

The Smithsonian and the *Enola Gay*

From the Air Force Association's *Enola Gay* Controversy archive collection
Online at www.airforcemag.com

Frequently Asked Questions

- **The curators at the National Air and Space Museum and an advisory panel of historians had spent months developing the exhibition plan for the *Enola Gay*. What was your basis for objection?**

The exhibition script went a long way toward depicting Japan as the victim rather than the aggressor in World War II. It cast US actions in the worst possible light.

Two of the lines about the war in the Pacific became infamous: "For most Americans this war was fundamentally different than the one waged against Germany and Italy—it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism."

The curators said we quoted these lines out of context. In fact, they illustrated the tone that ran through the script from beginning to end. As a Washington Post editorial in January 1995 said, the script was "incredibly propagandistic and intellectual shabby" and "had a tendentiously anti-nuclear and anti-American tone."

- **But didn't the museum director say your accusations were false? For example, that the hard facts about Japan in World War II had been in the exhibition script from the beginning?**

That's what he said in public, all right. What he said in private was a different matter. In an internal memo, dated April 16, 1994, he said that "much of the criticism that has been leveled against us is understandable."

His memo also said that "We show terrible pictures of human suffering in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in section 400 [of the script] without earlier, in section 100, showing pictures of the suffering the Japanese had inflicted in China, in the camps they set up for Dutch and British civilians and military, and US prisoners of war."

An internal review team appointed by the museum director said the script contained numerous imbalances, including "depictions of Japanese as victims" and "insufficient development of Japan's extensive pre-war aggression."

- **Why didn't you give the museum a chance to fix the problems itself, rather than creating a public uproar?**

The curators had no interest in "fixing the problems" unless they were pushed because they did not believe there were any significant problems. In public, the museum described the exhibition as a work in progress. At the same time, in private, the lead curator was saying the script "must be considered a finished product, minor word changes aside." The curators retreated reluctantly, word by word and line by line, and made changes only under pressure.

- **The curators and their supporters were regularly referred to as "revisionists." What's wrong with revision? Isn't it a good idea to make revisions as new information becomes known?**

Agreed, the problem was not “revisionism.” It was distortion, bias, and lack of balance. However, we did not invent the “Revisionist” term. It had been in use for at least 20 years to describe a faction of historians whose interpretation of the atomic age was aggressively critical of the United States. The original plan for exhibiting the *Enola Gay* was a showcase of the views of the Revisionist historians.

- **Weren't your tactics underhanded?**

The museum director said you passed out copies of the exhibition script he sent to you in confidence, and that you obtained and released “privileged correspondence” from the museum.

Two weeks before the museum director sent a copy of the script to AFA, *Air Force Magazine* got a copy, no strings attached, from other sources. (As the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution said, the museum leaked like a sieve.) The “privileged correspondence” the director complained about was an internal memo in which he acknowledged our criticism was valid while he was saying public that our accusations were untrue. (See above) The real objection was that the public, the news media, and Congress were shown—with the museum's own documents as evidence—what the museum was up to.

- **Didn't you try to dictate the content of the exhibition?**

No. We declined to participate in line-by-line negotiations of the script and said we would base our assessment on the overall message visitors took away with them.

We said the exhibition would not be acceptable if it fostered the following impressions:

- That the Japanese were victims in World War II, defending their nation and culture against western aggression
- That the Americans were ruthless invaders, driven by racism, revenge, and blood lust
- That the death, suffering, and horrors of war were borne unilaterally or unfairly by a passive Japan
- That the roles of Japan and the US and World War II were morally equivalent
- That the United States acted dishonestly, dishonorably, or immorally in its decision to use the atomic bomb.

The list tells you a lot about what was wrong with the original script.

We also said the solution could be either subtractive or additive. The subtractive solution could take out some of speculative suspicion about the actions and motives of the United States. Or, the curators could keep that material and go for the additive solution: Put in the same kind of speculation about Japan's actions and motives.

We pointed out several ripe targets: Japan's alleged quest for peace in 1945; The Emperor's actual wartime role in policy and planning ; Why Japan did not move sooner to end the war when it was evident that the cause was lost; Popular Japanese support, before the war turned sour, for military aggression to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

- **Weren't the curators backed by a consensus of historians on their interpretation of the atomic bomb and the end of World War II?**

So they claimed. But in December 1994, the *Journal of American History* published a survey in which it ranked various “bright spots” and “dark spots” in American history. World War II ranked third from the top among 46 “bright” spots. The Atomic Bomb and Hiroshima were tied (with the Mexican War)

for 23rd place on the list of “dark” spots, and were in fact, considered less dark than Watergate, the Great Depression, sexism, the Cold War, and the 1980s in general.

- **Do you believe that museums should be forced to make a choice between history and commemoration?**

Absolutely not. That notion originated with the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in 1995 when he was trying to extricate the museum from its troubles. On the one hand, he was taking heat because of a bad exhibition that he had decided to cancel. On the other hand, he was taking heat from the activist scholars, who opposed the cancellation. “History versus commemoration” was a rationale of convenience. It gave the museum quick separation from the failed exhibit. It also provided something to tell the activists.

The problem was never that the exhibition was analytical. It was that the analysis was distorted. Nevertheless, “history versus commemoration” has since become an article of faith for activist scholars who want to believe the exhibition was canceled only because its critics could not tolerate historical analysis.

- **It was repeatedly said that the news media and Congress blindly went along with your interpretation of the situation and of the exhibition plan. How did you manage that?**

Anybody who believes that a military association and its magazine were able to get uncritical acceptance of their views from Congress and the nation’s news media needs to get a grip on reality.

- **Wasn’t it difficult to pull together a coalition of six million veterans to overwhelm the museum and its plans to display the *Enola Gay*?**

The vast alliance of six million was mostly in the minds of the curators. Veterans groups cooperated, but they were not coordinated. We shared information and kept in touch, but there was no joint strategy, few meetings, and nobody telling anybody what to do. As for the Air Force Association—often assigned primary blame (or credit) for what happened—only three or four of us were significantly engaged, and part time at that.

- **The *Enola Gay* is now on display at the museum’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Va. There have been protests that the “basic facts” exhibition plaque for the *Enola Gay* only says the airplane dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima but does not say how many people died there or describe the suffering. Shouldn’t such information be added?**

Leaving aside practical considerations—such as that the Udvar-Hazy format is not compatible with extensive wordage on any of the displays—there is no particular reason to avoid stating the death toll at Hiroshima. But if that addition is made, other facts need to be added as well.

According to the activists demanding change, the reason for adding the Hiroshima numbers is so visitors will understand the historical significance of the *Enola Gay* and its mission.

That is not achieved by saying that 80,000 people were killed at Hiroshima and that the suffering was enormous and letting it go at that. It must also be said that: The atomic bombs brought an end to a war in which 17 million people had died at the hands of the Japanese empire between 1931 and 1945. That, until the bombs fell, Japan was not ready to end the war. And that an invasion of Japan—the alternative to using the atomic bomb—would have led to more casualties, American and Japanese, than the death tolls at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.