from: Michael J. Hogan, ed.
Hiroshima in History & Memory,
Cambridge University Press, 1996

The Enola Gay Controversy: History, Memory, and the Politics of Presentation

MICHAEL J. HOGAN

It was an "eerie sight," reported the *Washington Post* on Thanksgiving Day 1994. Two nights before, observers in the nation's capital had been dumbstruck to see the fuselage of a B-29 bomber being hauled down Independence Avenue to the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum. It was the *Enola Gay*, the giant four-engine Superfortress that had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, in the early morning of 6 August 1945. Named after the mother of its pilot, Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, the *Enola Gay* had disappeared from sight after its deadly mission. Stored outdoors in three states, it had been home to field mice and other critters before taking up residence in Building 20 at the Smithsonian's storage yard in Suitland, Maryland. There, technicians had worked for years to restore the bomber before shrink-wrapping its fuselage for protection and moving it to the Air and Space Museum for an exhibit that was to open in May 1995.[1]

Shrouded in white plastic as it traveled down Independence Avenue, the fuselage looked vaguely like a blowup of the "Little Boy" atomic bomb it had dropped on Hiroshima. A group of demonstrators assembled near the museum to protest the public display of a warplane whose payload had taken the lives of so many Japanese soldiers and civilians. For them, the *Enola Gay* was a symbol of

1 *Washington Post*, 24 November 1994, B2. See also Arthur Hirsch, "Deadly Courier Retains Its Place in History," *Baltimore Sun*, 24 March 1994, A1; and Thomas B. Allen, "Flying into Controversy: Enola Gay a Target Decades after Hiroshima," *Phoenix Gazette*, 6 August 1994, B13. Although it has not always been possible to identify the section as well as the page number of particular newspaper stories, this information is included in the citations whenever available. The byline is also included whenever available.

the atomic carnage that had ended World War II and launched the Cold War. For others, however, the giant B-29 bomber was a lifesaver, a peacemaker, "a totem of American technological triumph," as Arthur Hirsch reported in the *Baltimore Sun*, that deserved center stage in an exhibit marking the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan.[2]

These competing symbols were at the heart of a bitter controversy over the proposed exhibit, finally entitled "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II."[3] At stake in this controversy was whether the exhibit would commemorate the atomic bombing of Japan or investigate the circumstances surrounding that event. Would Hiroshima loom as the last act in a bloody struggle or the first in a long and dangerous arms race? The answers to these and similar questions would determine whose story the exhibit recounted. Although American veterans wanted an exhibit that spoke for them, it was not at all clear if their memories could be reconciled with a careful analysis of the motives that drove President Harry S. Truman's resort to atomic warfare. Nor would it be easy to balance their narrative of the war against the silent voices of those who had perished at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese city that was destroyed by a second atomic bomb three days after Hiroshima.

To a large extent, everything depended on who controlled the process by which the exhibit was framed. Curators at the Air and Space Museum based their right to interpret the past on their scholarly credentials, on their mastery of the historical record, and on the advice they received from professional historians. American veterans appealed to the authenticity of personal experience. They equated their collective memory with historical reality and asserted their authority over that of the curators. These differences might have been reconciled, and some balance between history and memory achieved, had it not been for the intervention of organized interests, including the American Legion, the Air Force Association, and conservative politicians in Congress. These groups appro-

2 Hirsch, "Deadly Courier Retains Its Place in History," *Baltimore Sun*, 24 March 1994, A1.

3 The exhibit was originally entitled "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War."

priated the memory of American veterans to defend a conventional, patriotic picture of the past. Determined to deny history if it subverted their sense of American identity, they censored alternative voices and forced the Smithsonian to cancel its original plans. To be sure, the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* would still be displayed at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum, but the exhibit would no longer tell the bomber's story or recount the memories, and commemorate the sacrifices, of American veterans.

II

The curators at the National Air and Space Museum understood better than most that historical commemorations are socially constructed and often contested events. At stake in such commemorations is nothing less than the control of history itself, or at least the process by which historical representation gives voice to the past. The question is: Whose voice will be heard? In addressing this question the curators knew they were walking a "tightrope," to borrow a word from Tom D. Crouch, chair of the museum's aeronautics department and a leading figure in the *Enola Gay* controversy. "On both sides of the Pacific, the sensitivities on this subject run very deep," he said. "There's very little middle ground." Crouch's colleagues agreed. "When we began discussions of the exhibit," Martin O. Harwit, the museum's director, told a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, "there were two points everyone agreed on. One, this is a historically significant aircraft. Two, no matter what the museum did, we'd screw it up."[4]

Harwit worried from the beginning about Japan's reaction to the proposed exhibit and was anxious to include a Japanese voice in the Smithsonian's plans. Early in 1994, Crouch and other curators met with a delegation of Japanese officials from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Smithsonian hoped for their cooperation in the commemoration, particularly the contribution of a number of artifacts that could illustrate the awesome power of the atomic bomb

4 Robert L. Koenigk, "Enola Gay Display Evokes Passion," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 9 June 1994, A1; Maurice Weaver, "Japanese Upset by A-Bomb Exhibition," *Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 1994, 14. See also Hirsch, "Deadly Courier Retains Its Place in History," *Baltimore Sun*, 24 March 1994, A1.

and the death and destruction it had brought to Japan. For their part, the Japanese did not want the exhibit to glorify the atomic assault on their homeland or arouse anti-Japanese sentiments in the United States. One Japanese resident in Washington wrote the mayor of Hiroshima that the *Enola Gay* belonged in "the Holocaust Museum," not in the Air and Space Museum. Japanese-Americans had similar concerns, which officials at the Smithsonian tried to assuage. The proposed exhibit, they explained on every occasion, would "reflect all the many arguments" about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To be sure, it would be "an American exhibition," said Michael J. Neufeld, the exhibit's principal curator, but it would nonetheless "present all the differing views."[5]

It was this aspect of the Smithsonian's plan that got it into so much trouble with American veterans of the Second World War. Neufeld had said at the start that he and his collaborators "must be careful not to offend our own veterans." But this was going to be difficult if the curators also acknowledged Japanese concerns and perceptions or addressed some of the controversial issues that have bothered historians for years, which is exactly what they decided to do. For example, early drafts of the exhibit's script dealt with the diplomatic as well as the strategic aspects of Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, especially with whether that decision had been driven in part by a desire to intimidate the Soviet Union with American military power. They also presented evidence on the degree to which Truman's decision might have been motivated by racist perceptions of the Japanese and by a desire to avenge the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. They summarized recent historical studies that question whether an invasion of Japan would have cost hundreds of thousands of American and Japanese lives, and they asked if the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the only alternative to such an invasion. Might the Japanese have been induced to surrender by a test demonstration of the bomb, by Soviet entry into the war, or by revising the American demand for unconditional surrender in order to safe-

5 Weaver, "Japanese Upset by A-Bomb Exhibition," *Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 1994, 14; Hirsch, "Deadly Courier Retains Its Place in History," *Baltimore Sun*, 24 March 1994, A1.

guard the position of the Japanese emperor? Historians have been dealing with these difficult issues since 1945, and the curators wanted those who viewed the exhibit to tackle them as well. Visitors would be encouraged to take sides in the historiographical debates, as the curators themselves appeared to do in certain cases. They seemed convinced, for example, that diplomatic considerations had played a part in Truman's decision, and they had their doubts about whether the atomic bomb was the best way to end the war. "In the end," said Neufeld, "there's still a case to be made that the bomb was a better alternative than invading, but it's not as clear-cut as some would say. . . . There are a lot more questions and unknowns."[6]

For the curators, in other words, the exhibit would be much more than a display of historical artifacts; it would be an exercise in historical thinking. Besides the motives behind Truman's decision, they wanted visitors to view that decision less in the context of the Pacific war, more as prelude to the postwar era, and to grapple with its consequences. As a result, the exhibit would begin with the last year of the war, by which time the Japanese were clearly on the defensive. From this beginning, visitors would move through a second section of the exhibit on the American decision to drop the bomb and a third section on the wartime bombing of Japan and the training of the 509th Composite Group, an elite corps of Army Air Force crewmen that included the crew of the *Enola Gay*. This section would feature the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* and a replica of the "Little Boy" atomic bomb it dropped on Hiroshima. The fourth section would constitute the "emotional center" of the exhibit. It would illustrate the destruction at Ground Zero with life-size pictures of Japanese dead and wounded, personal narratives of those who survived, and a variety of artifacts, including a watch with its hands frozen on the moment when the bomb exploded over Hiroshima. A final section would focus on the nuclear arms race that followed the war. This section would speak to the children and

6 See the sources cited in the previous footnote. See also two scripts for "The Last Act," one finished in late May 1994 and the other in late August, in the files of the Organization of American Historians, Bloomington, Indiana (hereafter OAH Files). I am grateful to Arnita Jones, executive secretary of the OAH, for sharing these and other documents with me. My account of the controversy also draws on the first and last scripts of the exhibit, which are in my own possession.

grandchildren of those who had lived through World War II, for whom Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the start of a fabulously expensive arms race with "megaton warheads, the DEW line, 45-minute warnings, first strike, Mutually Assured Destruction," radioactive fallout, and the danger of nuclear winter. "Part of the purpose of the exhibition," Crouch told National Public Radio, was "to get people to think about the origins" of the "nuclear age and everything that's come with it over the past half-century."[7]

Veterans envisioned a different history altogether. While the curators wanted visitors to analyze the Hiroshima bombing and wrestle with the horrors of war and the dangers of a nuclear arms race, veterans wanted an exhibit that commemorated the sacrifices they had made in a just cause. From their perspective, these sacrifices would be obscured by the exhibit's emphasis on the last year of the struggle, on the death and destruction at Ground Zero, and on the role that diplomatic considerations, racism, and the spirit of vengeance had played in Truman's decision. Instead of commemorating their sacrifices, the exhibit, in their opinion, would portray the Japanese as victims of American aggression and the atomic bombings as unnecessary, wrongful acts. The Smithsonian's plans were an "insult to every soldier, sailor, marine and airman who fought the war against Japan," complained W. Burr Bennett, Jr., a veteran from Illinois. "They're trying to evaluate everything in the context of today's beliefs," explained Brigadier General Paul Tibbets, who flew the *Enola Gay* on that fateful day, and it's "a damn big insult." Instead of taking up the questions that historians have debated, Bennett, Tibbets, and other veterans urged the Smithsonian to display the bomber "proudly and patriotically," much as it displayed the Wright Brothers' first airplane or Lindberg's *Spirit of St. Louis*.[8]

As the veterans saw it, the curators were recounting the end of

7 National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, script for 9 August 1994, OAH Files. See also the layout of the proposed exhibition in *New York Times*, 5 February 1995, E5.

8 Hirsch, "Deadly Courier Retains Its Place in History," *Baltimore Sun*, 24 March 1994, A1; "Plan to Display First Nuclear Bomber Stirs Ire," *Rocky Mountain News*, 23 June 1994, A30; Mike Christensen, "New Attitudes on Display: Changing Focus at Smithsonian Upsets Some Traditionalists," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 3 May 1994, A4. See also Mario Battista (past commander of the American Legion Post 79, New Port Richey, Florida), "What was Crueler than the Enola Gay? Japan at War," *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 September 1994, 2.

the war from a perspective that privileged a Japanese narrative over their own experience. They were particularly offended by the curators' decision to emphasize the destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Neufeld and Crouch could not imagine an exhibit that stopped "the story when the bomb leaves the bomb bay." Veterans, Crouch complained, were reluctant to "tell the whole story." Not so, said Bennett. What troubled the veterans was the exhibit's "accent on the effects of the bombing rather than the fact that the bombing ended the war in nine days." By stressing the death and destruction at Ground Zero, the exhibit, according to the veterans, made the Japanese look like victims. "It will leave you with the impression that you have to feel sorry for those poor Japanese," said Tibbets, "because they were only defending their way of life." Still worse, the curators' perspective made American soldiers look like ruthless aggressors rather than selfless heroes. "History has been denigrated," Tibbets complained. "The *Enola Gay* has been miscast and a group of valiant Americans . . . have been denied a historically correct representation to the public." Other veterans made the same point. Manny Horowitz, a B-29 navigator, did not want "school children and their parents born after World War II" to leave the exhibit "with a distorted and incorrect understanding of this important part of our country's history." Ben Nicks, another B-29 pilot who flew his last mission on the day of the Hiroshima bombing, was more specific. The *Enola Gay* was a symbol to generations for whom World War II was only a memory, said Nicks, and he and other veterans wanted a symbol "that reflects credit on us."[9]

To veterans and other critics it was especially galling to see the Air and Space Museum discounting the experiences of those who had lived through the war and whose collective memories supposedly added up to the nation's history. "Let the Smithsonian listen to the voices of those who fought," said the son of a war veteran,

9 "Smithsonian's Plans for Enola Gay Assailed," *Arizona Republic*, 8 May 1994, A21; "Plan to Display First Nuclear Bomber Stirs Ire," *Rocky Mountain News*, 23 June 1994, A30; Thomas B. Allen, "Flying into Controversy," *Phoenix Gazette*, 6 August 1994, B13; Horowitz letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, 14 August 1994, C9. See also Christensen, "New Attitudes on Display," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 3 May 1994, A4; and Guy Gugliotta, "Air and Space Exhibit Gets Flak Even before Takeoff," *Washington Post*, 31 May 1994, A15.

not to historians who would "place the legacy" of the veterans in "a specific ideological camp." Historians had no business challenging "the views of history of those who actually lived it." They could "read the words of their research," but they could not interpret that research "in the atmosphere of the past." By ignoring the authentic voices of the past, according to the critics, the curators had failed to properly contextualize the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They had ignored the record of Japan's aggression, the brutality of its war policy, and the fanaticism of its soldiers. Most importantly, they had failed to appreciate how Truman's decision to drop the bomb had saved countless lives that would have been spent in an American invasion of the Japanese home islands.[10]

Anthony Sokolowski, a veteran from Orlando, was offended when he heard a "Smithsonian intellectual historian" report on television that only forty-six thousand Americans would have been killed or injured in an invasion of Japan, not the hundreds of thousands commonly assumed. His LST was scheduled for the invasion and his life "might have been one of the ONLY 46,000 lives cut short on that day." Other veterans felt the same way. Glenn McConnell, a retired air force pilot, "was a POW in Tokyo that August" and could say from experience what the facts were: The bomb saved thousands of lives, "including Japanese lives." Another veteran of the Pacific war wrote his newspaper that "in 1945, instead of invading Japan, I went home." Hal King, whose artillery battalion was scheduled for the invasion, was told by his commanding officer to expect fanatical Japanese resistance and the loss of more than half of his comrades. "We were convinced that this would be our last landing and that we would die on the beaches," King wrote the *Wall Street Journal*. James Potter, a navy veteran whose cruiser had been torpedoed in 1944, made a similar point in a letter to the same newspaper. "The A-bomb saved hundreds of thousands of my compatriots from death or injury in the projected home-island invasion," he wrote. "I'm so glad my friend

10 David J. Smollar, "A War of Words . . . over World War II," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 1 December 1994, B11; Frank E. Maestrone letter to the editor, ibid., 16 October 1994, G3. See also unsigned letter to the editor, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 22 December 1994, C3; and Battista, "What was Crueler than Enola Gay? Japan at War," *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 September 1994, 2.

Pat DiGiacomo, who survived the Bataan Death March and spent four years of the war as a slave working in the coal mines in northern Japan, is no longer alive to hear the drivel" coming from the Smithsonian.[11] The same message came from veterans of the Bataan march when they met for their annual reunion, from representatives of the Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A., from the surviving members of the 509th Composite Group when they held a four-day reunion at the Fairmount Hotel in Chicago, and from a group of B-29 bomber pilots who gathered in front of a war memorial in Battery Park City, New York, to protest the Smithsonian's proposed exhibit.[12]

As these narratives attest, the Smithsonian's exhibit struck not only at the historical memories of American veterans but also at their sense of personal and national identity. They wanted the exhibit to reflect credit on them, to convey an image of themselves as heroes who had risked their lives in a great struggle, not as racist, vindictive warriors. Such an unambiguous narrative was not easily squared with doubts about the necessity of Truman's decision or with an analysis of the motives behind that decision, the alternative strategies for ending the war, and the human cost at Ground Zero. Nor was it easy for veterans to reconcile such an analysis with their image of themselves as Americans. Many of their letters, which poured into newspapers by the dozens, stressed how the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had saved Japanese lives, not just American lives. In this sense it was an act of mercy that defined Americans as different from the Japanese, and the United States as unique among nations. "For all of our faults," Robert Wilcox wrote the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, "we have been a kind and just people. We don't boil captives alive as the Japanese did. We don't hold Inquisitions like the Spanish, nor

11 Sokolowski letter to the editor, *Orlando Sentinel*, 11 October 1994, A8; McConnell letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, 14 August 1994, C9; Matthew H. Portz letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 1995, E5; King letter to the editor, *Wall Street Journal*, 7 October 1994, A11; Potter letter to the editor, ibid., 12 September 1994, A17.

12 Janine DeFao, "Death March Survivors Remember the Horror," *Sacramento Bee*, 17 October 1994, B1; Eugene L. Meyer and Eric Brace, "Seeking the Survivors," *Washington Post*, 5 December 1994, B7; William Mullen, "WWII Airmen Gather in Storm," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 September 1994, A1; Susan Price, "NY Protest of Bomb Exhibit," *Newsday*, 26 September 1994, A8.

Holocausts like the Germans. We were the first victors not to rape and pillage. Instead, we built up Japan in the Occupation and did the same for Germany through the Marshall Plan." Herbert Jaffe struck the same theme of American exceptionalism in a letter to *Newsday*. The curators, he said, were missing a great opportunity "to show that American compassion is unique among nations." The United States did not seek vengeance or reparations or territory after World War II, but "showed the finest example of reconciliation and magnanimity." It rebuilt the defeated aggressors and "bestowed upon them a monumental gift, the American democratic political system."[13]

III

More was at stake in the controversy than whose history would be told in the Smithsonian's exhibition; involved as well was a struggle to dominate the process of historical representation. The veterans and their supporters aligned themselves on one side of this struggle. Burr Bennett helped to organize the Committee for the Restoration and Display of the *Enola Gay*. Composed of veterans who had flown B-29s during the war, the committee responded to what it heard about the exhibit by circulating protest petitions across the country. By April 1994, Bennett had gathered more than nine thousand signatures. The committee wanted the Smithsonian to abandon its plans for a historical analysis of Truman's decision and its consequences, display the *Enola Gay* without commentary, or give it to a museum that would.[14] Joining Bennett and his associates was the Air Force Association and its publication, *Air Force Magazine*. The association's executive director, retired Air Force General Monroe W. Hatch, Jr., had learned of the Smithsonian's exhibit in late 1993 and had complained to Harwit that it treated Japanese and American war strategies as if they "were morally

13 Wilcox letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 1995, E5; Jaffe letter to the editor, *Newsday*, 25 October 1994, A35.

14 Hirsch, "Deadly Courier Retains Its Place in History," *Baltimore Sun*, 24 March 1994, A1; Christensen, "New Attitudes on Display," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 3 May 1994, A4; "Smithsonian's Plans for Enola Gay Assailed," *Arizona Republic*, 8 May 1994, A21; Battista, "What was Crueler than Enola Gay? Japan at War," *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 September 1994, 2.

equivalent." During a meeting with Harwit in January 1994, Hatch and John T. Correll, editor-in-chief of *Air Force Magazine*, expressed their concerns and asked to see an early, incomplete version of the exhibit's script. In March, after reviewing the script, the Air Force Association issued a press release criticizing the proposed exhibit. Correll accused the Smithsonian of "politically correct curating." The exhibit, he said in the April issue of *Air Force Magazine*, lacked context and balance, particularly the emotionally loaded section on the destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By concentrating on the last six months of the war, the exhibit ignored the record of Japan's aggression in the 1930s, not to mention its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. It made the Japanese look like embattled patriots who were merely defending their country against a vindictive American assault that was racially motivated and unnecessarily brutal.[15]

On the other side of the controversy stood the curators at the National Air and Space Museum and their allies among professional historians. From their point of view, the exhibit should represent historical reality, more than personal memory, and should be framed by professional historians, rather than veterans. The curators, in other words, responded to their critics by citing professional authority and defending their right to guide the process of historical representation. The Smithsonian had "no thought of apologizing for Hiroshima and Nagasaki," Harwit asserted, but at the same time it aimed at an accurate historical account that went beyond the personal perceptions of American veterans. The curators wanted to be "true to the documented facts." Their goal was to "tell the full story surrounding the atomic bomb and the end of World War II," which meant balancing personal narratives against "the reality of atomic war and its consequences."[16]

With this goal in mind, Crouch told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*,

15 Gugliotta, "Air and Space Exhibit Gets Flak Even before Takeoff," *Washington Post*, 31 May 1994, A15. See also Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space," *Air Force Magazine* (April 1994): 24–9; and John R. Dichtl, "A Chronology of the Smithsonian's 'Last Act,' " *OAH Newsletter* (November 1994): 9-10.

16 Hirsch, "Deadly Courier Retains Its Place in History," *Baltimore Sun*, 24 March 1994, 1A; Harwit, "Enola Gay and a Nation's Memories," *Air & Space* (August/September 1994): 18, 20–1; idem, "The Enola Gay: A Nation's and a Museum's Dilemma," *Washington Post*, 7 August 1994, OAH Files. See also Harwit letter to the editor, *Air Force Magazine* (May 1994): 4.

the curators had gone to extraordinary lengths to solicit expert advice in drafting the exhibit's script. Harwit drove the same point home on several occasions. The Smithsonian had been guided by an advisory group of distinguished scholars, he said. The group included Edwin Bearss, chief historian of the National Park Service and a veteran of the Second World War; Barton Bernstein, a professor of history at Stanford University who had written widely on U.S. atomic policy; Victor Bond, a doctor with the Brookhaven National Laboratory who specialized in radiation effects; Stanley Goldberg, an expert on the history of the Manhattan Project that produced the first atomic weapons; Richard Hallion, chief historian of the U.S. Air Force; Akira Iriye, a professor at Harvard University who specialized in Japanese-American relations; Edward Linenthal, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh and an expert on American war memorials; Richard Rhodes, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*; and Martin Sherwin of Dartmouth College, another specialist on the history of the atomic bomb.[17]

The Smithsonian tried to bolster its own authority, and the credibility of its exhibit, by citing the authority of these distinguished historians. A press release, for example, included favorable comments by members of the advisory board. "A most impressive piece of work," said Hallion, "comprehensive and dramatic, obviously based upon a great deal of sound research, primary and secondary." Bernstein thought the script "reflected the current scholarship on the war" and was "fair, balanced, and historically informed." Iriye praised its "judicious" interpretation of "controversial events."[18] "Everybody signed off on it," said Tom Crouch, himself a published scholar with a doctorate in history from The Ohio State University. The other curators were similarly credentialed. Michael Neufeld, for example, was a specialist in European history and German rocketry, while Martin Harwit had been a professor of astronomy at Cornell University and a member of

17 Ken Ringle, "At Ground Zero: Two Views of History Collide over Smithsonian A-Bomb Exhibit," *Washington Post*, 26 September 1994, A1; Harwit letter to the editor, *Air Force Magazine* (May 1994): 4; idem, "Enola Gay and a Nation's Memories," *Air & Space* (August/September 1994): 18, 20–1.

18 See the news release enclosed in Neufeld to Arnita Jones (OAH executive secretary), 17 August 1994, OAH Files. See also Bernstein to Harwit, 23 May 1994, OAH Files.

NASA's Astrophysics Management Working Group before taking over the directorship of the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum. The script had the advantage of this combined authority, the Smithsonian seemed to imply, and was therefore a reasonable and balanced document. As proof, Crouch defended the script not only against conservative critics in the Air Force Association but also against Professor Sherwin of Dartmouth, a historian on the "left" who thought that any exhibit of the *Enola Gay* was obscene and would tend to glorify the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[19]

Critics quickly challenged the Smithsonian's claim to authority. For one reason or another, they did not view the curators or their historical consultants as disinterested experts. Perhaps it was because their version of history contrasted so sharply with the lived experience of American veterans, whose personal narratives, according to the critics, constituted a collective memory of unimpeachable authority. Perhaps it was because Bernstein and Sherwin were "revisionist" historians who had long been critical of Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, or because the curators had taken sides in some of the historiographical controversies covered in the exhibit. Perhaps it was because Iriye was a native of Japan, or because Neufeld was a Canadian citizen, or because Harwit had been born in Prague and raised in Istanbul, or because neither Neufeld nor Crouch had served in the armed forces. At least some of the criticism seemed to imply that the exhibit was tainted with un-Americanism. Then, too, the advisory committee had not written the scripts; it had been consulted and the extent of its involvement was the subject of dispute. The committee had gathered only once, and not all of its members could attend the meeting. They kept no record of their discussion, and it was never clear if they had seen or approved the script in all of its variations. Even more important, the consultants themselves apparently disagreed. As noted above, Martin Sherwin of Dartmouth had criticized the original script for glorifying the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even more important was the position taken

19 Ringle, "At Ground Zero," *Washington Post*, 26 September 1994, A1. See also Koenigk, "Enola Gay Display Evokes Passion," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 9 June 1994, 1A; and Correll, "Three Doctors and the Enola Gay," *Air Force Magazine* (November 1994): 8–10, 12.

by Dr. Richard Hallion of the Air Force. The Smithsonian said that Hallion had endorsed the script, and quoted him accordingly, but Hallion argued later that he was consulted only after the first script was finished, at which point the curators dismissed his proposals for fundamental revisions.[20]

Divisions on the advisory board undermined the Smithsonian's efforts to place the expertise of historians over the memory of veterans, the historical document over the personal narrative. Nor was that the worst of it. Disagreement among the curators also raised doubts about their claim to authority and their right to assert their views over those of their critics. Even as the first script was being prepared, the *Washington Post* reported, Smithsonian Secretary Robert McCormick Adams and museum director Harwit had apparently expressed concerns about whether the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki was sufficiently contextualized. Harwit raised the same concern in April 1994, as the script was being revised. "We do have a lack of balance," he told the curators; "much of the criticism leveled against us is understandable." Harwit established a so-called Tiger Team of staff advisers to scrutinize the second draft, which the curators finished in mid-May. This process led to additional changes in light of the team's report, but not enough to satisfy the critics.[21]

"There is [more] work to be done," said an official of the Retired Officers Association, which claimed four hundred thousand members. He and other veterans, including Paul Tibbets, still considered the exhibit to be "a pack of insults." To their way of thinking, the curators at Air and Space had hijacked the history of World War II. They had reinterpreted that war in a way that defied the experience of American veterans and gave far too much credence to the Japanese point of view. Hallion, by now a leading critic, had the "overall impression, even from this revised script," that the Japanese, "despite 15 years of aggression, atrocities and brutality, were the victims." Correll agreed. Although Harwit de-

20 Ringle, "At Ground Zero," *Washington Post*, 26 September 1994, A1. See also Eugene Meyer, "Dropping the Bomb," ibid., 21 July 1994, C2; Dichtl, "A Chronology of the Smithsonian's 'Last Act,'" *OAH Newsletter* (November 1994): 9–10; and Correll, "Three Doctors and the Enola Gay," *Air Force Magazine* (November 1994): 8–10, 12.

21 Meyer, "Dropping the Bomb," *Washington Post*, 21 July 1994, C2. See also Ringle, "At Ground Zero," ibid., 26 September 1994, A1.

fended the revised script as a balanced account that would allow visitors to "draw their own conclusions," Correll saw it as "a partisan interpretation." It still lacked sufficient context, he explained in the *Washington Post* and in a report to the Air Force Association, and still gave too much attention to the "crackpot theories" promoted by historians, including the notion that Truman's decision might have been motivated by vindictiveness, by racism, or by a desire to influence Soviet diplomacy. In addition, Correll was still convinced that the exhibit put too much emphasis on death and destruction at Ground Zero and too little on Japanese aggression and the suffering of Japan's victims, including American soldiers and prisoners of war. The last section of the exhibit on the postwar legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki also showed little regard, in Correll's words, for "military perspectives" on a "military subject." It dismissed the notion that nuclear deterrence had made war between the superpowers impossible, while giving too much attention to the waste, contamination, and cost involved in the nuclear arms race. Most of all, Correll, Hallion, and other critics resented the reluctance of the Smithsonian to acknowledge what they considered to be the principal military justification for Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb: It ended the war and saved hundreds of thousands of Japanese and American lives. The curators, Hallion said, were "still pushing the thesis that the atomic bomb shouldn't have been dropped."[22]

Much of the controversy now centered on whether the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the only alternative to an Allied invasion of Japan and on the number of Allied and Japanese casualties that were expected in such an invasion. Despite earlier criticism on this point, the curators continued to advance the possibility that American casualties might have been much fewer than the original postwar estimates had suggested, involving

22 Meyer, "Dropping the Bomb," *Washington Post*, 21 July 1994, C2; Harwit, "Enola Gay and a Nation's Memories," *Air & Space* (August/September 1994): 18, 20–1; Tony Snow, "Sanitizing the Flight of the Enola Gay," *USA Today*, 1 August 1994, A11; "The Mission That Ended the War," *Washington Post*, 14 August 1994, C9; Correll, "'The Last Act' at Air and Space," *Air Force Magazine* (September 1994): 58–64. Correll had earlier circulated "'The Last Act'" as "The Smithsonian Plan for the Enola Gay: A Report on the Revisions" to the publisher and staff of *Air Force Magazine*. See the copy in the OAH Files.

perhaps as few as sixty-three thousand soldiers. The higher estimates, ranging upward to five hundred thousand, had always provided moral as well as military justification for Truman's decision, and challenging those estimates led critics, especially veterans, to see the exhibit as an unbalanced assault on the righteousness of the American cause. "It is totally skewed," said the Air Force Association. It "basically ignores all the figures which have been produced to show how many people would have died invading Japan." Historians, according to Tibbets, might look "to the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to find answers for the use of those atomic weapons." But the "real answers lay in the thousands of graves from Pearl Harbor around the world to Normandy and back again. The actual use of the weapons . . . was believed to be the quickest and least costly . . . way to stop the killing." In May, the executive committee of the American Legion adopted a resolution objecting to an exhibit that questioned the moral and political wisdom of dropping the atomic bombs or condemned the American airmen who carried out the last act of the war.[23]

IV

With the Air Force Association, the American Legion, and the Retired Officers Association involved, it was not long before Congress also got involved in what had now become a political struggle to control the proposed exhibit. Republican Senator Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas had warned the Smithsonian in the spring not to proceed with an exhibit that offended American veterans. Then in August, Republican Representative Peter Blute of Massachusetts led a bipartisan group of twenty-four representatives who denounced the proposed exhibit as "anti-American." The representatives also described the exhibit script as "biased, lacking in context, and therefore unacceptable." They warned the Smithsonian to provide "an objective accounting of the *Enola Gay* and her

23 Ian Katz, "Hiroshima Row Hits US Museum," *Guardian*, 22 July 1994, 12; "Exhibit Plans on Hiroshima Stir a Debate," *New York Times*, 28 August 1994, A25; Allen, "Flying into Controversy," *Phoenix Gazette*, 6 August 1994, B13. See also Larry Miller (president of the Air Force Association of Texas), "Don't Distort History of A-Bombing," *Dallas Morning News*, 14 August 1994, 6J; and Brian D. Smith, "Rewriting Enola Gay's History," *American Legion* (November 1994): 26–9, 68, 70.

mission," or face the consequences, which might include a congressional investigation and a reduction of federal funding for the Smithsonian.[24]

By this time leading newspapers and editorial writers had also entered the controversy, which gained fresh attention with the forty-ninth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing in August 1994. Their involvement heightened the political stakes in the *Enola Gay* controversy. It linked that controversy to the larger "culture wars" and spelled bad news to those who thought the Smithsonian should have an independent voice in shaping historical consciousness. To be sure, an occasional commentary defended the curators at the Air and Space Museum. The *New York Times* compared them to their counterparts at the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima, who had been trying in new exhibits to counter the popular perception of Japan as a victim in World War II.[25] The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* made the same comparison. Although critical of the exhibit's original script, the *Post-Dispatch* complained more about "meddlesome" politicians who sought to impose their orthodoxy on historians. To its way of thinking, both the United States and Japan would benefit from facing the ugly brutality of war.[26] Robert Reno, a columnist for *Newsday*, was even more strident. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he said, was the link between a horrifying war and a host of appalling events that followed. These included the contamination of nuclear test sites, the accumulation of radioactive waste, the tens of thousands of people who were exposed to nuclear fallout, the innocent victims of radioactive experiments conducted by the Atomic Energy Commission and the American military, the billions of dollars wasted on the nuclear arms race, and more. "All in all," Reno wrote, "the Smithsonian Institution would be fully justified in mounting a major exhibit commemorating Hiroshima and the splitting of the atom as events of unspeakable malignity that have brought humanity more grief and loss than the 14th Century plagues."[27]

24 Blute et al. to Secretary Adams, 10 August 1994, OAH Files. See also Theo Lippman, Jr., editorial, *Baltimore Sun*, 15 August 1994, A6; and Dichtl, "A Chronology of the Smithsonian's 'Last Act,' " *OAH Newsletter* (November 1994): 9–10.
25 "Exhibit Plans on Hiroshima Stir a Debate," *New York Times*, 28 August 1994, A25.
26 "A Politically Correct Enola Gay?" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 29 August 1994, B12.
27 Reno, "Business: Reno at Large," *Newsday*, 2 September 1994, A59.

With few exceptions, however, almost every other newspaper and editorial commentator lambasted the curators for rewriting history to denigrate the nation. Sabrina Eaton, writing for the *Plain Dealer*, repeated a charge from Republican Representative Martin Hoke of Ohio, who accused the curators of "writing revisionist history to give a black eye to the United States and somehow cast Japan in the role of victim of World War II."[28] James G. Driscoll of the Fort Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel* also denounced the "Foggy revisionists" who "distort history," as did Jeff Jacoby of the *Boston Globe*, who criticized the Smithsonian for airing revisionist points of view on such controversial issues as the "Soviet factor" or the role of race in American foreign policy. In addition, Jacoby and others hammered away at how the atomic bomb had ended the war without an Allied invasion that would have cost perhaps five hundred thousand American and two million Japanese lives.[29] The Smithsonian was more interested in "social commentary," argued Marianne Means in an editorial for the *Plain Dealer*, than in the truth that Truman's decision had shortened the war and saved lives. Means wanted to know how the country could trust an institution that postured "as moral arbiter and rewriter of history." How could it trust curators and historians who "seemed mostly interested in registering opinions framed by subsequent political and philosophical developments" – who imposed "today's morality on yesterday's war?"[30]

For the *Wall Street Journal* and its conservative allies, including Correll and *Air Force Magazine*, the *Enola Gay* exhibit was only the latest indication of the Smithsonian's "mania for revising American history."[31] They blasted the Air and Space Museum for an earlier exhibit that took a critical look at air power in the First World War and the postwar legacy of strategic bombing. They singled out the National Museum of American Art for an exhibit on the American West that supposedly debunked the pioneering

28 Eaton, "Proposed Show Irks Bipartisan Coalition," *Plain Dealer*, 13 August 1994, B7.
29 Driscoll, "Before Passing Judgment on Past Decisions It's a Good Idea to Study History," *Sun Sentinel*, 14 August 1994, G7; Jacoby, "Smithsonian Drops a Bomb in World War II Exhibit," *Boston Globe*, 16 August 1994, A14.
30 Means, "The Nation's Attic – Historian or Moralizer?" *Plain Dealer*, 27 August 1994, B9.
31 "War and the Smithsonian," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 August 1994, A10.

spirit, characterized American settlers "as rapacious brutes," and portrayed "the founding and development of America generally as a criminal capitalist venture." They also attacked the Museum of American History for celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the U.S. Constitution with an exhibit on the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; for an exhibit on science in American life that focused on such "failures and dangers" as Three Mile Island, Love Canal, and acid rain; and for an exhibit on America from 1780 to 1800 that treated Indians, blacks, and Europeans as "three equally excellent cultures."[32] The *Tampa Tribune* castigated the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History for closing a display on the "Origins of People" because it depicted the natives of ancient cultures as less worthy than Europeans – even though "European nations were further developed" than most of the people they "encountered during their explorations." The *Tribune* made the same point about the museum's decision to revise exhibits that depicted male mammals as superior to females. "The fact is that the male mammal is usually larger than the female," the *Tribune* explained. "The mate-seeking male needs to fend off competitors" while the "young-bearing female needs to be less visible to predators."[33]

According to critics in the press and elsewhere, "elite American museums" had joined modern intellectuals to redefine American history in a way that assaulted traditional values. The villains in this story were usually lumped together as revisionists, postmodernists, and politically correct thinkers who believed that objective truth was unattainable and who therefore promoted a version of truth that squared with the "current cannons of political virtue and related humbug." For the *Wall Street Journal* and conservative editorial writers like Charles Krauthammer, Robert Park, John Leo, and Pat Buchanan, "the forces of political correctness and

32 Ibid.; John Leo, "PC Propaganda at Smithsonian: More Examples," *Orlando Sentinel*, 4 October 1994, A7. See also Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space: At the Smithsonian, History Grapples with Cultural Angst," *Air Force Magazine* (April 1994): 24–9; Charles Krauthammer, "World War II Revised: Or, How We Bombed Japan out of Racism and Spite," *Washington Post*, 19 August 1994, A27; and Robert L. Park, "Science Fiction: The Smithsonian's Disparaging Look at Technological Advancement," ibid., 25 September 1994, G2.

33 "Incoming GOP Congress Should Shake Some Cages at Smithsonian," *Tampa Tribune*, 16 December 1994, 18.

historical revisionism" were "unable to view American history as anything other than a woeful catalog of crimes and aggressions against the helpless peoples of the earth."[34] Buchanan linked the *Enola Gay* exhibit to the National Standards developed by Professor Gary Nash of UCLA and other historians as a guide to teaching American and world history. Involved in both cases, Buchanan said, was "a sleepless campaign to inculcate in American youth a revulsion toward America's past." "Secure in tenure," the "UCLA crowd" and its allies in universities and museums across the country were serving a diet of "anti-Americanism" that denied the country's "greatness and glory."[35]

Other commentators picked up the same point in editorials that defended American exceptionalism against the "exhibit commissars" at the Smithsonian.[36] Ken Ringle, writing in the *Washington Post*, described the controversy as "a tug of war" between "the way mainstream America views American history and the way it is viewed in many academic circles."[37] Kevin O'Brien, in an editorial for the *Plain Dealer*, saw the *Enola Gay* exhibit as part of a larger effort by the Smithsonian and its collaborators "to change the way Americans look at the world" – to promote what he called a "paradigm shift." Whereas most Americans considered their country "the greatest nation on Earth," a nation that "has done most things right," the Smithsonian "asks us to think of . . . our country as just another name on the world map, of our culture as nothing special in comparison with others and of our political system as just one of many competing and even interchangeable options."[38] O'Brien's argument echoed a theme stressed by many veterans. As noted earlier, they, too, castigated the Smithsonian for ignoring the

34 Krauthammer, "World War II, Revised," *Washington Post*, 19 August 1994, A27; "War and the Smithsonian," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 August 1994, A10. See also "Context and the Enola Gay," *Washington Post*, 14 August 1994, C8; Park, "Science Fiction," ibid., 25 September 1994, G2; and Leo, "PC Propaganda at Smithsonian," *Orlando Sentinel*, 4 October 1994, A7.

35 Buchanan, "History 'Standards' Slander American Culture," *Arizona Republic*, 6 November 1994, E5. The *New York Times* rightly viewed the whole controversy as a continuation of the "culture wars" launched by political conservatives who wanted to "throttle scholarly and artistic expression" with which they disagreed. See "The Smithsonian and the Bomb," *New York Times*, 5 September 1994, A16.

36 Kevin O'Brien, "Spare the Apologies," *Plain Dealer*, 28 August 1994, C1.

37 Ringle, "At Ground Zero," *Washington Post*, 26 September 1994, A1.

38 O'Brien, "Spare the Apologies," *Plain Dealer*, 28 August 1994, C1.

unique goodness of the American cause in World War II and for slighting the courage and self-sacrifice of the soldiers who had fought and died in that noble venture.

Reeling from this kind of criticism, the Smithsonian decided, in effect, to negotiate history with its critics. It decided to further revise the script along lines suggested by the critics and to reconceptualize the entire exhibit. The revised plan, finished in August, called for a new section entitled "War in the Pacific: An American Perspective." Visitors would pass through this display before entering the original exhibit on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Designed to contextualize the last months of the struggle, the new section would cover four thousand square feet and include approximately fifty photographs showing events leading up to Hiroshima, including the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and examples of Japanese aggression. The new display was clearly designed to assuage critics who wanted Hiroshima and Nagasaki set against the backdrop of the whole war, who wanted Japanese suffering balanced against the suffering caused by Japanese aggression, and who wanted the horror of Hiroshima balanced against the horror of Japanese atrocities in the Pacific and Asia. With the same objective in mind, the curators revised the balance of the script as well. They included fewer pictures of Japanese casualties, more of American. They also reduced the number of Ground Zero images, toned down their coverage of various historiographical controversies, and eliminated much of the speculation about why Truman dropped the bomb. The revisions amounted to a substantial concession to the Smithsonian's critics. "We felt that their concerns were valid," said Harwit, "and we think this new exhibit – coupled with changes within the original exhibition – addresses those concerns."[39]

At the same time, Harwit sought the backing of the nation's leading historical associations in conversations in late August with Michael Kammen, a professor of history at Cornell University, president-elect of the Organization of American Historians (OAH),

39 "Museum Agrees to Broaden Hiroshima Exhibit," *Sacramento Bee*, 30 August 1994, A7. See also the copy of the August script in the OAH Files; Ken Ringle, "A-Bomb Exhibit Plan Revamped," *Washington Post*, 30 August 1994, C1; "Smithsonian Alters Plans for its Exhibit on Hiroshima Bomb," *New York Times*, 30 August 1994, A17; and Correll, "Three Doctors and the Enola Gay," *Air Force Magazine* (November 1994): 8–10, 12.

and a member of the Smithsonian Council. Together they agreed that Harwit would provide Kammen and the OAH with copies of the latest script. Kammen would review the script and decide if he could write a letter of support to William Rehnquist, chief justice of the Supreme Court and chairman of the Smithsonian's Board of Regents. Harwit sent the revised script to the OAH on 2 September and Kammen followed with a letter to Rehnquist four days later. Writing in his dual capacity as president-elect of the OAH and as a member of the Smithsonian Council, Kammen told Rehnquist that he was "impressed by the historical veracity and quality" of the revised exhibit. He reminded Rehnquist that historians disagreed over such matters as the number of lives that might have been saved by bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He said that it was important to convey the diversity of opinion on such controversial issues, praised the curators for doing so in a "balanced and judicious" manner, and warned that "outside interference by special interest groups, ideological partisans, and politicians" would compromise the exhibit and imperil "academic freedom."[40] A similar warning came in mid-September from the Executive Committee of the Organization of American Historians. In a resolution conveyed to the Smithsonian's Board of Regents by Professor Gary Nash of UCLA, president of the OAH, the executive committee noted that the exhibit's curators had followed "proper professional procedures" and cautioned against any congressional effort to penalize the Smithsonian for its work.[41]

If Harwit and his colleagues thought their revised script, or the support of prominent historians, would obviate the need for more fundamental changes, the initial signals were mixed at best. Tibbets considered the new section on the Pacific war a "plus factor," as did the *New York Times*, which also said that any exhibit on the atomic bombing of Japan must "reflect both the content of the debate" over Truman's decision and "its unresolved nature." The *Times* praised the revised script as balanced in this regard and as the outcome of a

40 Kammen to Rehnquist, 6 September 1994, OAH Files. See also Kammen memorandum to Arnita Jones (OAH executive secretary) and Professor Gary Nash of UCLA (OAH president), 31 August 1994, and Harwit to Jones, 2 September 1994, OAH Files. See also Kammen to the author, 20 May 1995, author's possession.

41 Nash to James M. Hobbins (Office of the Secretary, Smithsonian Institution), 19 September 1994, OAH Files.

professional process that was best left to run its course without "endless tampering" by congressional critics who would be satisfied with nothing less than "complete vilification of the Japanese and uncritical glorification of the American war effort."[42] Correll, on the other hand, attributed the revisions to constant prodding by veterans groups and other critics who continued to demand additional changes.[43] Representative Blute still wanted "a massive revision or rewrite" of the whole exhibit. "Tidying up the front hallway," as he put it, "doesn't erase the fact that the rest of the house is a mess."[44] More ominous still, Nancy Kassebaum introduced a Senate resolution denouncing the revised script as "unbalanced and offensive" and calling for further changes.[45] The same demand came from the American Legion, the nation's largest veterans group, which focused its complaint on the exhibit's reluctance to concede that the atomic bombing of Japan had saved hundreds of thousands of American lives that would have been lost in an invasion of the Japanese home islands.[46]

By the end of September it had become clear that the Smithsonian's strategy had not succeeded. The OAH's intervention had not put the museum's authority beyond question. Nor had revisions and the addition of a new display on the Pacific war assuaged its critics. In a remarkable decision, Harwit agreed to negotiate still additional changes directly with the American Legion. Meeting in late September in a windowless room in the Air and Space Museum, representatives of both sides spent two days in a line-by-line review of the script, after which the curators tried to implement the changes agreed upon. "They drafted pages while we talked," bragged Hubert R. Dagley II, a Legion official who participated in the negotiations. When it was over, the Smithsonian had agreed to erase virtually every hint of the controversy among historians over the American decision to drop the atomic bombs. In addition, the

42 "Smithsonian Alters Plans for Its Exhibit on Hiroshima Bomb," *New York Times*, 30 August 1994, A17; "The Smithsonian and the Bomb," ibid., 5 September 1994, A16.
43 Correll letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 10 September 1994, A18.
44 Ringle, "A-Bomb Exhibit Plan Revamped," *Washington Post*, 30 August 1994, C1.
45 "Senate Angry over Bomber Display," *Toronto Star*, 24 September 1994, D32. See also "Atomic Bomb Exhibit," *Houston Post*, 20 September 1994, A10; "Exhibit Called Offensive," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 20 September 1994, A6; and "Senator Criticizes Smithsonian Exhibit," *Baltimore Sun*, 20 September 1994, A6.
46 "Senate Angry over Bomber Display," *Toronto Star*, 24 September 1994, D32.

curators made the new display on the Pacific war an integral part of the exhibit and eliminated much of the last section on the postwar world, which, according to the critics, pictured Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb as the beginning of a reckless nuclear arms race rather than the culmination of a long and costly war. The curators also agreed to reduce still further the number of photographs showing the atomic explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to eliminate some of the artifacts that captured Japanese suffering at Ground Zero, to rephrase language in order to highlight Japanese aggression, and to add language that seemed to defend the atomic bombings as the only way to end the war without an invasion of Japan that would cost hundreds of thousands of American lives. These changes were finished by the last week in October. At that point Smithsonian officials went over the new script, the fourth since January, with representatives of the Air Force Association and the Retired Officers Association at a meeting in Washington, and then flew to the American Legion's headquarters in Indianapolis to win the blessing of that group as well.[47]

It began to look as if the *New York Times* had been right: The critics would settle for nothing less than an "uncritical glorification of the American war effort."[48] The result was a strong reaction from historians, historical associations, and the organized peace movement. Leaders of the American peace movement had met with Harwit in late September and had urged him to preserve the human face of war and the integrity of the original exhibit. They were outraged when the Smithsonian "caved in" to the more compelling remonstrances of the American Legion. "They are now presenting American Legion propaganda," said John Dear of the Catholic peace group, Pax Christi USA, "an uncritical glorification of the American war effort."[49] By late October, representatives of

47 Eugene L. Meyer, "Smithsonian Bows to Critics, Revamps Atom Bomb Exhibit," *Washington Post*, 30 September 1994, A1; Neil A. Lewis, "Smithsonian Substantially Alters Enola Gay Exhibit after Criticism," *New York Times*, 1 October 1994, A10; Andrea Stone, "Wounds of War Still Color Enola Gay's Place in History," *USA Today*, 5 October 1994, A7; Arthur Hirsch, "Bowing to Pressure, Smithsonian Rewrites Its History of World War II," *Baltimore Sun*, 5 October 1994, D1.
48 "The Smithsonian and the Bomb," *New York Times*, 5 September 1994, A16.
49 Andrea Stone, "A-Bomb Exhibit Still under Fire," *USA Today*, 6 December 1994, A3. See also Joe Becker (executive director, Fellowship of Reconciliation) letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 11 October 1994, A20; and Eugene L. Meyer, "No Peace for

seventeen peace organizations had joined to protest the revisions made in the Smithsonian's original script. While the Smithsonian's curators were hammering out last-minute details with veterans groups in Washington and Indianapolis, the peace groups were demanding another meeting with the curators and were threatening to sponsor an alternative exhibit of documents and photographs that had been removed from the original script. Representatives of the Smithsonian and the peace groups met again in mid-December at the Air and Space Museum. But after a long session, Mike Fetters of the museum staff emerged to explain that further changes were inappropriate. The Smithsonian would not revise the script to include artifacts, photographs, and controversial commentary that had been removed to assuage the American Legion and other groups.[50]

Alarmed by the growing controversy, the Organization of American Historians also reasserted its position and won support from the American Historical Association (AHA). The AHA's Executive Committee unanimously endorsed the resolution passed in September by its OAH counterpart. In late October, moreover, the OAH Executive Board approved a strong resolution condemning "threats by members of Congress to penalize the Smithsonian" because of its controversial exhibit and deploring "the removal of historical documents and revisions of interpretations of history for reasons outside the professional procedures and criteria by which museum exhibitions are created." The OAH also urged immediate efforts by a number of historical societies to protect the rights and professional autonomy of museums and historical societies.[51]

Similar complaints came from various historians acting individually or in groups, including Edward Linenthal, one of the Smithsonian's original consultants. "To be called on the carpet by senators and congressmen and scolded for not doing history in a politically

Enola Gay: Exhibit Now Has Anti-War Groups Up in Arms," *Washington Post*, 21 October 1994, C2.

50 Meyer, "No Peace for Enola Gay," *Washington Post*, 21 October 1994, C2; Stone, "A-Bomb Exhibit Still under Fire," *USA Today*, 6 December 1994, A3; Meyer, "More Turbulence for Enola Gay: Peace Activists Disappointed after Smithsonian Meeting," *Washington Post*, 16 December 1994, F1; "Groups Seek Change in A-Bomb Exhibit," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 24 December 1994, E8.

51 Dichtl, "A Chronology of the Smithsonian's 'Last Act,'" *OAH Newsletter* (November 1994): 10.

correct way smacks of totalitarianism," Linenthal concluded.[52] Kai Bird, another historian, wrote in the *New York Times* that the Smithsonian's curators had "agreed to censor their own historical knowledge." Bird focused particular attention on the curators' decision to increase the number of casualties that Truman and others expected from an Allied invasion of Japan. Reeling off a long list of historians who had written on the subject, he concluded that the preponderance of scholarly opinion held that the war could have been brought to an end without an Allied invasion or the atomic bombing of Japan – through diplomatic overtures, changes in the American demand for unconditional surrender, or Soviet intervention. Even had an invasion been necessary, Bird went on, historians had found no evidence that American leaders anticipated upward to a million casualties – a figure that was invented after the war.[53] Gar Alperovitz, author of one of the first revisionist histories of the atomic bombings, also denounced the Smithsonian for bowing to political pressure and provided the *Washington Post* with a similar assessment of recent historical scholarship on Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs.[54]

By mid-November, Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, another of the Smithsonian's original consultants, had persuaded more than sixty historians and other scholars to sign a petition that accused the Smithsonian of "historical cleansing." The new script, according to the petitioners, no longer reflected "a balanced range" of "historical scholarship." On the contrary, it presented as uncontested facts a variety of assertions that had long been challenged by historians. The petitioners urged the curators to restore some of the information deleted from the exhibit's original script, especially references to the debate in 1945 over whether the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was the only way to end the Pacific war without an invasion of Japan. On 17 November, Sherwin and eight other scholars, including Barton Bernstein of Stanford University, who

52 Stone, "Wounds of War Still Color Enola Gay's Place in History," *USA Today*, 5 October 1994, A7. See also Linenthal, "Fuss Clearly Shows Complexity of A-Bomb History," *Houston Post*, 29 November 1994, A19.

53 Bird, "The Curators Cave In," *New York Times*, 9 October 1994, section 4, 15.

54 Alperovitz, "Beyond the Smithsonian Flap: Historians' New Consensus," *Washington Post*, 16 October 1994, C3, OAH Files. See also idem, "Loading the Guns of August 1995," *Chicago Tribune*, 9 August 1994, 15; and idem letter to the editor, *Wall Street Journal*, 13 September 1994, A19.

had also been one of the Smithsonian's original consultants, met with Ira Michael Heyman, who had replaced Robert Adams as the Smithsonian's secretary. They accused the museum of completely disregarding the "historical documents and the scholarly literature on the atomic bombings." In the latest script, Bernstein announced to the press, "there is no clear statement that there is controversy surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that leaves Americans impoverished intellectually." Sherwin said the revised text had "nothing to do with the history, as it is known by serious historians." The Smithsonian had given in to "political pressure," and as a result the "whole presentation of history in the United States is in jeopardy."[55]

Suddenly it was the historians who were complaining that history had been appropriated by their critics and was being used to support a narrative that was more personal and political than historical. Under the weight of these complaints, Harwit decided to revise the script one more time. Responding to arguments from Bernstein, who had probably written more on the atomic bombing of Japan than any other scholar, Harwit decided to revise a portion of the script that estimated the number of casualties expected in an American invasion of Japan. The new estimate put the number at sixty-three thousand, much lower than the figure of nearly half a million included in the script approved by the American Legion. Harwit informed the Legion of the change in a letter of 9 January 1995, claiming that the higher figures were not historically accurate and had to be revised. The change touched off another firestorm. The Legion denounced the Smithsonian for backing away from its earlier agreement with the veterans and immediately withdrew its support for the exhibit. Along with other veterans groups the Legion now wanted the exhibit canceled altogether, as Legion Commander William Detweiler informed President Bill Clinton in a letter of 20 January. In Detweiler's view, there was no room in such an exhibit for "debatable information" that might

55 "Scholars Decry Exhibit on Atomic Attack: Smithsonian Accused of 'Historical Cleansing' in Bombings of Japan," *Rocky Mountain News*, 18 November 1994, A56; "Enola Gay Moves as Debate Goes On," *New York Times*, 28 November 1994, A12. See also "Hiroshima Exhibit Changes Draw Fire," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 November 1994, 20; and Eugene L. Meyer, "A-Bomb Exhibit Takes Another Hit: Academics Blast Revised Script for Beleaguered Smithsonian Show," *Washington Post*, 18 November 1994, F1.

call into question "the morality and motives of President Truman's decision to end World War II quickly and decisively by using the atomic bomb." Detweiler and other veterans wanted Harwit fired and urged Congress, dominated after the November elections by conservative Republicans, to investigate what they saw as a turn toward "political correctness" at the Smithsonian.[56]

By the end of January, Representative Blute and two other conservative Republicans had also called for Harwit's dismissal, and the historians had once again entered the fray. The National Council on Public History endorsed the resolution passed by the OAH's Executive Board in late October. Professor Eric Foner of Columbia University and a past president of the OAH, joined Nash and Kammen in a letter to Rehnquist that warned the Smithsonian's Board of Regents, on behalf of the OAH, against canceling the proposed exhibit. "We are concerned about the profoundly dangerous precedent of censoring a museum exhibition in response to political pressures from special interest groups." Such a course would, concluded the historians, send "a chilling message to museum administrators and curators throughout the United States . . . that certain aspects of our history are 'too hot to handle.'" Brigadier General Roy K. Flint, president of the Society for Military History, also spoke out on behalf of the country's military historians, who might disagree over how to interpret Truman's decision but who shared "a passionate commitment to freedom of speech and to providing the best scholarship with integrity." The Smithsonian, Flint wrote, should "stand publicly against the politicizing of scholarship in public discourse" and should do so by going forward with the planned exhibit.[57]

In the end, however, the historians were no match for the Legion

56 "Group Seeks Cancellation of Enola Gay Exhibit," *New York Times*, 20 January 1995, OAH Files. See also Eugene L. Meyer, "Smithsonian Stands Firm on A-Bomb Exhibit: Veterans Ask Museum to Cancel Enola Gay Plans," *Washington Post*, 19 January 1995, C1; "Legion Urges Canceling of Enola Gay Exhibit," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 January 1995, A20; Air Force Association Press Release, 20 January 1995, OAH Files; Andrea Stone, "Vets Blast A-Bomb Exhibit," *USA Today*, 20 January 1995, A1; and "The History That Tripped over Memory," *New York Times*, 5 February 1995, E5.

57 Foner, Nash, and Kammen to Rehnquist, 27 January 1995, and Flint to Rehnquist, 26 January 1995, OAH Files. See also Patricia Mooney-Melvin (president, National Council on Public History) to Smithsonian Secretary I. Michael Heyman, 16 January 1995, OAH Files; and Michael Kilian, "Enola Gay Exhibit Put on Hold Pending Smithsonian Meeting," *Houston Chronicle*, 21 January 1995, A2.

and its friends on Capitol Hill. On 24 January, Blute and his two allies were joined by seventy-eight other members of Congress in a letter to Smithsonian Secretary Heyman that demanded cancellation of the exhibit and the dismissal of Martin Harwit. The representatives also promised a congressional investigation of the entire controversy, as did Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, the new Republican majority leader in the Senate. Running for cover, Heyman suspended work on the exhibit and asked the Smithsonian's Board of Regents to take up the issue.[58] Meeting on 30 January, the board decided to cancel the original exhibit and accede to the Legion's demand that the *Enola Gay* be displayed without historical commentary. The planned exhibit of ten thousand square feet would be scrapped and the B-29 Superfortress would be displayed with little more than a plaque identifying the giant bomber and its crew. Dr. Robert K. Musil, a historian and director of Physicians for Social Responsibility, called the decision a "tragic capitulation to political pressure . . . reminiscent of the McCarthy era." Heyman viewed the results differently. Veterans and their families, he said in a statement announcing the board's decision, were expecting an exhibit that would "commemorate their valor and sacrifice." They "were not looking for analysis," and the Smithsonian, frankly, had not given "enough thought to the intense feelings such analysis would evoke."[59]

58 Eric Schmitt, "80 Lawmakers Demand Ouster of Director of Air Museum," *New York Times*, 26 January 1995, A6; "Enola Gay Controversy Continues," *OAH Newsletter* (February 1995): 3.

59 Karen De Witt, "Smithsonian Scales Back Exhibit of Plane in Atomic Bomb Attack," *New York Times*, 31 January 1995, A1, C19. On 2 May, roughly three months after Heyman canceled the original exhibit, Martin Harwit resigned as director of the National Air and Space Museum. Two weeks later the Senate Rules and Administration Committee chaired by Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, a conservative Republican who had been a member of World War II's Flying Tigers, opened hearings on the *Enola Gay* controversy and the future of the Smithsonian. Veterans and their representatives reasserted their view that the atomic bombing of Japan had ended the war quickly and saved lives. They saw the curators as left-wing historians who were hell-bent on revising the historical record in order to advance a political agenda. Stevens and other members of the committee shared this opinion. They refused to be moved by the alternative views presented by historians and curators, accused the Smithsonian of exceeding its legal authority in presenting controversial material, and promised to help the institution get back on the right track. See "Aide Resigns Over Exhibit of Enola Gay," *New York Times*, 3 May 1995, A9; Rowan Scarborough, "Smithsonian Under Siege on Hill," *Washington Times*, 12 May 1995, A10; and Jacqueline Trescott, "Senator Warns Smithsonian on Controversies," *Washington Post*, 19 May 1995, D6.

V

The *Enola Gay* exhibit had been "caught between memory and history," wrote Edward Linenthal shortly after the exhibit was cancelled, between "the commemorative voice and the historical voice." On one side of this divide were the curators, who were "looking for analysis," to borrow Heyman's phrase. Citing their professional credentials, and backed by the authority of professional historians, they claimed a right to interpret the past in an exhibit that would challenge the historical consciousness of its viewers. They wanted viewers to wrestle with the doubts and debates that had occupied historians for half a century, to grapple with the complexities of an important historical event, and to appreciate its consequences for later generations. On the other side of the struggle were the veterans of World War II, who spoke not with the authority of the historian but with "the authority of the witness," as Linenthal put it. The veterans wanted an exhibit that squared with their collective memory, and with their sense of personal heroism and American exceptionalism. They wanted an exhibit that privileged their story over that of the Japanese, that commemorated their sacrifices in a noble cause, not the destruction at Ground Zero, and that remembered "the atomic bomb as the redemptive ending of a horrible war," not as the beginning of the nuclear arms race. This was the history recounted not only by the American Legion and other organized veterans groups, but by individual veterans in letters written to the editors of newspapers all across the country.[60]

In the end, the commemorative voice prevailed over the historical voice, in part because veterans groups could muster more political power than the historians, in part because a conservative political climate called the very practice of history into question. One of the most fascinating aspects of the *Enola Gay* controversy was the degree to which critics in Congress and the press, particularly conservative critics, discounted the authority of professional historians with whom they disagreed. Professional historians, including the curators, were dismissed as the agents of political

60 Linenthal, "Can Museums Achieve a Balance between Memory and History?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* (10 February 1995): B1–2.

correctness, multiculturalism, postmodernism, or historical revisionism – all phrases used more-or-less interchangeably in a conservative critique that ranged from the *Enola Gay* exhibit to the National Standards for American History. If the critics needed experts on their side of the story they pointed invariably to the authors of popular histories, such as David McCullough, or to military historians, who were seen as somehow uncorrupted by the "revisionist" disease. But mostly the critics were their own experts or found them among American veterans, whose collective memory constituted a more authentic past than the archival accounts of professional scholars.

In this part of the story, by far the most disturbing, the memories of American veterans became weapons not only in a vigorous anti-intellectual assault on the practice of professional history but also on the principle of free speech and the tradition of academic freedom. Conservative commentators accused the curators and historians of present-mindedness while passing themselves off as defenders of historical truths, which they equated with traditional American patriotism. Denouncing the curators for promoting a political agenda, they demanded complete capitulation to a point of view that was itself frankly political and that often represented the organized interests of particular groups. This was obviously the case with Pat Buchanan and other conservatives in the press and in Congress, where not a single voice spoke on behalf of the historians and the curators. But it was also the case, if less apparently so, with such critics as Richard Hallion and John Correll.

Critics often cited Hallion as the voice of military history, though he actually spoke for the U.S. Air Force, which employed him, and refused, according to the available record, to stand with the Society for Military History in defending the Smithsonian's right to interpret history. Much the same can be said of Correll, whose employer was a professional lobby. Correll's was not the voice of the veterans, though he claimed as much, but of professional military men who wanted the *Enola Gay* exhibit to make a frankly political statement about the righteousness of the American cause and the blessings of air power. Correll would tolerate no dispute with his point of view, nor even the principle that such disputes were fundamental to the practice of history and protected

by the principle of academic freedom. Like Commander Detweiler, who told President Clinton that "debatable information" had no place in public history, Correll could not be happy until the curators accepted his position "that dropping the atomic bomb was a legitimate military action taken to end the war and save lives." Visitors to the Air and Space Museum were "not interested in countercultural morality pageants put on by academic activists," he said in words that mimicked the style of Pat Buchanan. They came to the museum to see "historic aircraft . . . cleanly presented," not to watch the curators "doubt, probe," or otherwise investigate a complex past.[61]

The *Enola Gay* controversy proved again that history is contested terrain, particularly when public presentations of the past collide with living memory. In hindsight, it is easy to wish that Neufeld, Crouch, and the other curators had tried harder, and earlier, to contextualize the atomic bombings in the long and bloody history of the Second World War. And maybe they could have struck a better balance between the narrative of Japanese suffering and the record of Japanese aggression, between the commemorative voice and the historical voice. As Heyman concluded, the curators had not thought enough about the feelings of individual veterans, who were less concerned about the politics of the *Enola Gay* controversy than they were about how their wartime sacrifices would be remembered by generations to come.

Still, the curators had been willing to share their work with the Air Force Association and other interested parties, had sought their advice, and had made adjustments accordingly. What is more, it is difficult to see how any degree of balance between history and memory would have satisfied critics like Correll, who was determined to censor all voices but his own. Second-guessing the curators also sidesteps the central issue in the *Enola Gay* controversy, on which Professor Alfred F. Young of Northern Illinois University had the last word. The issue is whether or not the nation's history can be openly and critically discussed or whether organized political pressure will encourage censorship and promote a false consciousness about the past. Historians will always

61 Correll, "Airplanes in the Mist," *Air Force Magazine* (December 1994): 2.

disagree over the past, Young wrote in the *OAH Newsletter*, but they should respect their disagreements and defend the right of public historians to represent the past without political interference.[62] Defending that right is particularly important in an age when so many critics are determined to reduce history to "bunk," to borrow a famous phrase from Henry Ford, who, like Correll, sought to build a romanticized version of the past as an alternative to the one offered by historians.

62 Young, "S.O.S.: Storm Warning for American Museums," *OAH Newsletter* (November 1994): 1, 6–8. See also Young to Nash, 21 January 1995, OAH Files.