

## HIROSHIMA, CULTURE WARS, AND THE ENOLA GAY

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In the early 1990s, the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC wanted to mark the upcoming anniversary of the end of World War II with a special exhibition. At the centre of the proposed exhibit would be the forward section of the restored *Enola Gay*, the B-29 bomber that had dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The first document in the readings that follow is an internal museum memorandum from July 1993 reflecting the curatorial staffs initial conception of the exhibition. By January 1994, museum historians had completed a first draft of the "script," the captions that would accompany the artefacts and visual images in the proposed exhibit. However, the script ignited a firestorm of critical reaction, especially from veterans' groups, which had often felt that the museum favoured achievements in civilian aviation over the exploits of military pilots. In the forefront of opposition to the museum's plan was the Air Force Association, a private organization separate from the U.S. Air Force comprising many veterans. The second document was originally published in that association's magazine by its editor-in-chief. Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich insisted that most Americans were 'sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country' while the *Wall Street Journal* complained that museums now had fallen under the sway 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." In January 1995, more than eighty members of Congress called for the museum's director Martin Harwit's dismissal, and 20,000 subscribers to *Smithsonian Magazine* voiced their displeasure with the museum's plans. Harwit's letter to the *Washington Post*, is the third selection.

### 1) National Air and Space Museum, proposed script for the exhibition (July 1993)

Beginning in May 1995, the National Air and Space Museum will mount an exhibit about the end of the Second World War, the development of the atomic bomb, and the onset of the Cold War. Museum staff members recognize that this subject is marked by strong feelings and a broad range of opinion. The primary goal of this exhibition will be to encourage visitors to undertake a thoughtful and balanced reexamination of these events in the light of the political and military factors leading to the decision to drop 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 [...].

The main theme of [the first] unit will be the increasing bitterness and brutality of a war that was also, for Americans, a war of vengeance for Pearl Harbor [...] "A Fight to the Finish" will [include] a view of the Japanese Okha suicide bomb hanging overhead and diving toward the visitor. The kamikaze attacks expressed and symbolized the bitter resistance of the Japanese forces, which contributed to American racial and cultural perceptions and the assumption that war would end with a fight to the finish on the beaches and in the home islands of Japan [...] This section will point out that air raids [...] killed at least half a million Japanese civilians in the last six months of the war—about as many as in five years of bombing Germany. These raids were an important context for the decision to use the atomic bomb without warning on Japanese cities.

[The second] section, which forms the intellectual heart of the exhibit [shows] that there may have been no decision to drop the bomb in the usual sense, but rather there was a process of moving toward use that was difficult to deflect. Neither the atomic bomb nor an invasion was probably needed to end the Pacific war, but this is much more obvious in hindsight than it was at the time [...]

The second unit stops at the point where the dropping of the bomb is inevitable; the exhibit now turns to how the weapon was to be delivered. When visitors walk into this unit, they will immediately see the nose of the "Enola Gay," plus some view of the rest of the gigantic forward fuselage, which is about 15 meters (56 ft) long and 3 meters (10 ft) in diameter [...] The theme of Unit 3 is thus the creation of the instruments for delivering the bomb [...].

When visitors go from Unit 3 to Unit 4, they will be immediately hit by 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. The opening of "Hiroshima/Nagasaki" must convey that stunning, searing moment of the initial flash, heat and burns through pictures, through the words of survivors themselves and through bomb-damaged artifacts [...].

If Unit 2 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. Photographs of dead bodies will, however, be presented in such a way that parents can choose whether or not to allow their children to see them. The emphasis will be on the personal tragedy of this experience. The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will tell their own stories [...]. Among the artifacts that could be used, if permission were granted, are a school girl's lunchbox with completely burned contents, burned and shredded clothing, and melted and broken religious objects.

## **2) John T. Correll, "Air Force Association Special Report: The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay" (15.3.1994)**

The *Enola Gay's* task was a grim one, hardly suitable for glamorization. Nevertheless, many visitors may be taken aback by what they see. That is particularly true for World War II veterans who had petitioned the museum to display the historic bomber in a more objective setting.

The restored aircraft will be there all right, the front fifty-six feet of it, anyway. The rest of the gallery space is allotted to a program about the atomic bomb. The presentation is designed for shock effect. The museum's exhibition plan notes that parents might find some parts unsuitable for viewing by their children, and the script warns that "parental discretion is advised."

For what the plan calls the "emotional center" of the exhibit, the curators are collecting burnt watches, broken wall clocks, and photos of victims—which will be enlarged to life size—as well as melted and broken religious objects. One display will be a schoolgirl's lunch box with remains of peas and rice reduced to carbon. To ensure that nobody misses the point, "where possible, photos of the persons who owned or wore these artifacts would be used to show that real people stood behind the artifacts." Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will recall the horror in their own words.

The Air and Space Museum says it takes no position on the "difficult moral and political questions" involved. For the past two years, however, museum officials have been under fire from veterans groups who charge that the exhibition plan is politically biased.

The exhibition plan the museum was following as recently as November picked up the story of the war in 1945 as the end approached. It depicted the Japanese in a desperate defense of their home islands, saying little about what had made such a defense necessary. US conduct of the war was depicted as brutal, vindictive, and racially motivated.

The latest script, written in January, shows major concessions to balance. It acknowledges Japan's "naked aggression and extreme brutality" that began in the 1930s. It gives greater recognition to US casualties. Despite some hedging, it says the atomic bomb "played a crucial role in ending the Pacific war quickly." Further revisions to the script are expected.

The ultimate effect of the exhibition will depend, of course, on how the words are blended with the artifacts and audiovisual elements. And despite the balancing material added, the curators still make some curious calls.

"For most Americans," the script says, "it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism." Women, children, and mutilated religious objects are strongly emphasized in the "ground zero" scenes from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The museum says this is "happenstance," not a deliberate ideological twist [...].

In a letter to Dr. Harwit last fall, Gen. Monroe W Hatch, Jr. (USAF Ret.), Air Force Association executive director, said the museum's plan "treats Japan and the United States 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.' What visitors would get from such an exhibition, General Hatch said, was "not history or fact, but a partisan interpretation."

### **3) Martin Harwit, "The Enola Gay: A Nation's and a Museum's Dilemma" (7.8.1994)**

Forty-nine years ago this weekend, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and then another on Nagasaki. A year from now, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Americans will commemorate these pivotal events. But we lack a national consensus on what to say.

Two divergent but widely held views define the dilemma. One view sprang up as soon as the bombs exploded and the war ended. Its proponents are united on the main details that need to be included in their story. Properly told, it appeals to our national self-image. The other point of view, slower in coming to the fore, is more analytical, critical in its acceptance of facts and concerned with historical context. It is complex and, in the eyes of some, discomfiting.

The first view recalls the morning of Aug. 6, 1945, when three B-29 Superfortresses arrived over Japan's Inland Sea. One of the aircraft, the Enola Gay, named for the pilot's mother, approached its Hiroshima target, released its heavy payload, then veered to distance itself from the bomb. Seconds later, at 8:15 a.m. the atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima. The crew was stunned by the sight. The blast rocked the aircraft. The 29-year old pilot, Col. Paul W. Tibbets, commander of the 509<sup>th</sup> composite Group, which was trained and tasked to deliver the bomb, was awed by the sight of the burning, devastated city below. To his copilot he remarked, "I think this is the end of the war." Five days and another atomic bomb later, Japan surrendered.

Our troops were ecstatic. They would not have to die by the many tens of thousands in a bloody invasion of Japan. They'd go home instead, settle down with their sweethearts, have children and lead normal lives. They had been asked to save the world for democracy, had accepted the challenge at great personal risk, and had come through victorious.

Approaching the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hiroshima next year, these same men, now in their seventies, have asked the National Air and Space Museum, into whose care the Enola Gay was entrusted after the war, to put their aircraft on exhibition. They want the museum to tell their story the way they have always told and retold it—a story of fighting a ruthless enemy, perpetrator of barbaric massacres in China, the infamous attack at Pearl Harbor, the death march at Bataan, torture and executions in prison camps, kamikaze raids on our warships and deaths by the thousands for every Pacific island wrested away; a story of the world's top physicists working in secrecy to perfect a mighty weapon; a story of a powerful new aircraft, designed, built and first flown in just 24 months; a story of ordinary citizens, men and women, working together to defeat a ferocious enemy.

These are the themes emphasized by those who fought so hard to secure freedom for their children and grandchildren.

Those children and grandchildren by now are mature citizens. For them the atomic bomb has added associations: ICBMs, megaton warheads, the DEW line, 45-minute warnings, first strike, Mutually Assured Destruction, nuclear winter. [...] Theirs was not a world of two small atomic bombs but of 50,000, many of which are 1,000 times more powerful than those that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Next year these younger people will not only commemorate a bomb that ended the most terrible war, but also they will have reason to celebrate the restraint that has prevailed for half a century in which no man, woman or child has been killed by an atomic bomb. They want to extend that record to all time.

The Enola Gay symbolizes the end of one era and the beginning of another. For an older generation, the aircraft meant the end of World War II; for younger people it ushered in the nuclear age. The postwar generations respect their fathers for the sacrifices they made, but they also realize that the nuclear bombs that saved their fathers' lives continue to threaten their own and their children's.

These conflicting views pose the dilemma the National Air and Space Museum faces as we prepare an exhibition of the Enola Gay for 1995. We want to honor the veterans who risked their lives and those who made the ultimate sacrifice. They served their country with distinction. But we must also address the broader questions that concern subsequent generations—not with a view to criticizing or apologizing or displaying undue compassion for those on the ground that day, as some may fear, but to deliver an accurate portrayal that conveys the reality of atomic war and its consequences.

To that end, the museum proposes to tell the full story surrounding the atomic bomb and the end of World War II; to recall the options facing a newly installed President Truman, who had never heard of the bomb until the day he was sworn in; to examine the estimates of the casualties Truman anticipated if U.S. troops had to invade Japan; to consider the extent to which his wish to impress a threatening Soviet Union influenced his decision to drop the bomb; to exhibit the destruction and suffering on the ground at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and to recall the escalating numbers of weapons in the superpowers' nuclear arsenals during the Cold War, and their current decline.

Faced with a number of alternatives, the museum has chosen to provide not an opinion piece but rather the basic information that visitors will need to draw their own conclusions. This is our responsibility, as a national museum in a democracy predicated on an informed citizenry.

We have found no way to exhibit the Enola Gay and satisfy everyone. But a comprehensive and thoughtful discussion can help us learn from history. And that is what we aim to offer our visitors.