “A More Perfect Union,” “Science in American Life,” and the planned *Enola Gay* exhibition — were developed during his tenure. Adams showed little respect for military history, at least as he saw it practiced. He allowed the Eisenhower Institute to fold by not replacing its director, Forrest Pogue, when he retired. In 1987 Adams told a reporter, “We have lots of artifacts, but [military history is] a field that involves strategy, human suffering. . . . Somehow we haven’t picked that up and run with it. That’s an opportunity, among many, which we ought to seize.” “Take the Air and Space Museum,” he said. “What are the responsibilities of a museum to deal with the destruction caused by air power?”<sup>4</sup>

Martin Harwit, whom Adams chose over a distinguished retired four-star United States Air Force general with a graduate history degree, embraced Adams’s agenda of scholarship and apparently shared his views of military affairs and air power. Harwit set out to encourage the curators to extend their historical research and writings, to hire bright young scholars, to help staff members finish graduate degrees, to increase the intellectual content of displays and exhibitions, and to foster scientific as well as historical study, but not to lessen either the appeal of the museum or its service to public, professional, industrial, and military constituencies. He even confronted two nagging problems of long standing: conservation of precious but deteriorating artifacts and the size of the collection, which had been built by the legendary chief curator Paul Garber, who for over fifty years had collected anything valuable, whether or not the Smithsonian had the storage space or the resources to care for the object. Patient and consultative, open to ideas, considerate of staff while insisting on high standards, Harwit made many difficult choices. Although he did not please everyone or solve every problem, under his constant and consistent prodding, the museum made steady progress. By the early 1990s, Air and Space had progressed to a standard of excellence that its position of leadership — conferred by its location in Washington, its place within Smithsonian, and the size and scope of its collection — required.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Howard Means, “The Quiet Revolutionary,” *Washingtonian*, 22 (Aug. 1987), 96–101, 146–51, esp. 149, 150, 151, 146.

<sup>5</sup> This assessment of Martin Harwit’s tenure is based on my observation of the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) beginning in 1982, frequent discussions with NASM staff and other history and museum professionals

The *Enola Gay* exhibition would advance Harwit's agenda of promoting scholarship, exploring the social contexts and human implications of the aviation and space experiences, and avoiding uncritical celebration of technology. Restoration of the famous airplane began under his predecessor. From the outset the museum staff recognized how controversial the airplane would be, even if it were displayed with only an identifying label. For years, veterans had badgered the museum to restore the *Enola Gay* and display it or to loan or transfer it to a site or institution where it would receive the honor its historic flight deserved. During the 1980s, the NASM's Research Advisory Committee several times debated whether the aircraft should be restored and displayed. Members of the committee favored restoration and exhibition because of the plane's educational value in an exhibition. The only dissenter was the outspokenly antinuclear retired admiral and former commander of United States armed forces in the Pacific, Noel Gayler, who argued forcefully against any act that could be interpreted to celebrate such destruction or to memorialize the killing of so many innocent civilians. Thus well before the museum began mounting an exhibition, even before it began the expensive restoration of the aircraft, the Hiroshima atomic bomber had already come to symbolize both conflicting perspectives on American war making—emphasizing either innovative technological achievement or the mass death of enemy civilians—and, more widely, positive and negative judgments on the American past. The airplane had become, and within the museum was understood to have become, a flash point of profound, often emotional disagreement about how to observe, or even whether to observe, the event that had made this most famous of military aircraft significant. When, in 1989 and 1990, in preparation for the exhibit, the museum undertook a sixteen-month program of lectures, films, panel discussions, and scholarly symposia about strategic bombing, argument was often intense. Disagreement broke out in the planning committee over whom to invite to participate. During the events, participants and people in the audience disagreed among themselves, often radically, particularly over the motives for, and the effects of, the bombing campaigns during World War II and over the use of nuclear weapons both in 1945 and, during the Cold War, for deterrence.<sup>6</sup>

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beginning in the early 1980s, and service on three NASM advisory committees: special advisory committee on research, 1986; Collections Management Advisory Committee, 1988–1991, as chair; and Advisory Committee on Research and Collections Management, 1991–present, as chair. My views are supported in part by "Statement by I. Michael Heyman, Secretary Smithsonian Institution," May 2, 1995 (in Kohn's possession). In my judgment, Harwit's direction of NASM was designed to conform its activities to the understanding of the role of the Smithsonian first articulated in the Smithsonian's first circular: not merely to entertain and amuse the public or to inspire them and celebrate national achievements, but to educate and to advance the frontiers of knowledge. See G. Brown Goode, *Plan of Organization and Regulations* (Washington, 1881), cited in G. Carroll Lindsay, "George Brown Goode," in *Keepers of the Past*, ed. Clifford L. Lord (Chapel Hill, 1965), 132–33, 137. Compare Goode's ideas with those that inspired NASM, according to Roland, "Celebration or Education?," 77–89.

<sup>6</sup> As chief of air force history at the time and at my own request, I advised the planning committee and attended many of the events. I recognized the air force's interest in, and sensitivity to, public interpretations of military aviation history and strategic bombing, especially involving atomic and nuclear weapons. My purpose was to encourage the museum to present a broad range of the best scholarly interpretations and the voices of the most knowledgeable and thoughtful participants, to avoid moralizing or politically inspired perspectives that were not based on solid research or high-quality analysis, and to position the museum "above the battle" of conflicting interpretations about strategic bombing and the use of the atomic bombs in 1945. The original

In keeping with the goals of scholarship and education and in spite of the conflict any exhibition was sure to provoke, the museum embedded in the exhibit a didactic objective that exacerbated the potential for controversy. According to the 1993 planning document, the exhibition's "primary goal" was "to encourage visitors to make a thoughtful and balanced re-examination of the atomic bombings in the light of the political and military factors leading to the decision to use the bomb, the human suffering experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long-term implications of the events of August 6 and 9, 1945." In other words, the chief purpose was not simply to present a historical investigation of what happened, why, and what it meant, but to revisit the American decision to use the bomb in 1945, to ask whether the bomb was needed or justified, and to suggest "an uncertain, potentially dangerous future for all of civilization." "The exhibition would conclude, as it began, by noting the debatable character of the atomic bombings," read an earlier document. Secretary Adams expressed worry about the contentious nature of the proposal. In response, the chairman of the Aeronautics Department, Tom Crouch, who would oversee production of the exhibit script, told Harwit: "Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic Bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both."<sup>7</sup> From the beginning, then, the *Enola Gay* exhibit was designed to provoke its audience; and in the mind of the chief supervising curator, the museum faced an unbridgeable chasm between scholarship and commemoration. Harwit insisted that the museum could do both, impartially and responsibly, and he suggested that Crouch and Michael Neufeld, the lead curator, could withdraw if work on the exhibit would violate their professional ethics. Both agreed that it would not, and they continued.<sup>8</sup>

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slate of speakers was in my (and others') opinion heavily tilted toward criticism of strategic bombing, the development and use of atomic weapons, and the meaning and impact of the nuclear age, and it did not include the most knowledgeable veterans or those scholars most current in researching the field. The museum rectified this bias in the program and participants. Harwit made clear that the program should introduce museum staff to the best scholarship and most knowledgeable veterans in preparation for the *Enola Gay* exhibit.

<sup>7</sup> National Air and Space Museum, "Exhibition Planning Document July 1993. Tentative Exhibit Title: The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Onset of the Cold War. Projected Dates: May 1995 to January 1996," pp. 2, 16 (in Kohn's possession); National Air and Space Museum, "A Proposal. Hiroshima and Nagasaki: A Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum," [1993?], p. 4, *ibid.*; Tom Crouch to Harwit, memo: "SUBJECT: A Response to the Secretary," July 21, 1993, p. 2, *ibid.*; See Robert Adams to Harwit, July 17, 1993, *ibid.*; Adams said he found much of the planning document "compelling. There could be an exhibit here that would do the Smithsonian credit. On the other hand, there are some, fairly fundamental aspects of it with which I am no more in agreement now than when we have discussed them on previous occasions." Adams listed seven points, asked for changes, and clearly expressed his unease about aspects of the interpretation, at one point using the term "increasing the risk to SL." Crouch warned Harwit about tampering with the exhibit piecemeal to meet Adams's objections: "What we will accomplish is to transform a good, powerful, and honest exhibition into a mass of confused messages on the basis of ten million nickel-and-dime changes."

<sup>8</sup> Martin Harwit, conversation with Richard H. Kohn, July 18, 1995. On combining scholarship with commemoration in the exhibit, see "Presenting History: Museums in a Democratic Society," conference sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 19, 1995. An audio tape of the conference can be purchased from the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife Program & Cultural Studies, Washington, D.C. See also *Washington Post*, April 20, 1995, p. A7; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 20, 1995, p. A7; *ibid.*, April 24, 1995, p. D1.

The first script, finished in January 1994, titled the exhibition "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War"; it combined patriotic commemoration with serious scholarship. The 303 pages of text, comprising narrative explanation and labels to connect and identify dozens of photographs, paintings, maps, charts, documents, videos, and artifacts, including the fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, was a sophisticated historical collage. The exhibition told the story with a clarity and completeness designed to appeal to varied audiences, while compromising none of the complexity. The first of five sections set the scene by describing the war in the Pacific during 1945, focusing on the mounting casualties in the island campaigns, the strategic bombing of Japan, and the two home fronts at war. The second investigated the decision to drop the bomb, beginning with the Manhattan Project and ending with an exegesis of the factors that influenced President Harry S. Truman and his senior advisers. The third and longest (92 pages) recounted the history of the B-29, its use against Japan in 1945, the formation and training of the 509th Composite Group (which dropped the bombs), the history of the *Enola Gay* airplane, and the details of the two missions on August 6 and 9, 1945. The fourth described the effect of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, emphasizing the human suffering. The fifth, the shortest and most superficial, devoted 10 pages to Japan's decision to surrender and 14 to the Cold War and the nuclear arms race.<sup>9</sup>

The story was told in context, frequently with rich detail. The themes of risk, bravery, and struggles to overcome unprecedented technical and operational problems underlay the third section. The script thus celebrated American ingenuity and technical prowess. The two longest subsections in the exhibition script, nearly 20 percent of the entire text, reconstructed with respect and sensitivity the experiences of the *Enola Gay*'s aviators: their selection, training, life in the States and in the Pacific, and challenges in flying the two missions. The museum consulted and worked with veterans, and it arranged for loans of documents and artifacts, most notably from museums in Japan.

In presenting historical interpretations, the texts were cautious and balanced, choosing words precisely so as to treat controversial subjects with a tone of distance and detachment. On the cause of the war, the script said, "Japanese expansionism was marked by naked aggression and extreme brutality. The slaughter of tens of thousand of Chinese in Nanking in 1937 shocked the world. Atrocities by Japanese troops included brutal mistreatment of civilians, forced laborers and prisoners of war, and biological experiments on human victims." On the decision to use the bomb, the script portrayed the president rather sympathetically.

According to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill . . . 'the decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb . . . was never even an issue.' Upon becoming President in April 1945, Harry Truman inherited a very expensive bomb project

<sup>9</sup> National Air and Space Museum, "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War," first draft script, Jan. 12-14, 1994 (in Kohn's possession). For diagrams of the sections, with major artifact placements, see *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1995, p. E5; and below, 1050 and 1051.

that had always aimed at producing a military weapon. Furthermore he was faced with the prospect of an invasion and he was told that the bomb would be useful for impressing the Soviet Union. He therefore saw no reason to avoid using the bomb. Alternatives for ending the Pacific war other than an invasion or atomic-bombing were available, but are more obvious in hindsight that [*sic*] they were at the time.

Churchill observed that "Truman and his advisers could not know how the war would actually end." On projected American casualties in the planned invasion of Japan, perhaps the greatest bone of contention between the museum and its critics, the original script was fair. "To many on the Allied side, the suicidal resistance of the Japanese military justified the harshest possible measures. The appalling casualties suffered by both sides seemed to foreshadow what could be expected during an invasion of Japan. Allied victory was assured, but its final cost in lives remained disturbingly uncertain." On Japanese resistance to surrender, the script characterized the Japanese government as "dominated" by "hawkish Army generals" and "die-hard military leaders who wished to fight a last battle in Japan." The Japanese peace feeler in the spring of 1945 was therefore "weak and indecisive." "As a result, opportunities to end the war early were greatly limited." An Exhibit Advisory Committee of ten scholars from the government, academe, and the literary community convened by the museum to critique this first script praised the curators for a "sound" approach and "a careful and professional job," which required only "a little refining"; individual committee members disagreed with parts of the script but, according to one participant, "these concerns were a matter of emphasis." All agreed that the exhibit "would inform, challenge and commemorate" and was "solid and . . . rooted in the latest historical scholarship."<sup>10</sup>

What most bothered the critics, including some historians, and led to the public campaign of opposition by the Air Force Association, other veterans' groups, politicians, and commentators were not the carefully crafted statements of interpretation, virtually all of which were consensus scholarship. (A very few statements, mostly taken out of context, were used publicly to accuse the museum of an anti-American and pro-Japanese portrayal.)<sup>11</sup> The problems with the script were the omission of material, the emphasis on other material, the order and placement of facts and analysis, and the tone and the mood. Taken as a whole and read with the emotional impact on viewers in mind, the exhibition *was* in fact unbalanced; it possessed a very clear and potent point of view. On a level of feeling that could

<sup>10</sup> National Air and Space Museum, "Crossroads," 100, p. 5. (Each part of this draft script bears a number in the hundreds and is separately paginated, so 100, p. 5, is page 5 of part 1.) *Ibid.*, 200, pp. 1, 56; 100, p. 6. See also *ibid.*, 16, 23, and 54. *Ibid.*, 200, pp. 25, 26; Stanley Goldberg, "Smithsonian Suffers Legionnaire's Disease," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 51 (May/June 1995), 30. Cf. Wallace, "Battle of the Enola Gay," 2-5.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Wallace points out that most "of the pundits . . . relied on a series of articles by John T. Correll, editor of *Air Force Magazine*," a judgment that confirms my own reading of columns and press reports. See Wallace, "Battle of the Enola Gay," 2. For a glaring example, see "The Shame of Enola Gay," *Popular Mechanics*, 172 (Aug. 1995), 45-49. The story title on the cover of the magazine reads "Enola Gay: From Glory to Dishonor. Our Shameful Treatment of The World's Most Famous Airplane."

be reached more powerfully through the senses of sight and sound than through the intellectuality of words, the exhibit appealed to viewers' emotions, and its message could be read to be tendentious and moralizing; the exhibition script could be read to condemn American behavior at the end of World War II.<sup>12</sup>

On the first panel of text at the entry to the exhibition, in the second sentence mentioning the atomic bomb, visitors would learn that "To this day, controversy has raged about whether dropping this weapon on Japan was necessary to end the war quickly."<sup>13</sup> Nearly every section of the exhibit that followed would contribute, directly or by juxtaposition, to doubts not only about the necessity and appropriateness of the bomb but about American motives, honor, decency, and moral integrity in wreaking such destruction on what the script portrayed as a defeated (but not surrendering) enemy.

The first of the five sections, "A Fight to the Finish," characterized combat in the Pacific as a bitter contest of racial hatreds that by 1945 had escalated to unprecedented ferocity; thus it implied that racism was an important impulse for using the atomic bombs. The script seemed sympathetic to both sides, but it contained an inherent imbalance of sympathies: The Japanese fought out of fear "that unconditional surrender would mean the annihilation of their culture," the Americans out of vengeance, although "the suicidal resistance of the Japanese military justified the harshest possible measures." The next section treated the kamikazes with sensitivity and sadness. What followed detailed the vast destruction wrought by the B-29 fire bombing of Japanese cities; condemned strategic bombing by saying that "during World War II civilians themselves had become the target"; equivalently quoted Franklin D. Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, and Neville Chamberlain in 1939 eschewing the bombing of civilians, and a few pages later George C. Marshall threatening the fire bombing of Japanese civilians in November 1941; and generally sympathized with the Japanese victims of the 1945 bombing campaign. The comparison between the American and Japanese home fronts—one description emphasizing dedication, unity of purpose, material production, and prosperity (and mentioning the internment of Japanese Americans), the other focusing on increasing deprivation and suffering ("on the brink of collapse")—completed the contrast and could be read to swing the weight of sympathy clearly to the Japanese side.<sup>14</sup>

The second section, "The Decision to Drop the Bomb," offered in its concluding analyses consensus interpretations that avoided criticizing the American action.

<sup>12</sup> I detected this bias in my first reading of the script and communicated my concerns in a letter, accompanied by specific criticisms: Kohn to Harwit, June 18, 1994 (in Kohn's possession). Other historians read this or later scripts similarly according to Gerhard L. Weinberg, conversation with Kohn, July 17, 1995, and Alfred Goldberg, conversation with Kohn, July 18, 1995. This bias in the script coincided with that apparent to me in 1989–1990, in the museum's planned program of films, lectures, and symposia. I and others warned the museum that it could and should air different interpretations, but that if the exhibit did not stand above the battles over interpretation and tilted toward an attack on air power, the air force, or American behavior in the war against Japan, the museum might forfeit support in the aviation and space community and incite an assault from the military.

<sup>13</sup> National Air and Space Museum, "Crossroads," 100, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 6, 17–28. The three subsections of "A Fight to the Finish" were: "Combat in the Pacific," 21 pages; "A Torch to the Enemy: The Strategic Bombing of Japan," 9 pages; and "Two Nations at War," 16 pages.

But the text also took every opportunity to pose alternatives and raise doubts. Viewers of the exhibition could not help but walk away believing, as the planning document promised, that a different outcome was possible and preferable. The titles of some subsections indicated a line of interpretation that visitors could read as skeptical of the necessity of using the bomb:

- “Deciding to Build the Bomb,” 16 pages
- “The Most Terrible Weapon Ever Known in Human History,” 5 pages
- “Japan Looks for a Way Out of the War,” 6 pages
- “The Soviet Factor,” 7 pages
- “Selecting the Target,” 10 pages
- “The Invasion of Japan: A Giant Okinawa?” 6 pages
- “Truman, Stalin, Potsdam and the Bomb,” 10 pages

In seven sidebar “Historical Controversies,” the curators emphasized disagreements among scholars:

- “Would the Bomb Have Been Dropped on the Germans?”
- “Did the United States Ignore the Japanese Peace Initiative?”
- “Would the War Have Ended Sooner if the United States had Guaranteed the Emperor’s Position?”
- “How Important was the Soviet Factor in the ‘Decision to Drop the Bomb?’”
- “Was a Warning or Demonstration Possible?”
- “Was the Invasion Inevitable if the Atomic Bomb had not been Dropped?”
- “Was the Decision to Drop the Bomb Justified?”

While the texts always identified what was counterfactual or speculative and emphasized what decision makers knew or how they reasoned in 1945, the script as a whole emphasized how hindsight could differ. On the Japanese peace feeler in spring 1945:

It is nonetheless possible to assert, at least in hindsight, that the United States should have paid closer attention to these signals from Japan. Like so many aspects of the ‘decision to drop the bomb,’ this matter will remain forever speculative and controversial.

It is possible that there was a lost opportunity to end the war without either atomic bombings or an invasion of Japan.

Some combination of blockade, firebombing, an Emperor guarantee, and a Soviet declaration of war would probably have forced a Japanese surrender, but to President Truman an invasion appeared to be a real possibility. Matters were not as clear in 1945 as they are in hindsight, because Truman and his advisers could not know how the war would actually end.

It is . . . clear that there were alternatives to both an invasion and dropping atomic bombs without warning—for example guaranteeing the Emperor’s position, staging a demonstration of the bomb’s power, or waiting for blockade, firebombing and a Soviet declaration of war to take their toll on Japan. Since these alternatives are clearer in hindsight and it is speculative whether they

would have induced the Japanese government to surrender quickly, the debate over 'the decision to drop the bomb' will remain forever controversial.<sup>15</sup>

The third and longest section, "Delivering the Bomb," celebrated American technological and operational ingenuity and the bravery of the American aviators. The texts and the subsection titles, however, were admiring but matter-of-fact, especially in comparison with the sections before and after:

"The B-29: A Three-Billion Dollar Gamble," 9 pages

"The B-29 and the Bombing of Japan," 17 pages

"The World's First Atomic Strike Force," 27 pages

"The B-29 Superfortress 'Enola Gay,'" 6 pages

"The Missions," 27 pages

Sandwiched between a long section questioning the use of the bomb and the fourth unit depicting what happened when the bombs killed tens of thousands of Japanese civilians, this careful, laudatory reconstruction of airplanes and fliers might have had very little emotional impact. And once visitors moved on to the next viewing area, they would confront scenes that made any impulse to memorialization utterly inappropriate.

Unit four possessed no ambivalence whatsoever. "When visitors go from Unit 3 to Unit 4," predicted the 1993 planning document, "they will be immediately hit by a drastic change of mood and perspective: from well-lit and airy to gloomy and oppressive. The aim will be to put visitors on the ground during the atomic bombings of the two cities." "Ground Zero: Hiroshima, 8:15 A.M., August 6, 1945[;] Nagasaki, 11:02 A.M., August 9, 1945" was designed to shock. "If Unit 2 [the decision to drop the bomb] is the intellectual heart of the exhibit, Unit 4 is its emotional center. Photos of victims, enlarged to life-size, stare out at the visitor. . . . The emphasis will be on the personal tragedy of this experience."<sup>16</sup> The four parts—"Before the Bomb: Two Cities at War" (9 pages), "The Incredible Avalanche of Light" (9 pages), "Two Cities in Chaos" (22 pages), and "A Deadly New Threat: Radioactivity" (19 pages)—were horrifying. Relentlessly, repetitively, redundantly, in excruciating detail, returning again and again to the death and mutilation of women and children, this section of the exhibit succeeded even in text form in eliciting shock and disgust. The many pictures of human pain and suffering, the heartrending quotations from observers and victims, all appealed to the emotions of viewers. Such scenes not only could reinforce anxieties about whether the United States needed to use the bomb but could provoke feelings of guilt and shame among American visitors, including veterans. In the ensuing controversy, no part of the exhibit angered veterans more.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 200, pp. 28, 31, 56, 66.

<sup>16</sup> National Air and Space Museum, "Exhibition Planning Document, July 1993," p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> See John T. Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space," *Air Force Magazine*, 77 (April 1994), 24–29; John T. Correll, "'The Last Act' at Air and Space," *ibid.* (April 1994), 58–64; John T. Correll, "The Three Doctors and the *Enola Gay*," *ibid.* (Nov. 1994), 8–12; and John T. Correll to editor, *Washington Post*, Aug. 14, 1994, p. C9. On the reactions of veterans of the 509th Composite Group, see *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 2, 1994, pp. 1, 7; and *Miami Herald*, Feb. 23, 1995, p. 13A. The author of the last article, Kate Cannon, the daughter of

The final section finished the job. In a short 24 pages (some introductory), "The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" told two stories: "Japan Surrenders" (8 pages) and "The Cold War and the Nuclear Arms Race" (14 pages).

For Japan, the United States, and its Allies, a horrific war was brought to an abrupt [*sic*] end, although at a cost debated to this day; for the world, a nuclear arms race unfolded that still threatens unimaginable devastation. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot be said to have simply caused either the end of the war or the nuclear arms race, but they have exercised a profound influence as military and political acts, as symbols of the arrival of the nuclear age, and as a glimpse of the realities of nuclear war.

Although the first subsection concluded that "the surrender of Japan was doubtlessly a critical legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," that statement grudgingly followed 162 words focusing once again on the controversy over whether the bombs were needed to shock Japan into surrender, whether the United States should have moderated its demand for unconditional surrender, and whether the Soviet intervention was equally responsible for the surrender. The 14 pages devoted to the Cold War depicted the nuclear arms race ("A World Gone 'M.A.D.'") in starkly simplistic terms; an entire page examined the 1954 nuclear test accident that killed one crewman and sickened others on the Japanese fishing boat *Lucky Dragon*—emphasizing once more the personal, human tragedy of atomic and nuclear power.<sup>18</sup>

Read in this fashion with the probable reaction of visitors imagined, the entire exhibition cast a wholly negative interpretation on the development, use, and impact of the atomic bombs. It was thus possible, looking beyond the careful wording of each individual panel or label, to detect in the five sections of the exhibit an interpretation that was in today's parlance revisionist, countercultural, and condemnatory of the United States: the war was a racist conflict waged by Americans for vengeance, a war essentially won by mid-1945; the bombing was an unnecessary act, growing out of bureaucratic, diplomatic, and political as well as military impulses, that wreaked an atrocity upon a defeated Japanese population. The bombing made an uncertain contribution to ending the conflict but an unquestionable one to a more dangerous, depressing world that still troubles us today.

To be fair to the curators, few readers saw such extremes in the first draft or voiced strong objections, at least before the controversy over the script burst into public view. The exhibit followed recent innovations in the museological community: to explore the broad contexts of important events, particularly their human dimensions; to include complexity; to stimulate viewer interest and evoke controversy; to educate as well as to commemorate; and to combine the best recent scholarship with artifacts and other materials in multimedia, interactive "shows"

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a 509th veteran, teaches at the University of Miami and Florida Atlantic University and is finishing an American history Ph.D., doing a "good bit of research . . . on World War II veterans." She wrote that "The American Legion's accusations that the exhibit made Americans look like 'butchers' and 'aggressors' . . . worked," inducing "some veterans" at the last 509th reunion to make "hysterical charges about the exhibit." *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> National Air and Space Museum, "Crossroads," 500, pp. 1, 15, 18.

that draw in audiences in powerful ways, intellectually and emotionally.<sup>19</sup> The exhibit contained a balance of techniques and approaches. The first section, on 1945, provided context, and it was strongly interpretative. The second, on the decision to use the bomb, emphasized recent historical scholarship. The third—on the bomb, the airplanes, and the mission—memorialized American science, technology, industry, and fighting men. The fourth roused powerful emotions in viewers, while memorializing people the museum perceived as among the major stakeholders, the Japanese. The fifth, on Japan's surrender and the nuclear age, explored implications and meanings. If the story featured civilian death, a case could be made that the most enduring significance of strategic bombing and of the atomic bombs, perhaps even of World War II, was to spread destruction to civilian populations in ways and with results heretofore unknown in the history of war.<sup>20</sup>

Knowing that the exhibit was meant to provoke and that it addressed hot-button issues, the museum administration consulted a distinguished group of scholars, balanced to include a range of expertise and experience. The museum's leaders emerged from the meeting with this Exhibit Advisory Committee in February 1994 believing that the product was sound and that the necessary modifications were not major. Apparently the discussion at that meeting and the written critiques that grew out of it did not give sufficient warning about the imbalances in the script to prepare the museum for what followed. Military historians who scrutinized the script later would flag the problems, of detail and conception, and criticize the script in much stronger terms, a few questioning its scholarship and interpretations as well as its balance. But by then it was too late.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> On recent trends in museum exhibits, see Eric Gable and Richard Handler, "The Authority of Documents at Some American History Museums," *Journal of American History*, 81 (June 1994), 119–20, 121, 134; Cary Carson, "Lost in the Fun House: A Commentary on Anthropologists' First Contact with History Museums," *ibid.*, 143–50; Barbara Franco, "The Communication Conundrum: What Is the Message? Who Is Listening?," *ibid.*, 152–63; and Cary Carson, remarks, "Enola Gay Exhibit: A Case Study in Controversy," panel at "Presenting History."

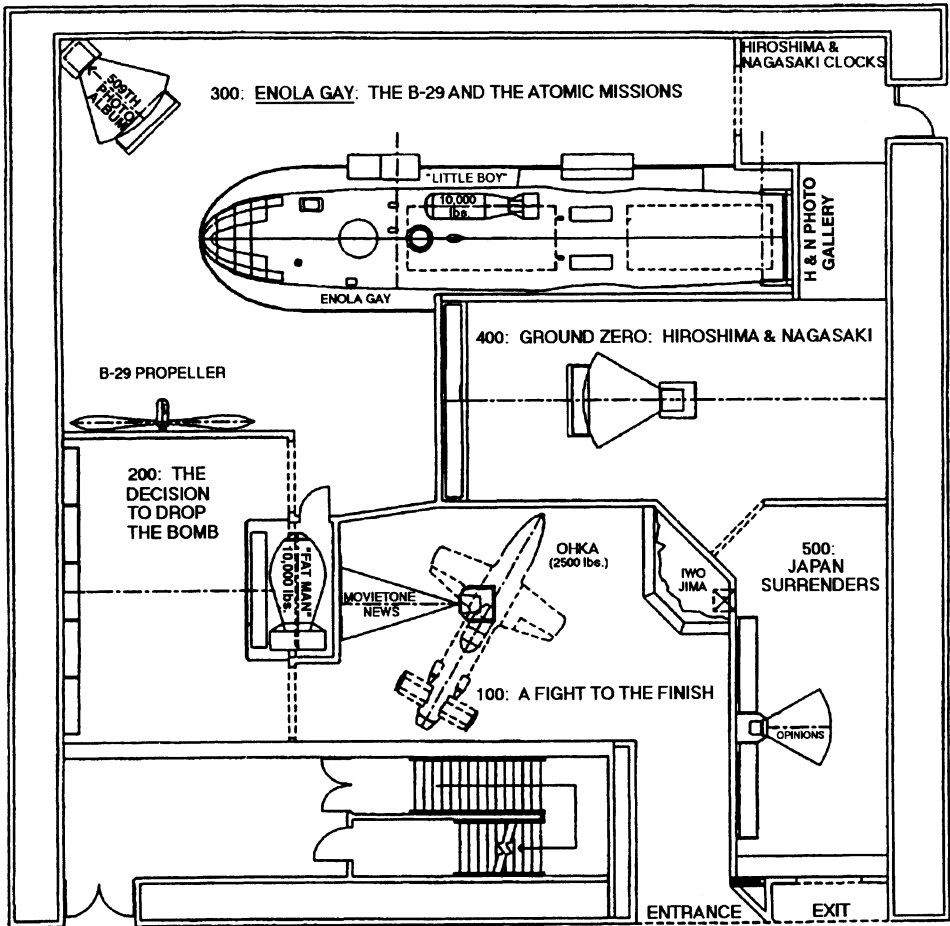
<sup>20</sup> For Tom Crouch's explanation of the exhibit's purpose and the curators' goals, see Tom Crouch, remarks, "Enola Gay Exhibit" panel, "Presenting History." See also his testimony, statement, and answers to questions in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Rules and Administration, *Hearings on the Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 104 Cong., 1 sess., May 18, 1995, pp. 72–78, 89–90, 92–93, 95–98. See also, "Excerpts from Hearings of the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration," *Journal of American History*, 82 (Dec. 1995), 1136–44. As late as August 1994, Harwit expressed his goals for the exhibition as both a commemoration of the veterans' contributions and "an accurate portrayal that conveys the reality of atomic war and its consequences." *Washington Post*, Aug. 7, 1994, p. C9.

<sup>21</sup> For the meeting and its immediate aftermath, I have relied on Goldberg, "Smithsonian Suffers Legionnaires' Disease," 29–30; and on conversations over the last year with Martin Harwit, Tom Crouch, Edward Linenthal, and Herman Wolk. I have seen in its entirety only one written critique from the February meeting that was filed before the Air Force Association attacked the exhibit publicly: [Herman Wolk], "Comments on Script, 'The Crossroads . . .,'" [Feb. 1994] (in Kohn's possession). Excerpts from other comments are printed in Tom Crouch's statement in Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 77. My own views of the first and fourth scripts were communicated in Kohn to Harwit, June 18, Sept. 19, 26, 1994, Jan. 31, 1995 (in Kohn's possession). For the reactions of other historians critical of the exhibit scripts, I have relied on Weinberg, conversation; Goldberg, conversation; Edward J. Drea, "Memorandum for DOD WWII Commemoration Committee," April 13, 1994 (in Kohn's possession); Edward J. Drea, "Memorandum For: DOD WWII Commemoration Committee," July 7, 1994, *ibid.*; Harold W. Nelson, "Memorandum for Executive Director 50th Anniversary of World War II Commemoration Committee," April 19, 1994, *ibid.*; Richard Hallion to Tom Crouch, April 13, 1994, *ibid.*; and [Herman Wolk], "Comments on 'The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II,'" [second script], July 1994, *ibid.*

The second story was the reaction of the Air Force Association and its public attack on the exhibition, undertaken either to force a revision or to stop it altogether. The association, formed immediately after World War II by Army Air Forces veterans to promote air power and the air force, had evolved over two generations into a large, powerful advocate for a strong national defense and a chief connecting link between the air force and its industrial suppliers. A private organization with an elected leadership and professional staff, it is separate from the United States Air Force, although the association's membership includes many active-duty and reserve servicemen and -women and many veterans, overwhelmingly of the air forces, of World War II and the Cold War. Some of the association's Washington staff had come to view Smithsonian in general and NASM in particular with suspicion; the exhibit script confirmed their worst fears. This was the fourth planning document for the *Enola Gay* exhibition that they had seen. They had detected hidden political messages in all those documents. Especially offensive to people who viewed their organization as representing tens of thousands of Army Air Forces veterans of World War II, living and dead, were the hints of doubt about the ethics and morality of the way the United States fought Japan and, by implication, about the honor of those who did the fighting. From the association's perspective, this "emotionally charged program," which "was fundamentally lacking in balance and context," was all the more suspect because the museum had been assuring veterans for years that the exhibition would honor their service.<sup>22</sup> Association staff members believed their objections were disregarded, although NASM officials believed they were consulting and listening (if not exactly responding) to a primary stakeholder and an important potential opponent. Having shared its plans, the museum leadership was therefore shocked when *Air Force Magazine* published, in April 1994, a virulent attack on the exhibit script, the curators, the director, and the museum, less than two months after the Exhibit Advisory Committee had seemingly approved the script.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Correll, "'Last Act' at Air and Space," 59–60.

<sup>23</sup> The first public attack was issued as a documented "Air Force Association Special Report" titled "The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay" and published as Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space." Six months earlier, the association's executive director had written Harwit that "the new concept does not relieve my earlier concerns and, in some respects, it seems even less balanced . . . than the earlier concepts were. . . . you assure me that the exhibition will 'honor the bravery of the veterans,' but that theme is virtually nonexistent in the proposal as drafted." The plan "dwells, to the effective exclusion of all else, on the horrors of war"; the "concept paper treats Japan and United States in the war as if their participation in the war were morally equivalent. If anything, incredibly, it gives the benefit of opinion to Japan, which was the aggressor." "Balance is owed to all Americans, particularly those who come to the exhibition to learn. What they will get from the program as described is not history or fact but a partisan interpretation." Monroe W. Hatch Jr. to Harwit, Sept. 10, 1993 (in Kohn's possession). In 1993, at the request of the museum, I discussed the proposed exhibit with General Hatch, with whom and for whom I had worked in the 1980s when he was inspector general of the air force, vice commander in chief of Strategic Air Command, and vice chief of staff of the air force. (In 1988, when he was my supervisor's boss, I had shared concerns about the exhibit with him.) While both General Hatch and I recognized the broader purposes and activities of the association, the general was emphatic in saying that he "represented a veterans organization," which I interpreted as a statement by him of the association's primary reason for taking such intense interest in the *Enola Gay* exhibit. On the Air Force Association, see James H. Straubel, *Crusade for Airpower: The Story of the Air Force Association* (Washington, 1982); and Wallace, "The Battle of the Enola Gay," 10–11.

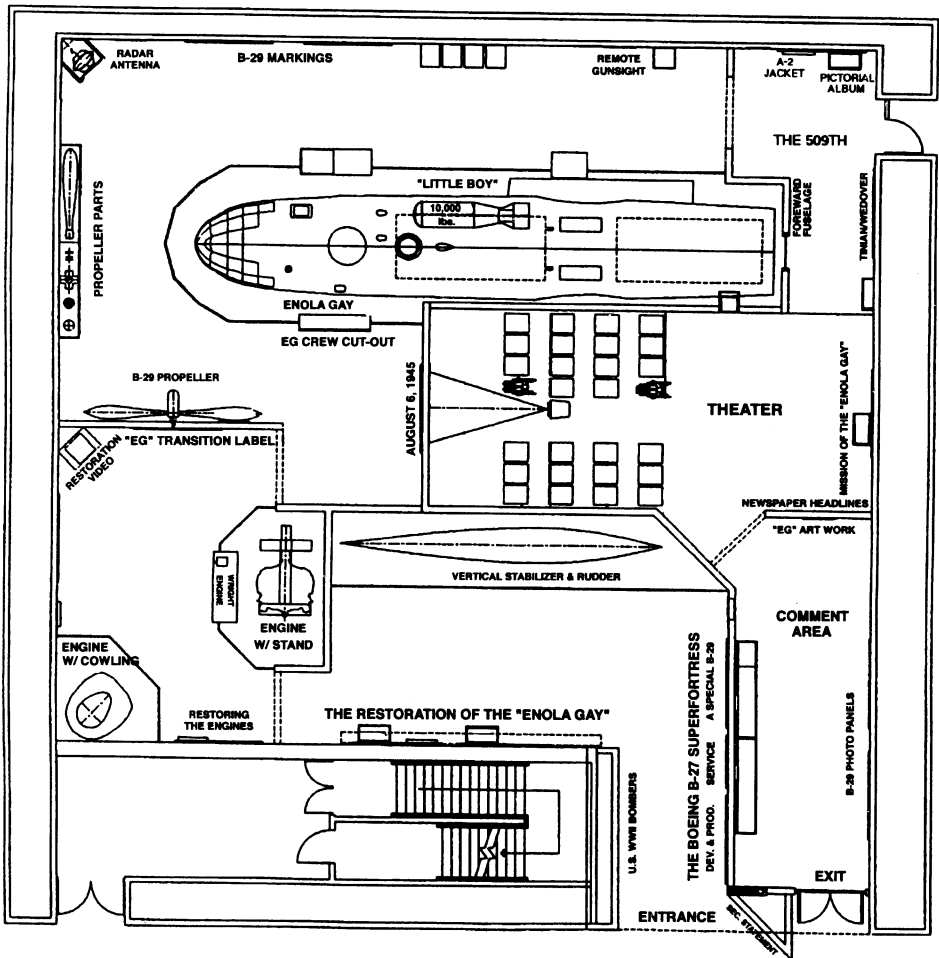


Blueprints for the planned main exhibition gallery of the National Air and Space Museum's "The Last Act" from October 1994. Critics of the exhibition charged that the sections entitled "The Decision to Drop the Bomb" and "Ground Zero" embodied a revisionist interpretation of American motives and actions during World War II.

*Courtesy National Air and Space Museum.*

The violence of the Air Force Association's public assault — the personal attacks on Smithsonian secretary Robert Adams and Air and Space director Martin Harwit, the accusation that the museum had been neglecting its primary task of preserving its priceless artifacts, the charges of political correctness — indicated something deeper at work.<sup>24</sup> Just as that first script cannot be understood apart from the museum's history of the previous ten years, so the Air Force Association's public

<sup>24</sup> For my initial reading of Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space," see Richard H. Kohn to editor, *Air Force Magazine*, 77 (June 1994), 6.



Blueprints for the main exhibition gallery of the National Air and Space Museum's "The *Enola Gay*" from May 1995. B-29 hardware and displays on the restoration of the *Enola Gay* replace the controversial elements of the "The Last Act."  
*Courtesy National Air and Space Museum.*

blast, which brought the controversy over the exhibit to the nation's attention, cannot be understood apart from the unhappiness with the museum felt by some in the air force community. They believed that Smithsonian as a whole and Air and Space curators in particular were antimilitary, that displays downplayed military as opposed to commercial or general aviation, that the museum sometimes took a skeptical or disparaging attitude toward aviation, flight, air power, space exploration, even science and technology per se. Such perceptions were all the more irritating because Army Air Forces chief Hap Arnold had been instrumental in founding the museum and had donated many aircraft (including the *Enola Gay*) to the Smithsonian, and Sen. Barry Goldwater, a pilot in World War II and a

general in the air force reserve, had provided the final push to get the museum built, citing the need to celebrate aviation's achievements. A permanent exhibition on air power in World War I, which opened at the museum in 1991, drew special ire, not only because it emphasized the carnage of the war, the airplane as an instrument of death, and the invalidity of popular myths about "knights of the air" but also because the exhibit relegated the airplanes to a secondary role, hanging them from the ceiling virtually out of sight. The exhibit labeled the effect of aviation in that war both limited and a failure. Most infuriating, that exhibit ended with a video on strategic bombing in the seventy-plus years *after* World War I, including the atomic bombing and controversially high estimates of Iraqi casualties in the Gulf War, all of which air force people interpreted as biased, gratuitous, and indicative of the anti-air power attitudes pervading the museum. The aspirations of the aviation community for the museum were revealed in the association's inaugural blast at the exhibition, in the caption to the full-page illustration opposite the first page: "To aviation enthusiasts, the National Air and Space Museum is a special place, where priceless artifacts are held in trust, to be displayed with understanding and pride."<sup>25</sup>

A further problem lay in the lack of public monuments or national memorials to air power and the air force in Washington, in comparison with the army, navy, and marines. There may have been a subtle resentment that the most public reminder of aviation's contribution to American life and the nation's security was left by default to the Smithsonian. The marines have the Iwo Jima Memorial across the Potomac River in Arlington; the navy's is on Pennsylvania Avenue halfway between the White House and the Capitol. Both those services have national museums in the Washington Navy Yard, with historic residences for their ranking officers nearby. (The air force's national museum is at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio.) The army lacks a national museum in Washington, but statues of famous generals dot the Washington landscape, which also includes Civil War fortifications, Arlington National Cemetery with its tomb of the unknown soldier, and many other reminders of army history. Even the merchant seamen of World War II have a memorial, near the Pentagon along the George Washington Parkway. The air force began only recently to raise money and seek a site for an air force memorial in the nation's capital.<sup>26</sup>

Nor can air battles be commemorated like those on land or sea by setting aside battlefields or large vessels, which become sacred ground (and decks) where people can walk, visualizing a two-dimensional clash of arms that moved in relatively slow, understandable terms. Air battles have been sudden, confusing three-dimensional melees difficult to depict adequately even in videos. Historically, air power has been memorialized almost exclusively by means of the machines themselves, displayed alone with labels describing what they did or what they represent. The more famous the aircraft, the more symbolic an emblem to be venerated, not only for the aviators who risked their lives, but for all who contributed to creating

<sup>25</sup> Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space," 24. For air force involvement in the museum's founding, see Roland, "Celebration or Education?," 80-88.

<sup>26</sup> "Clearing the Way for the Air Force Memorial," *Air Force Magazine*, 78 (Aug. 1995), 80-82.

and supporting the machines in the sky.<sup>27</sup> For the military aviation community, the *Enola Gay* was an icon. Perhaps from the beginning some wanted to abort any exhibition beyond the display of that icon, perhaps with some brief celebration of the achievements of the crew, the designers, and the builders, the American war effort, and the contribution of the Army Air Forces to victory in the war. It may well be, as one historian has charged, that the association's campaign "was designed, in part, to embarrass the Smithsonian and force the resignation of Harwit" so the museum would revert to a "strictly celebratory" orientation.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the willingness of the Air Force Association to initiate and lead a public campaign against the exhibit must be understood within two contexts beyond the content of the exhibit: resentment of the National Air and Space Museum and the churning culture war that surfaced during the 1980s and rose to crescendo in 1994.

That culture war is the third element that helps explain the calamity of the *Enola Gay* controversy. The Air Force Association's attack of April 1994 landed like a match on dry tinder. There exploded over the summer and fall of 1994, among veterans' groups and in the speeches of politicians, a rising chorus of criticism, almost all of it directed at the museum, and from the liberal press and columnists as well as conservatives. Much of the outcry was almost certainly spontaneous, but the Air Force Association and veterans' groups did much to plan and manage the public criticism. "Changing the exhibit was no small task," according to one reporter in *Air Force Times*. "It took 18 months of relentless effort from dozens of groups, especially the Air Force Association and the American Legion, which mobilized their members to pressure Capitol Hill lawmakers to stop the exhibit."<sup>29</sup>

Historians and other scholars will need to locate the *Enola Gay* exhibit battle in the wider culture wars, but from the initial attack by *Air Force Magazine* to the postmortems after the exhibit was canceled, those involved in the battle

<sup>27</sup> My thinking derives from Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Correll, "Last Act' at Air and Space," 64; Vago Muradian, "'This Is What We Wanted': How a Veteran's Letter Launched a Campaign to Honor the Enola Gay," *Air Force Times*, Feb. 13, 1995, p. 17; Goldberg, "Smithsonian Suffers Legionnaire's Disease," 33. In his statement to the Senate, on May 11, 1995, R. E. Smith, national president of the Air Force Association, stated: "The question does not end with the *Enola Gay* exhibit. What about the next exhibit and the one after that? We would like to see the museum putting its main effort on its primary mission which is to collect, preserve, and display historic aircraft, spacecraft, and aeronautical artifacts. There are most certainly indications of change; the main one being the resignation of the director. . . . It was unfortunate that matters came to that, but it was probably inevitable." Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> For a sampling of reaction and analysis of the public campaign, see *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 9, 1995, p. 1; "Atom Bomb Exhibit Hit," Council on America's Military Past, *Headquarters Heliogram* (July-Aug. 1994), 1, 8; *Washington Post*, Aug. 14, 1994, p. C8; *Boston Globe*, Aug. 16, 1994, p. 5; *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 29, 1994, p. A10; Charles Krauthammer, "An Exhibit Infused with Revisionism on Hiroshima Bomb," *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 19, 1994, p. 13; *ibid.*, Sept. 2, 1994, pp. 1, 6; Lance Morrow, "Essay: Hiroshima and the Time Machine," *Time*, Sept. 19, 1994, p. 94; *Washington Times*, Dec. 21, 1994, p. 6; A. J. Bacevich, "Rewriting 'The Last Act,'" *World and I*, 9 (Dec. 1994), 78-83; *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jan. 26, 1995, p. 21; and *Raleigh News and Observer*, Feb. 2, 1995, p. 9A. Muradian, "'This Is What We Wanted,'" 17. For an analysis of the press coverage of the controversy, see Tony Capaccio and Uday Mohan, "Missing the Target," *American Journalism Review*, 17 (July/Aug. 1995), 18-26.

connected the exhibition and the argument over it to the campaigns over political correctness, provocative art, multiculturalism, equal opportunity programs, gender and sexual orientation, the national history standards and revisionist history, and just about every other divisive social and cultural issue rending American society, save abortion and prayer in the schools.<sup>30</sup> "What can't be altered," opined the *Wall Street Journal*, "is the clear impression given by the Smithsonian that the American museum whose business it is to tell the nation's story is now in the hands of academics unable to view American history as anything other than a woeful catalog of crimes and aggressions against the helpless peoples of the earth."<sup>31</sup>

The museum responded in a number of ways. Harwit, in a letter to *Air Force Magazine* and in short essays, appealed to verifiable history and to recent scholarship, acknowledging the differing views of the function of the museum and the differing perspectives of the World War II and Cold War generations on the atomic bombings.<sup>32</sup> During the spring and summer of 1994, museum officials also undertook to defuse the criticism by changing the exhibit. Harwit gave the script another careful reading to judge balance, and he found "much of the criticism . . . understandable."<sup>33</sup> Having circulated the draft script with the intention of consulting widely, listening to responses, and altering the exhibit where appropriate, the museum changed the script, making use of criticism from Department of Defense historians and from a team inside the museum consisting chiefly of senior retired military aviators. The museum leadership also began to negotiate content with groups outside the museum with political agendas and no claim to scholarly knowledge, museum expertise, or a balanced perspective. Museums customarily consult, consider, react, and modify their products according to the best advice they can gather, but to negotiate a rendering of the past in exchange for acquiescence poses special dangers.<sup>34</sup> To negotiate an exhibition on the labor movement in American history with the American Federation of Labor–Congress

<sup>30</sup> A particularly incendiary example was George F. Will, "Score Big Points: Kill the Monster at Smithsonian," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jan. 26, 1995, p. 21. Otis Graham connected the controversy over a proposed Disney history park with the *Enola Gay* exhibit battle, arguments in the Santa Barbara high schools over ethnic studies, and debate over the National History Standards. See Otis Graham, "Editor's Corner: Who Owns American History?," *Public Historian*, 17 (Spring 1995), 8–11. See also Karen J. Winkler, "Who Owns History?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 20, 1995, pp. A10–11, A18; Wallace, "Battle of the Enola Gay," 6–8.

<sup>31</sup> *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 29, 1994, p. A10; *Washington Post*, Feb. 11, 1995, p. 21. An editorial in the leading newspaper in the city where the American Legion has its headquarters said, "Americans who love their country are increasingly disgusted with the carping of elitists dedicated to tearing down national morale, insulting national pride and debasing national achievements." The editorial called for firing Martin Harwit and canceling the exhibit. "This isn't the first instance of arrogant revisionism on the part of Smithsonian curators. And it isn't likely to be the last unless Congress intervenes forcefully." *Indianapolis Star*, Jan. 25, 1995, p. A12.

<sup>32</sup> See Martin Harwit to editor, *Air Force Magazine*, 77 (May 1994), 4; *Raleigh News and Observer*, Aug. 12, 1994, p. 21A; and "Enola Gay and a Nation's Memories," *Air & Space*, 9 (Aug./Sept. 1994), 18–21.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Harwit, "Comments on *Crossroads*," April 16, 1994 (in Kohn's possession). This memorandum became public almost immediately. See Correll, "Three Doctors," 8, 9–10.

<sup>34</sup> For the role of the veterans' organizations, see Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 13–40, 116–17, 157–60. This process apparently began in July. See *ibid.*, 14. On "negotiation" with outside groups, see Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York, 1995); Daniel Martinez, remarks, "Enola Gay Exhibit" panel, "Presenting History"; and Barbara Franco, "Doing History in Public: Balancing Historical Fact with Public Meaning," *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association*, 33 (May/June 1995), 5–8.

of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) or one on medicine with the American Medical Association risks making the exhibition hostage to a constituent group that then wields a veto over fact or interpretation. That was exactly what happened to the Air and Space Museum during the last six months of 1994.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of October, after line-by-line review with the American Legion (a participation some veterans' groups refused), the script had been revised to a fifth version. Harwit, who oversaw the negotiations and ordered the changes, became trapped between curators who resisted alterations and the veterans' groups, some of them perhaps bent on getting the exhibit canceled. In August 1994, he expressed surprise at how little the exhibit had been altered, a complaint some historians were making and something the veterans' groups feared openly.<sup>36</sup> Yet two months later there had been enough changes to provoke several dozen historians and writers to protest to the Smithsonian secretary that the museum had caved in to censorship and succumbed to "intellectual corruption," and that the fifth draft was "mere propaganda," the result of "*historical cleansing*." One author attacked the museum for abandoning "history with all its uncomfortable complications" in favor of "feel-good national myths."<sup>37</sup>

Thus by the fall of 1994, the museum had not succeeded in satisfying the veterans and had alienated many historians; its actions had called into question the credibility of the exhibition's scholarship. Harwit had lost the trust of both groups. Mired in a senseless contest over the number of casualties expected in the planned invasion of Japan—a symbol of whether the bombing was necessary—the museum had become the target of a United States Senate resolution demanding history in proper context and exhibits reflecting positively on veterans of the Pacific war; the Smithsonian faced a troubling number of critics and politicians calling for Harwit's resignation or removal and the abandonment of the exhibition as planned. Not until too late did the museum leadership realize that the exhibit could be canceled from the outside.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Harwit has told me that overwhelmingly, the changes desired were insignificant from a scholarly standpoint. For the dangers in negotiations, see Alfred F. Young, "S.O.S.: Storm Warning for American Museums," *OAH Newsletter*, 22 (Nov. 1994), 6, 8; Martinez, remarks, "Enola Gay Exhibit" panel; Barbara Clark Smith, remarks, "Museums in a Democratic Society" panel, "Presenting History"; and Richard Kurin, remarks, "Wrap-Up Session" panel, "Presenting History."

<sup>36</sup> Herman S. Wolk, "Subject: Conversation with Dr. Martin Harwit," memorandum, Aug. 23, 1994 (in Kohn's possession). On June 21, lead curator Michael J. Neufeld had sent the revised (second version) script to the Exhibit Advisory Committee members, but his cover letter ruled out any further substantive changes. "If you find any factual errors or if you object strongly to certain formulations in the revised script, I would be happy to hear them. But, if the exhibit is to be opened in late May 1995, as planned, we must now move on to the production and construction phase. This script therefore must be considered a finished product, minor wording changes aside." Michael J. Neufeld to Edwin Bearss et al., June 21, 1994, *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> William Allison et al. to I. Michael Heyman, Nov. 11, 1994, *ibid.* See also "Enola Gay Controversy Continues," *OAH Newsletter*, Feb. 1995, p. 3; "Teach-Ins to Foster Discussion of Atomic Bomb Exhibit," *ibid.*, May 1995, p. 15. The fifth and last version of the script, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," Oct. 26, 1994, is copyrighted by the Smithsonian and can be purchased from its Office of the General Counsel. This script, considerably shorter than the original, in my judgment is not as imbalanced as the first version, but it errs on the other side by simplifying the history and arguing one-sidedly for the necessity of the bomb and its agency in ending the war in the Pacific. *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 1994, p. E15. See also *ibid.*, Jan. 31, 1995, p. A11; and Bernstein, "Guest Opinion: Misconceived Patriotism," 4.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas J. Kilcline, remarks, "Museums in a Democratic Society" panel, "Presenting History"; *Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 1995, p. C1; *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 1995, p. A6; Budiansky et al., "Museum in Crisis," 73–75.

The fourth and fifth elements came together after November 1994 with a speed and power that decided the outcome. First came the largely unexpected victory of the Republicans in the fall congressional elections. For those in the House of Representatives who had made the culture war central to their critique of American society, canceling this exhibit seemed a necessary victory, and one essential to rolling back the cultural Left in American intellectual life. After the exhibit was canceled, newly installed House Speaker Newt Gingrich told the nation's state governors that the "Enola Gay fight was a fight, in effect, over the reassertion by most Americans that they're sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country."<sup>39</sup> As part of the larger battle over American values, the *Enola Gay* exhibit seemed to its critics more emotional, significant, and less ambiguous than the debate over the National History Standards, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Public Broadcasting Corporation, and the suspected left bias of the press and other institutions. If an exhibition that appeared to be openly unpatriotic, planned by a national, publicly funded museum on the fiftieth anniversary of the winning of World War II, could not be shut down or altered, then fashions and institutions more insulated from the levers of power might be truly unreachable. No matter that forcing the cancellation might excite charges of political censorship or the suppression of free speech, open debate, or the search for truth, values the critics professed; stopping the *Enola Gay* exhibition or converting it into a patriotic celebration would have deterrent and collateral effects. The threat of large cuts in the Smithsonian budget and hearings into how the Smithsonian was managed and administered were just the weapons to wield.

The final element in the story was a new Smithsonian secretary, brought in to raise money, who was unable or unwilling even to contest the political pressure to cancel the exhibition. And that pressure was intense. By January 1995, eighty-one members of Congress had called for firing Harwit; twenty thousand subscribers to *Smithsonian* magazine had complained about the exhibit. Some 72 percent of the Smithsonian's operating budget and 77 percent of construction monies came from federal appropriations; the percentage of federal support had been rising as dollars from the private sector dwindled. In the middle of January 1995, the American Legion, using as an excuse Harwit's intention to change a casualty estimate for the invasion of Japan, suddenly demanded cancellation of the exhibition, called on Congress to help, demanded hearings into Smithsonian's management, and asked that the *Enola Gay* be transferred to another museum for display in a positive context. The secretary met with legion officials on January 18 and refused; thirteen days later he reversed himself and abandoned the exhibition.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Budiansky et al., "Museum in Crisis," 73–74.

<sup>40</sup> *Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 1995, p. C1; *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 1995, p. A6; Budiansky et al., "Museum in Crisis," 73–75. Sen. Ted Stevens stated that 85% of Smithsonian's funding came from the public treasury.

In the weeks before becoming Smithsonian secretary, I. Michael Heyman, a law professor and former chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, had defended “the independence of the Institution from detailed political direction.” Heyman was “especially sympathetic” to the analogy between “the Smithsonian . . . [and] a public university”; the “threat to the Smithsonian budget [was like] . . . an attempt to dictate the books and curriculum to be taught in university courses.” Heyman endorsed the idea that the “strength of America is the relative independence of its scholars from political pressures.” But by November he had distanced himself from the exhibition. In a carefully reasoned and precisely worded speech to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, the new secretary defended the Smithsonian’s educational role, the broadening of its museums to include “the full range of communities which share the American experience,” the need for “context and interpretation” in exhibits, and the propriety of controversial exhibits, even ones that “*transform* the visitors’ perspective.” He denied that “the Smithsonian’s role” in “presenting American history [was] . . . solely to affirm ‘good news’ and traditional patriotic values.” He argued that “it is possible to respect affirmation without only telling the good news of history.” Although Air and Space’s “goal was honorable and important: to provide a context in which to understand the significance” of the airplane’s “participation in that epic moment,” the exhibit had presented only “half a context.” Heyman believed the exhibit needed “to honor the heroism of the American forces in their war against clear Japanese aggression and to recognize that significant numbers of American lives were saved” while respecting “the pain of those affected by the bomb on the ground and the precedent of the use of the bomb in a war.” “If we are to capture our audiences’ attention and carry out our mission as a national educational institution, we must eschew presenting narrow viewpoints. We must explore and present the complexities of our subjects, including the curator’s ‘take,’ and we must be mindful that most in our audiences are perfectly willing to deal with new ideas and interpretations (not always, of course, agreeing with them) if they do not feel that their own are despised.”<sup>41</sup>

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See Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 42–43. For the 1994 figures cited in the text, see *Smithsonian*, Year 1994: *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ended September 30, 1994* (Washington, 1994), 83–100. The American Legion gave the impression that it withdrew its support for the exhibition because Harwit changed the estimate of potential American casualties in an invasion of Japan. In reality, that change was inconsequential from an interpretive standpoint, and American Legion leaders had already decided to oppose the exhibition before receiving Harwit’s letter informing them of the change. See John T. Correll, “Political Exhibit Crashes at the Smithsonian,” *Air Force Magazine*, 78 (March 1995), 12; “Invasion of Japan—At What Cost?,” Jan. 18, 1995, revised label, fifth script (in Kohn’s possession); and Thomas B. Allen and Normal Polmar, “Blown Away,” *Washingtonian*, 30 (Aug. 1995), 110.

<sup>41</sup> I. Michael Heyman, “Smithsonian Perspectives,” *Smithsonian*, 25 (Oct. 1994), 9; I. Michael Heyman, “The Smithsonian: From the Spirit of St. Louis to Enola Gay,” Nov. 10, 1994 (in Kohn’s possession). In his “installation address,” Sept. 19, 1994, Heyman “commented . . . that our first script was deficient.” See Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 67. In a February 1995 speech to the National Press Club, Heyman said: “We need to distinguish between opinion and fact. We need to contribute to light rather than heat. And we need to avoid ‘instructing’ people or telling them how to think.” Yet “there should always be room at the Smithsonian to explore important contemporary issues lest our great potentialities as an educational institution be wasted” (in Kohn’s possession).

Eighty-one days later, when Heyman canceled the exhibit, he had changed his mind about the feasibility of combining commemoration and history. His "one overriding reason" for cancellation was "that we made a basic error in attempting to couple an historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the end of the war." The "veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and, frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke." While the revisions of the script "succeeded in creating plans for a more balanced presentation . . . the problem was more than one of balance," and a "fundamental flaw in the concept of the exhibition" made "our sincere efforts to address everyone's concerns . . . bound to fail. No amount of re-balancing could change the confusing nature of the exhibition." Earlier Heyman had contended that a few "historical objects," such as Charles Lindbergh's aircraft *The Spirit of St. Louis* and "the actual Star Spangled Banner" that had inspired Francis Scott Key, had a "kind of power" to "speak for themselves"; now "the *Enola Gay* and its crew" had no choice.<sup>42</sup>

Before he abandoned the exhibition, Heyman had listened to Harwit argue against cancellation. Harwit warned that the decision would destroy the morale of curators and staff at his museum and throughout the institution and bring on Smithsonian the opprobrium of scholars across the country for buckling under political pressure; educational opportunities would be lost along with an excellent exhibit that had undergone four full revisions. Heyman and Undersecretary Constance Newman dismissed these arguments by weighing them against the threat of massive reductions in congressional appropriations and private contributions and the threat to the independence of the institution. The scholars, Newman and Heyman pointed out, were nowhere to be seen defending Smithsonian, and they would get over it.<sup>43</sup> Less than a month after abandoning the exhibition, Heyman went further, telling an audience at the National Press Club that Smithsonian had studied its future and would clearly need more money: to use technology "to take the Smithsonian into American homes and schools," to care for the 140 million objects it possessed, to collect, and to mount exhibitions. The institution, however, was "not buffered . . . from the influence of the purse or the suasion of congressional opinion." The "ground rules—not unlike those guiding state legislatures in relating to their public universities—" were that Smithsonian "is expected to make its own judgment concerning the nature of its programs." But "if new initiatives require Federal funding . . . the Congress rightfully determines whether to make such investments." The primacy of budget came out most clearly in the Senate hearings nearly four months later, when Ted Stevens, Republican

<sup>42</sup> I. Michael Heyman to "All Smithsonian Employees," memo, Jan. 30, 1995 (in Kohn's possession); Heyman, "Smithsonian," *ibid.* In his testimony on May 18, 1995, Heyman stated that in January he had believed the exhibition possible, but that he changed his mind because of "renewed efforts to have the exhibition canceled." Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 68.

<sup>43</sup> Harwit, conversation with Kohn, Feb. 2, 1995.

of Alaska, chairman of the Rules and Administration Committee, told Heyman that “eroding public support threatens the ability of the Smithsonian to continue to be the central depository of our nation’s artifacts.” “I am worried, because we are going to discuss the budget for the next 5 years, and there is not room in that budget for the projection you have made to manage the institution you have. . . . I believe you should have the money,” Stevens said—twice. “But I can tell you, you will not get it from this Congress if we have controversies like this. You cannot expect to have dramatic increases in funding at the time of controversies of this size.”<sup>44</sup>

In January 1995, Heyman faced an awful choice. A new Republican Congress, promising major changes—and reductions—in the government, was organizing itself, about to hammer out a five-year budget agreement. Heyman, sixty-four years old, intended to stay in office only until he reached age seventy. A Commission on the Future of the Smithsonian Institution, only the third such outside body commissioned by the regents in the 150 years since James Smithson’s bequest, had concluded that “even with the best imaginable outcomes, improvement in revenues and operating efficiencies will not resolve the financial issues facing the Smithsonian.” To deal with these “daunting facts,” “choices will have to be made,” and the commission recommended many, some requiring more, not less, money.<sup>45</sup>

By canceling the exhibition, the new secretary would repudiate his most popular museum and admit management problems that might require him to impose authority over museums, galleries, research institutes, outreach efforts—institutions and programs that had been run for over a century loosely, like a major research university. The problem was not “curatorial freedom,” for to Heyman, as he put it in his November San Francisco speech, “there are differences between a university and the museum world of the Smithsonian. Most people treat academic work as that of the professor’s—either as author or in the context of presentation to a class or scholarly audience. Scholarly work, of comparable quality, translated into an exhibition in a museum, and in particular a national museum, however, is seen as an official statement and a national validation.” The pressing problem was imposing from the top guidelines, standards, and policies that might be difficult to apply to diverse activities and that might undermine independence, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit. In the summer of 1994, the vice president for research at Colonial Williamsburg had ridiculed interference by “nonacademic administrative officers and . . . trustees . . . to abrogate major program initiatives . . . or [to] downplay this or that kind of history” as a “tired old jab [that] lands few solid punches on museums today.” Cancellation would constitute exactly such an intervention. As Heyman admitted in his Senate testimony, his willingness

<sup>44</sup> I. Michael Heyman, speech at the National Press Club, Feb. 23, 1995 (in Kohn’s possession); Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 43, 99. See also *ibid.*, 42, 55, 108.

<sup>45</sup> Joshua Steinberg, “The Bomb in the Nation’s Attic,” *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, 87 (May 1995), 27; Smithsonian Institution, *E Pluribus Unum: This Divine Paradox. Report of the Commission on the Future of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, D.C., 1995), 23.

to consider top-down initiatives "with regard to exhibition policy and exhibition review is a little shocking to a number of my colleagues, and we are going to have an awful lot of conversation with respect to that." Heyman understood that his action would damage the Smithsonian's reputation, call into question its scholarly integrity, and give the appearance of political censorship.<sup>46</sup>

When the controversy blew up all over again in mid-January just as Congress convened, he had to choose. To cite a conflict between commemoration and history, between celebration and scholarship, offered a cover, although at the hearings the veterans' organizations disputed that and lamented the abandonment of a substantive exhibition. The president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, a distinguished biochemist who chaired the commission on the Smithsonian's future, reportedly regretted the decision as "a political one . . . cowering to pressure . . . the kind of nightmare that Washington hands out to people who come here to do important jobs."<sup>47</sup> But perhaps the *Enola Gay* exhibit was simply the last straw, following other exhibits denounced for disparaging American culture. As Heyman's predecessor, Robert Adams, had reflected the previous summer, "this may be a good time to be leaving." Michael Heyman was just coming in. By abandoning the exhibition and agreeing to review some earlier controversial exhibitions and to suspend or delay new ones underway, he chose to surrender the Smithsonian's independence in order to save it.<sup>48</sup>

History has had many functions in human society, the accurate reconstruction of the past being only one. "What happened, what we recall, what we recover, what we relate, are often sadly different," the scholar of the Middle East Bernard Lewis wrote twenty years ago. "The temptation is often overwhelmingly strong to tell it, not as it really was, but as we would wish it to have been." The conflict over the *Enola Gay* exhibition was in part generational, for to World War II veterans a critical presentation of this climactic event, on the Washington Mall during the fiftieth anniversary, seemed to discredit all that they had done in a cause that had defined their lives and connected them to American history. But Americans

<sup>46</sup> Heyman, "Smithsonian." This distinction between university and museum was endorsed by Robert R. Archibald, "From the President," American Association for State and Local History, *Dispatch*, 10 (May 1995), 3. See also James L. Abrahamson to editor, *OAH Newsletter*, 23 (Feb. 1995), 36. Both reply to Young, "S.O.S.," 1, 6-8. Carson, "Lost in the Fun House," 149-50; Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 99.

<sup>47</sup> See Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 4-8, 16, 30, 34; Steinberg, "Bomb in the Nation's Attic," 27.

<sup>48</sup> Harwit, conversation with Kohn, Feb. 2, 1995. Both Sen. Ted Stevens and Sen. Wendell Ford, the ranking Democrat on the committee, cited other controversial exhibits. See Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 42-43. Heyman may have been affected by an article in a conservative weekly published in Washington: Stephen Goode, "Political Correctness Comes Out of the Attic at the Smithsonian," *Insight on the News*, Jan. 2, 1995, pp. 30-32. For his reply, see I. Michael Heyman, "Mission of the Smithsonian Is to Teach and Celebrate," *ibid.*, Feb. 13, 1995, cited in Wilcomb E. Washburn, "The Smithsonian and the *Enola Gay*," *National Interest* (no. 40, Summer 1995), 46. For an analysis of Heyman's actions, see *ibid.*, 46-48. Heyman denied that he "negotiated any arrangement concerning the *Enola Gay* exhibit" with Newt Gingrich. "I came to the decision to scale it back independently. I then consulted the Smithsonian Regents." I. Michael Heyman to editor, *New Republic*, April 10, 1995, p. 1.

have frequently fought over how to commemorate anniversaries, design monuments, observe holidays, and mount displays and exhibitions. The United States government, like other national governments in the last two centuries, has used the memory of war to construct the identity and to build the cohesion of the modern nation-state. At the state and local levels, people have had different agendas. Throughout our history, the memorializations of battles and wars have been important cultural and political rituals that have had varied and changing meanings for individuals and groups—something all too easily forgotten as the fiftieth-anniversary commemorations of World War II come to a close. Because of its fame and mission, the *Enola Gay*, displayed alone or in an exhibit, in Washington fifty years after the event and in a heretofore celebratory museum, was sure to arouse passion.<sup>49</sup>

But the causes of the controversy and the cancellation lay in the diverse circumstances that came together in 1994: an exhibit designed to provoke its viewers with powerful (perhaps tendentious) interpretations; a difficult relationship between a museum and an important constituency; long-developing and increasingly bitter contests over education, social relationships, historical interpretations, public culture, and other issues rending American society; mistakes of process and response by the Air and Space Museum; a new, aggressive, determined Republican majority in the Congress; and a new, peculiarly vulnerable Smithsonian leader who did not resist pressures generated by an enormous national outcry. Before we read wider implications for presenting history in American society into this experience, we had better know and reflect on the events and conditions that help explain the event.

The historical and museum communities should be sensitive to the ironies as well as the issues. Some veterans' groups wanted a full historical exhibit; a few, including the *Enola Gay* pilot Paul Tibbets and the scholar and veteran Paul Fussell, from the beginning wanted no exhibit other than the airplane; others worked with the museum to the end, and at least one, the Retired Officers Association, sincerely deplored the cancellation.<sup>50</sup> An exhibit that provided the context of the entire war, that explained in even tones the decision to drop the bomb from the American government's viewpoint (including the disagreements among historians over American motives), that memorialized the artifacts and the fliers as the original script did, that recounted the effect of the bombs on the ground without attempting to arouse emotion or to use repetition in a way that might appear moralizing, and that explored the implications of the bomb for the

<sup>49</sup> Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (Princeton, 1975), 71. My thinking on commemorations is derived from John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992); John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994); G. Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way* (Washington, 1995); Edward T. Linenthal, "Committing History in Public," *Journal of American History*, 81 (Dec. 1994), 988–91; Edward T. Linenthal, "Can Museums Achieve a Balance between Memory and History?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 10, 1995, pp. B1–2; Linenthal, *Sacred Ground*; and Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*.

<sup>50</sup> See Committee on Rules and Administration, *Smithsonian Institution: Management Guidelines for the Future*, 4–8, 16, 30, 34; and Charles D. Cooper, "Editorial Comment: The *Enola Gay*—Mission Aborted," *Retired Officer Magazine*, 53 (March 1995), 4.

future with the ambivalence most Americans have felt about the nuclear age seemed possible to many historians. What was *not* possible was "to honor the veterans" in an exhibition that was, in its first form, essentially antiwar and antinuclear, one that emphasized "the reality of atomic war and its consequences." This was the fundamental predicament, Martin Harwit explained, in a thoughtful essay aptly titled "The *Enola Gay*: A Nation's, and a Museum's, Dilemma."<sup>51</sup>

The controversy could be read to indicate that the American people can tolerate honest history presented in full, that they can detect biased or partisan interpretation, and that they recognize the necessity of independent judgment and interpretation in public historical presentation.<sup>52</sup> Americans know that if the complex, scholarly history of controversial events cannot be presented to the public, the United States will be behaving like its former enemies, the Soviet Union and Japan: one abused history for propaganda; the other is still unwilling to acknowledge its behavior during World War II in spite of the harm such silence does to Japanese foreign policy across Asia. As a student of Japanese literature about the bomb wrote recently, "Americans' ambivalence over Hiroshima and . . . Japan's ambivalence over its role in the war, involve a common reluctance to think too carefully or long about anything that threatens the national sense of legitimacy." Perhaps a Briton, the great spy novelist of the Cold War John Le Carré, recognized something deeper at work in American culture in the aftermath of the Cold War. "The fight against communism diminished us," he wrote two years ago, lamenting the inaction on Bosnia. "It left in us a state of false and corrosive orthodoxy." "The strength of America is in her frankness, her nobility of mind, her willingness to declare herself, take risks and change. Not in her secrecy."<sup>53</sup>

The tragedy of the cancellation is that a major opportunity to inform the American people and international visitors about warfare, air power, World War

<sup>51</sup> Martin Harwit, "The *Enola Gay*: A Nation's, and a Museum's, Dilemma," *Washington Post*, Aug. 7, 1994, p. C9. Many Department of Defense historians and I believe a full exhibition that avoided this conflict was possible, according to Goldberg, conversation with Kohn, July 18, 1995; Herman Wolk, remarks, "Enola Gay Exhibit" panel, "Presenting History; Tony Capaccio, "DOD Historians Lauded Revisions in A-Bomb Script," *Defense Week*, July 3, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> For strong, balanced historical reporting, see Evan Thomas, "Why We Did It," *Newsweek*, July 24, 1995, pp. 22–28, 30; and Gerald Parshall, "Shock Wave," *U.S. News & World Report*, July 31, 1995, pp. 44–59. A recent Gallup poll indicates that while "senior citizens still narrowly approve of the bombing, . . . younger Americans, particularly those under the age of 30, believe that dropping the bomb on Japan was wrong." Thus accounts that question the American action would be accepted by some viewers to an exhibit. See Thomas, "Why We Did It," 22. Media coverage of the anniversary of Hiroshima indicates a general awareness and willingness to consider alternative interpretations of the event. See William Lanouette, "Why We Dropped the Bomb," *Civilization*, 2 (Jan.–Feb. 1995), 28–39; Murray Sayle, "Letter from Hiroshima: Did the Bomb End the War?," *New Yorker*, July 31, 1995, pp. 40–64; *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 1995, pp. 1, 9; and "Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped" (episode of "Peter Jennings Special Reports," ABC, July 27, 1995).

<sup>53</sup> On historical interpretation in the Soviet Union, see *Washington Post*, June 21, 1991, p. A21; and *ibid.*, Nov. 20, 1991, p. D1. On Japanese division over a war apology, see *USA Today*, Aug. 26, 1994, p. 7A; *New York Times*, June 7, 1995, p. 1; *ibid.*, June 12, 1995, pp. A1, 4; Kenzaburo Oe, "Denying History Disables Japan," *New York Times Magazine*, July 2, 1995, pp. 28–29; and David E. Sanger, "Coloring History Their [sic] Our Way," *ibid.*, 30–31. The contrast with Germany's confronting of its Nazi period is often remarked; see *New York Times*, June 9, 1995, p. A7; and Ronnie and Rolf Lynton to Lynne and Richard Kohn (from Berlin, describing the program of sponsored visits for refugees from political persecution in the Third Reich), May 9, 1995 (in Kohn's possession). *New York Times*, June 25, 1995, p. E15; John Le Carré, "The Trap Has Opened, So Let's Be Free," *International Herald Tribune*, May 6, 1993, p. 7.

II, and a turning point in world history was lost.<sup>54</sup> Certainly, the *Enola Gay* exhibition, even in its unbalanced versions, would have revealed the power and effectiveness of bombing and of nuclear weapons. Ironically, the effects for American foreign policy could have been salutary. Millions of people, including many of the world's leaders, would have seen how destructive nuclear bombs are and how difficult it is to control the passion unleashed in nations during wartime, perceptions that might help prevent nuclear proliferation and deter aggression. Viewers would have seen a reminder of what happens when an aggressor sets out on a war of conquest, attacks American interests, and provokes the American people. Placed just a few blocks from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and from the exhibit on the World War II internment of the West Coast Japanese Americans at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, the atomic bombing exhibit would have attracted many visitors. Those who saw all three might have reflected on the folly of racism and concluded that some wars are worth fighting, World War II being one of them.

<sup>54</sup> A poll shows "60 percent of Americans are unable to name the President who ordered the nuclear attack on Japan, and 35 percent do not know that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. One of every four people surveyed for the America's Talking/Gallup Poll did not even know that Japan was the target of the first atomic bomb." See *New York Times*, March 1, 1995, p. A19.