



The Debacle of the Enola Gay Exhibit: The Politicization of History

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On January 30, 1995, the U.S. National Air and Space Museum cancelled an exhibit that was to have displayed and interpreted artifacts from the end of World War II in the Pacific, including the fuselage of the Enola Gay, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The script for the exhibit, which had undergone major revisions and had been approved by an advisory board of eminent historians, was condemned by veterans groups and conservative members of Congress for portraying the Japanese as victims and for failing to support the view that the atomic bombings had brought the war to an early end and, thus, had saved American lives. The controversy illustrates a gap between the perceptions and beliefs of participants in the war and the post-war evidence gathered by professional historians concerning the decision to use the atomic bomb. That decision, in fact, was overdetermined and was based upon at least six reasons, only one of which related to saving lives. Establishing a balanced approach to confronting and understanding the past requires forums for the free flow of ideas -- a process that was embodied in the Enola Gay exhibit and that was undermined by its politicization and ultimate cancellation. [M&GS 1995:81-90]

In January, 1994, the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum (NASM), unveiled the preliminary text for its long anticipated exhibit, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II." The intriguing centerpiece to this exhibit was to have been the front part of the Enola Gay fuselage, the B-29 bomber that delivered the atomic bomb that obliterated Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

This first draft of the script went to the

exhibit Advisory Board¹ and other interested parties -- chiefly experts who could critique the exhibit in the interests of ensuring accuracy and cogency. The Advisory Board met

1. Besides the author, the board was comprised of the following individuals: Mr. Edwin Bearss, Chief Historian, National Park Service; Prof. Barton Bernstein, Dept. of History, Stanford University; Dr. Victor Bond, Medical Dept., Brookhaven National Laboratory; Dr. Richard Hallion and Dr. Herman Wolk, Center for Air Force History; Prof. Akira Iriye, Dept. of History, Harvard University; Prof. Edward T. Linenthal, Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh; Richard Rhodes, author of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*; Prof. Martin Sherwin, Director, The John Sloane Dickey Center, Dartmouth College, and author of *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance*.

At the time of publication, SG was an historian of science who completing a biography of Manhattan Project head U.S. General Leslie Groves. He served on the Advisory Board to the curators of the Enola Gay exhibit until he resigned in protest on September 10, 1994.

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with the curators to discuss the script on February 7, 1994. All the members had criticisms of some of the details of the script, but it was the consensus of the Board that the script represented an accurate reflection of the latest historical research on the subject and that the curators had done a remarkable job in transforming and adapting a complex set of issues to an exhibit medium.² The comments of Air Force historian Richard Hallion sum up the opinion of the Board: "Overall this is a most impressive piece of work, comprehensive and dramatic, obviously based upon a great deal of sound research, primary and secondary" [1]. At about the same time the Board was meeting, the U.S. Air Force Association (AFA), a fraternal organization whose membership includes active and retired U.S. Air Force personnel, began a public attack charging, among other things, that the script:

* reflected an antinuclear and anti-military bias on the part of the curators;

* apologized to the Japanese for having dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and

* contained strong anti-American elements.

The stage was now set for a media feeding frenzy, which finally resulted in newly appointed Smithsonian Secretary Michael Heyman's decision, announced on January 30, 1995, to cancel the original exhibit. In its place the Smithsonian would display the Enola Gay, accompanied by a short video in which surviving members of the crew shared their thoughts about the mission they had flown fifty years ago. After almost a year of rancorous contention, Heyman apparently felt there was no alternative. It was his feeling that the Smithsonian had made a fundamental error in trying to mount an exhibit that was simultaneously commemorative and analytic. He concluded that these two agendas, while reasonable in their own right, were mutually incompatible.

The sources of the dispute over the exhibit are, in different ways, obvious and obscure. What is obvious is that the dispute about the original exhibit script reveals a lacuna between historians and the general public concerning the nature of historical evidence, in particular the relationship between

individual and collective memory on the one hand and archival and documentary evidence on the other. The more obscure roots of the controversy are imbedded in the relationship between the frames of mind required of most of us to participate in a war and the relationship of those frames of mind to how those engaged in the war choose to describe, and later remember, their participation.

The Historical Evidence

The year-long controversy over the exhibit was documented and, at the same time, largely fought out in the pages of the U.S. newspaper The Washington Post. The AFA's John T. Correll, columnists Charles Krauthammer and Chalmer Roberts, and the Post's editorial board, among others, lambasted NASM Director Martin Harwit and the exhibit curators for, at worst, being silly and ignorant and, at best, biased and without objectivity. Twenty-four members of the U.S. Congress signed a letter to a sympathetic, lame-duck Smithsonian Secretary, Robert Adams, complaining that the exhibit lacked balance and objectivity. According to one report, the congressmen charged curators with "anti American" bias [2].

Judging by the large sample of letters that appeared in the Post in mid- to late-August, the newspaper must have received hundreds of letters from World War II veterans, most of whom, at the end of the war, were being prepared for an invasion of the Japanese main land. Almost all of these veterans find it unthinkable that, in the absence of the atomic bomb, the Japanese government might have surrendered without an invasion. "I was there and you weren't," is a refrain familiar to professional historians.

Many of the critics of the original Enola Gay exhibit script are disdainful of what they term "revisionist" history, by which they mean, apparently, accounts written by those who come along after the fact and who draw different conclusions and lessons than are ascribed to a set of events at the time that the events were newsworthy. Such histories are deemed by these critics to be exercises in abstraction and this, apparently, makes them suspect.

The chasm between professional historians who write about World War II and veterans of the war was unwittingly captured in Post reporter Ken Ringle's analysis of the battle over Enola Gay exhibit [3], which he characterized as a collision over two views of history. One view Ringle describes as "old history, a scholarly abstraction composed of archival records, argumentative books, and . . . fading images on black and white film." The other, apparently, is the history perceived by those who lived through the war --

2. In the world of museums the "script" is the fundamental blueprint for an exhibit. It contains plans for the physical layout, copies of all photographs, facsimiles of all artifacts, and the labels -- textual material -- that will adorn the walls and exhibit casings.

• *A Fight to the Finish* •

In 1931 the Japanese Army occupied Manchuria; six years later it invaded the rest of China. From 1937 to 1945, the Japanese Empire would be constantly at war.

Japanese expansionism was marked by naked aggression and extreme brutality. The slaughter of tens of thousands of Chinese in Nanking in 1937 shocked the world. Atrocities by Japanese troops included brutal mistreatment of civilians, forced laborers and prisoners of war, and biological experiments on human victims.

In December 1941, Japan attacked U.S. bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and launched other surprise assaults against Allied territories in the Pacific. Thus began a wider conflict marked by extreme bitterness. For most Americans, this war was fundamentally different than the one waged against Italy and Germany--it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism. As the war approached its end in 1945, it appeared to both sides that it was a fight to the finish.

Figure 1. A label from a display that was to have accompanied the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit. Conservative critics lashed out at the script, which they claimed portrayed the Japanese as victims, rather than as aggressors.

especially those who had fought the Japanese, had become their prisoners, and/or were prepared to invade their home islands.

Ringle interviewed Grayford Payne, who was interned in a Japanese prisoner of war camp for more than three years and who associates the war's end and his freedom with the dropping of the bomb. Payne recalls that the prison commander had posted an order from premier Tojo: the moment an American soldier set foot on the Japanese mainland, all prisoners were to be shot. It is understandably fixed in Payne's mind that the Bomb saved him from that fate. Ringle quoted to Payne from an early Enola Gay exhibit proposal that the exhibit would "address the significance, necessity and morality of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki....The questions of whether it was necessary and right to drop the bombs...continues to perplex us." Payne responded that it sounded like the curators were saying:

that the thousands of Japanese killed by those bombs were somehow worth more than the thousands of American prisoners in Japan....After all we'd been through?... What about the women and children I saw bayoneted and buried alive... by the Japanese in the Philippines? What about the hundreds of thousands of Chinese hacked to pieces in the Rape of Nanking?

Ringle's article, it should be noted, appeared near the end of the debate. Earlier,

Harwit had himself been in consultation with some of the exhibit's severest critics and had accepted an offer from representatives of the American Legion to mediate the dispute. As a result of this experience, in a Post op-ed piece Harwit defended the original exhibit script as well as the decision to attempt to placate critics: "We have found no way to exhibit the Enola Gay and satisfy everyone" [4]. A week later the Post responded editorially: the paper charged that Harwit and the exhibit curators had assumed that "the difference between [their]...take on the Enola Gay and [their]...critics' take on it is not simply one of political opinion but of intellectual sophistication. This naturally rankles with veterans and other groups that offered detailed and substantive criticisms of the initial plan which they said was emotionally rigged to create an antinuclear perspective and to present Japan overwhelmingly as a victim country fighting only to preserve its 'culture'" [5]. The editorial went on to accuse the curators of championing a post-modernist bias -- since objectivity is unobtainable, the dispute must represent differing political assumptions. Portions of that editorial raise the question whether anyone on the Washington Post had actually read the script. The charge that the script made the Japanese out to be "a victim nation" is based on a passage that read:

For Americans this [Pacific] 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.

This passage was widely quoted and misquoted in newspapers and magazines -- and by members of Congress -- as the smoking gun revealing curatorial bias. But the truth of the matter is that by pulling those few sentences out of context, the AFA had badly distorted their meaning. The full label from which those sentences is taken is shown in Figure 1. At best, the sentences in question need a little refining to make it clear that "defense of their unique culture" was a Japanese perspective, not an American one and certainly not the perspective of the exhibit curators. There is no question that the intensity of hatred by Americans and Japanese toward each other was unique [6].

While reading quotations out of context was an important ingredient in how the script was perceived by those who did not have access to it, the more general charges that academic history is abstract, revisionist,

and irrelevant to actual events are central to understanding the Enola Gay exhibit debate. All history is, by its very nature, abstract and this includes eyewitness chronicles. Moreover, all history is revisionist history. The new picture we historians have been drawing of certain specific World War II milestones is not the result of "scholarly abstraction," or "intellectual sophistication," but arises partly because hitherto unavailable evidence contained in recently declassified documents has forced us to reconsider earlier histories and partly because the context of the war takes on different meanings as the events recede further into the past.

Anyone writing a serious history of the circumstances surrounding the use of the A bomb and Japan's surrender must grapple with the following information:

* Because the U.S. had long since broken Japan's diplomatic code, the highest levels of the American government knew by May 1945 that a significant, though minority, faction within the highest reaches of the Japanese government was seeking a way to bring the war in the Pacific to an end. The U.S. also knew that a key issue between the so-called Japanese war parties and peace parties was the question of whether or not, upon surrender, the Japanese people would be allowed to retain their emperor system. The U.S. and its allies were insisting on "unconditional" surrender. At the time the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japanese diplomats were negotiating with the U.S. through Swiss diplomatic channels. There is no way of knowing, had the atomic bomb not been used, and had the allies dropped their insistence on unconditional surrender, whether the Japanese would have surrendered without an invasion. Note well, however, that after Japan surrendered we did allow them to retain their emperor.

* In the spring of 1945 intense inter-service rivalry led to confusion over how the war might be won. By June 1, the U.S. Army Air Corps had fire-bombed more than 30 Japanese cities. U.S. General Curtis LeMay expected to run out of targets by September and he did not "see much of any war going on" after that [7]. But the Navy was convinced that its blockade of Japan would, by itself, bring surrender. Meanwhile the Army was planning its invasion of the islands.

* In planning that invasion the Army estimated there could be as many as 25,000 American deaths as a result of the first operation scheduled for November 1, 1945 -- a landing on southern Kyushu [8,9,10,11]. Contrary to the AFA's later assertions, the Army planners were well aware of Japanese fanaticism, thanks to bloody experiences at Guadalcanal, Saipan, Tarawa, Leyte, Luzon, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, among other battle sites. Twenty-five thousand American deaths cannot be slighted but, as Stanford historian Barton Bernstein and others have shown, higher casualty estimates -- ranging from several hundred thousand to a million -- were unstudied, self-serving inventions. Some were created by U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson and his staff after the war in their well documented campaign to justify using the atomic bomb [8,9,10,11].

* As the war progressed, displeasure with the Manhattan Project festered. Then-U.S. Senator Harry Truman's powerful Committee Investigating the National Defense Program was rebuffed whenever it tried to get information as to why \$750 million was being spent on the Hanford reservation in the desert of south-central Washington state, or why one billion dollars (to translate these expenditures into 1994 dollars, multiply by 10) had gone to building and operating secret facilities at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. (The Committee only discovered that the two installations were parts of the same project after August 6, 1945.) All during the war, manufacturers whose products were essential to the war effort had been astonished when they were told that their priority claims to vital raw materials would have to take a back seat to the Manhattan Project, a project that seemed to need a great deal but that produced nothing. Time and time again, Secretary of War Stimson and Assistant Secretary of War Patterson had to remind the backsliding War Manpower Commission and the skeptical War Production Board that the Manhattan Project was "the most important project of the war" [12,13]. In March 1945 James Byrnes, the retiring head of the U.S. Office of War Mobilization, who at the time did not

know the purpose of the Manhattan Project, warned President Roosevelt that Project expenditures were approaching two billion dollars "with no definite assurance yet of production...If [the Manhattan] Project proves to be a failure, it will then be the subject of relentless investigation and criticism" [14].

* General Leslie R. Groves, the Manhattan Project's administrative head, had a reputation for getting things done. Both the civilian and military leadership to whom he answered had given him *carte blanche*. Thus he could, and did, apply intense pressure to the Project scientists and civilian contractors to build the required enormous installations and then to manufacture nuclear fuel at rates that, at first, seemed impossible to the people doing the work. Groves made sure the designers of the first bombs sought workable (as opposed to the most elegant) designs in the shortest time possible. And once the bombs were delivered to the island of Tinian from where they were to be dispatched to Japan, he relentlessly drove the scientists and technicians who were responsible for assembling and loading the bombs to speed up the second atomic attack (on Nagasaki) by two days [12,15]. After the war, in response to the congratulations of a close friend, Groves wrote, "I had to do some good hard talking at times. One thing is certain -- we will never have the greatest congressional investigation of all times" [16].

* When Stimson formed the Interim Committee to recommend to President Truman how to manage domestic and international aspects of nuclear policy until Congress could be brought into the picture, he asked the President to name a personal representative. Truman named James Byrnes, who was already on record as fearing the political consequences of a "failed" Manhattan Project.

There is ample evidence to show that Byrnes was also intent on using the bomb to limit Russian involvement in the Pacific War, and to warn the Russians about post-war adventurism in Europe [17,18]. Clearly Byrnes, who would soon become Truman's Secretary of State, had the President's ear more than anyone else in the early days of the administration -- when the A-bomb's use was

decided. Incidentally, it was the majority (not unanimous) opinion of the Interim Committee (with Byrnes as part of that majority) that the bomb should be used as soon as feasible without giving prior warning.

This information is not dry abstraction and the only thing musty about the documents is the paper on which they are written. For any account of the conditions surrounding the use of the atomic bomb against Japan, and Japan's decision to surrender, these are some of the bare facts.

This is not to suggest that historians do—or should—rely exclusively on documentary evidence. Eyewitness accounts, personal diaries, and unofficial reports, when available, have an important role to play in historical works. Take the case of Grayford Payne, the prisoner of war quoted earlier. For someone writing a history of Japanese prisoner-of-war camps, his testimony and the testimony of his fellow inmates would be vital. But with regard to the question whether or not the Japanese might have surrendered prior to an invasion of their home islands without the use of the atomic bomb, Mr. Payne's opinion is not of much value. Isolated in a prisoner-of-war camp, he was necessarily ignorant of events in Washington, Moscow, Tokyo, and Geneva. Although he might later have consulted important archives³ or have read the eyewitness accounts of high level negotiations between Moscow and Washington, Moscow and Tokyo, and Geneva and Washington, the events Mr. Payne experienced personally were but part of one scene in a multi-act drama, in which many of the scenes simultaneously "played" on a stage as large as the earth.

Frames of Mind

The critics of the Enola Gay exhibition script charge that its creators lacked objectivity. The charge is unwarranted. Many people hold a confused belief that attaining objectivity is simply a matter of individual will and personal psychology. This view has been reinforced by Hollywood portrayals of great scientists who, as they don their lab coats, assume the mantle of objectivity and are swayed by "the facts and only the facts." Such an image, while popular, is fantasy. All of us

3. For example, Mr. Payne does not seem to have been aware of the fact, that more than a year before the war ended, Tojo, whose memorandum on the execution of American prisoners is burned into Mr. Payne's memory, had been fired as prime minister. Though it is true that some American prisoners were executed when Japan surrendered, whether or not that happened turned out to depend on the passions and mental state of individual camp commanders.

-- reporters and historians, scientists and artists, policemen and engineers, laborers and congress men, physicians and poets, men and women, white and black, yellow and brown, old and young -- carry around with us considerable psychological baggage, much of it unconscious and deeply imbedded in our psyches, which colors everything we see, everything we believe, and everything we do. Living a life is never a matter of logic.

This is not to say that we don't try to do the best we can to find a balanced approach. Nevertheless, our outlook on the world is always colored by an overlay of shrouded preconceptions -- the result of idiosyncratic, familial, regional, and national influences. Even so, objectivity about the past, about the nature of the physical world, or about day-to-day events is achievable. While not a matter of personal will and discipline, objectivity can be obtained through a social process that requires forums for the free flow and exchange of ideas. The press not only relies on an open forum, with competing newspapers and broadcast stations vying against each other, but it also has internal processes:

reporters are often required by editors to produce one or more independent corroborations that an event occurred or that a public official made a particular statement. In this case, however, who is to corroborate the real reason the Japanese decided to surrender? Who is to confirm the real reason the atomic bomb was dropped? In fact there were many reasons. But the AFA, the American Legion, some members of Congress, the Post editorial writers, and some reporters appear to endorse the view that the only reason the bomb was dropped was to bring the war to a quick end and thereby effect a net saving of lives. Among historians there is no such agreement. Documentary and oral evidence support at least six reasons:

1) Momentum: a two-billion-dollar, three-year, secret nationwide enterprise had been created and no one said, "no, stop!"

2) Personal reputations: scientific and military leaders who all through the war had pushed the Project to the top of the list of military priorities, faced an outraged Congress and an irate public were the bomb not used.

3) Personal ambition: individual scientific leaders and military commanders saw the project as a route to swift personal advancement.

4) The completion of an experiment: target cities were not to be bombed by any other means and among the criteria chosen was size. The city had to be large enough so that every major effect of the bomb, including blast, heat, and radiation, would be observable. Among the first Americans to land in Japan after the war were Manhattan Project scientists whose job at that point was to measure the effects of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and on its citizens [19].

5) International diplomacy: the atomic bomb would shorten the war and thereby minimize Soviet involvement in the Pacific settlement; at the same time it would serve notice to the Soviets with regard to their designs on Western Europe.

6) Humane objectives: to shorten the war and effect a net saving of lives.

Most historians agree on the evidence, but disagree and debate about how that evidence should be interpreted. One can find individuals who participated in the decision about the bomb who evince one or several of the above motivations. There were many reasons to use the bomb -- the decision, it can be argued, was over-determined -- and there was no serious opposition to any of the reasons.

Yet, in the face of the evidence, the AFA and the American Legion doggedly insist that the only reason the atomic bomb was used was to shorten the war and effect a net saving of lives⁴ Both organizations also vehemently objected to the section of the original exhibit script that explored the results of the bombing of Hiroshima. This part of the exhibit was to contain artifacts from Hiroshima as well as photographs, both of which gave graphic testimony to the effects of the atomic bomb. As a result of "negotiations" with the American Legion, the curators were forced to remove much of this material. Such displays, the Legion argued, were designed only to elicit sympathy for the Japanese. According to the AFA, the fact that the exhibit did not contain

4. It is interesting to note that during World War I German chemist Fritz Haber justified to his colleagues his involvement in the development and use of poison gases for just this reason: it would bring the war to a quick end resulting in a net saving of lives. See his remarks on this as noted by Richard Rhodes, in *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster. 1984:92-93). Similarly, Alfred Nobel was convinced that the invention of dynamite would make war so unbearable as to render it obsolete. See Kenne Fant, *Alfred Nobel: A Biography* (New York: Arcade Publishing. 1993:265ff).

~~SECRET INTELLIGENCE~~
DECLASSIFIED

Capt. W. S. Parsons
Gen. Bradbury, S. B. Kistiakowsky, M. I. Roy
Proposal for a Modified Tactical Use of the Gadget

CLASSIFICATION CANCELLED
PER DOC REVIEW JUL 1978

The IR test yesterday has revealed that the reaction of energy which is converted into radiant energy of various wave lengths is very much greater than was originally estimated. This suggests that one can increase enormously the radius of effective action of the gadget on enemy troops in prepared positions, or in transit, by detonating them such that they will be looking in the general direction of the gadget during the instant of detonation. It is our feeling that anybody within a radius of five miles could look directly at the gadget and retain his eyesight. We do not know whether too long would be permanent or temporary but in any case it is certain to have a tremendous morale effect on the troops. It is therefore suggested that a companion plane accompany the plane carrying the gadget, and that it release shortly before the release of the gadget a parachute equipped dummy bomb which should be equipped with super powerful sirens, unusual lights etc. It is believed that this contraption will arouse enough interest in enemy troops to make them turn their heads towards the point of detonation of the gadget, and that thus the effectiveness of the gadget against field troops will be enormously increased.

That the visual effectiveness of the weapon is so great is attested by the fact that one man at the Base Camp at IR situated some 10 miles from the detonation point was asleep in the open was awakened by the flash and instinctively looked in that direction. Thus his eyes missed the period of the most intense light emission but nonetheless he was blind several hours after the explosion.

While the proposed technique cannot work indefinitely because of countermeasures by the enemy it may be extremely useful for the first few field applications of the gadget.

CEK:NEB:MFR:he

Copy to: J. R. Oppenheimer
Intelligence Office

FINAL INFORMATION
UNCLASSIFIED
L. M. Redman
JUL 18 1979

~~SECRET INTELLIGENCE~~

THIS DOCUMENT CONTAINS NEITHER RECOMMENDATIONS NOR CONCLUSIONS OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Figure 2. Declassified memo to Captain William S. Parsons, proposing a scheme to guarantee the blinding of "enemy troops" by the atomic bomb as it is exploded. Source: Los Alamos National Laboratories Archives

equivalent detailed discussions of Japanese cruelty was more evidence of the script's anti-American bias.

This insistence that the only reason for using the bomb was humanitarian and that evidence of the effects of the bomb be removed from the exhibit has its source in the frame of mind necessary to commit the acts required to fight a war. On the one hand, the veterans' commitment to the belief that the bomb was absolutely necessary to end the war quickly allows them -- and the rest of us -- to avoid looking at some very hard questions about the nature of war and about the frame of mind all participants -- even people not directly involved in combat -- are forced to assume in order to work on behalf of victory. On the other hand, retaining the fictions of such a frame of mind after the events, in an exhibit that also ends as the atomic bomb leaves the bomb bay, is a way of allowing individuals to live with themselves. Consider the memo shown in Figure 2. It was composed by three scientists who had had

important roles in the development of the atomic bomb. It was directed to their boss, U.S. Navy Captain William S. Parsons, who was one of the associate directors, under J. Robert Oppenheimer, of the wartime laboratories at Los Alamos.

The import of the memo, which is dated July 17, 1945, is that the atomic bomb tested in the New Mexico desert on July 16, 1945 put out so much light that a soldier ten miles away who had been sleeping at the time the bomb was detonated and who reflexively opened his eyes and looked right at the forming fireball, was rendered sightless for several hours. (Had he been closer, his sight would have been permanently destroyed and his eyes might well have melted.) What Bradbury, Kistiakowsky, and Roy proposed was that just before dropping the atomic bomb on the Japanese, military forces should drop a device with bright flashing lights and a loud whistle that would induce the Japanese to look in the direction of the explosion about to take place. Examine the rhetoric of this memo carefully. The bomb is not a bomb, it is a "gadget." And the authors do not speak of dropping the atomic bomb on a city filled with people, but on "enemy troops."

The men making this proposal were no more or less humane than any of the rest of us. This memo represents the mindset that is required to allow people to fight a war. The original Enola Gay exhibit would have forced any thoughtful viewer to confront the existence of -- and the need for -- that kind of mindset at all the levels at which World War II was prosecuted. And if the Americans needed such a frame of mind to fight the war, can we not say that the same must have been true for the general population of the Japanese--or, for that matter, of the Russians, Germans, French, and Italians?

The unwillingness to face such conclusions -- conclusions that are among the results of a historical study of warfare -- may drive those who insist on restricting the commemoration of war to simple-minded, flag-waving displays. This may well be the only way the participants in a war can live with themselves after the war is over. In this case, the AFA perspective seems to be that wars are fought on fast moving platforms, five miles or more above the ground. In the best of all wars, up there, things are antiseptic, quiet, and heroic. Now that television is bringing any war that is fought directly into our living rooms, it gets harder and harder to maintain the fiction, harder and harder to justify the frame of mind that is required to carry out the acts that war necessitates.

The Final Straw for "The Last Act"

By January of this year, the script for "The Last Act" had gone through five revisions. The last two were the result of forced conferences between the curators and representatives of the American Legion. These were line-by-line negotiations. Besides all their other objections, the Legion and the AFA were incensed by the script's treatment of how many casualties had been expected in the event of an invasion of the Japanese islands themselves. At the time, military planners had predicted approximately 132,500 casualties -- including deaths, injuries, and missing -- from the invasion of Kyushu, planned for November 1, 1945 [8]. The American Legion claimed that as many as a million American casualties had been expected. This was crucial to their case, for as far as the Legion and the AFA were concerned, there was only one reason why we had dropped the atomic bomb on Japan: to shorten the war and thus effect a net saving of lives. Figure 3 is a copy of how the original script dealt with the question of casualties to be expected in the event of an invasion of the Japanese home islands. That text is a very sensible assessment of the evidential situation. The American Legion representatives and the curators ended up negotiating a casualty figure of 229,000.

On January 9, 1995 Harwit solemnly promised the Legion and the AFA that there would be no more changes in the script. Though the Legion was still not happy, it pronounced the script acceptable. The AFA was still calling for a cancellation of the exhibit. At this point Barton Bernstein, who had spent years studying the documentary evidence on expected casualties in the event of an invasion, convinced Harwit that the negotiated figure was much too high. Harwit informed the American Legion that he was going to change the figure from 229,000 to 63,000 a figure that comes from a June 18, 1945 entry in Admiral William Leahy's diary. Of course the Legion was nonplussed. Harwit, who ultimately resigned as the director of NASM, had broken his word to them. The political heat was now too much for the Smithsonian's administration. On January 30, Secretary Heyman announced the cancellation of the original exhibit. And so, irony of ironies, the exhibit foundered over a disagreement about events that had never happened -- how many American casualties there would have been had there been an invasion. It was a fittingly outlandish ending for a bizarre chronicle.

References

1. Hallion R Memo to Michael Neufeld. 7

• *Half a Million American Dead?* •

After the war, estimates of the number of casualties to be expected in an invasion of Japan were as high as half a million or more American dead—twice the number of U.S. servicemen killed on all fronts during World War II. In fact, military staff studies in the spring of 1945 estimated thirty to fifty thousand casualties—dead and wounded—in "Olympic," the invasion of Kyushu. Based on the Okinawa campaign, that would have meant perhaps ten thousand American dead. Military planners made no firm estimates for "Coronet," the second invasion, but losses clearly would have been higher.

Early U.S. studies, however, underestimated Japanese defenses. Moreover, the U.S. Navy leadership, who were unenthusiastic about the invasion, were skeptical of the studies. On June 18, 1945, Admiral Leahy pointed out that, if the "Olympic" invasion force took casualties at the same rate as Okinawa, that could mean 268,000 casualties (about 50,000 dead) on Kyushu. It nonetheless appears likely that post-war estimates of a half million American deaths were too high, but many tens of thousands of dead were a real possibility.

Figure 3. Label text from the cancelled Enola Gay exhibit script. One of the central controversies surrounding the script was its historical challenge to the popularly held belief in the US that, by bringing the war in the Pacific to an early end, the atomic bomb had prevented the deaths of half a million or more Americans.

February 1994. Author's copy.

2. Washington Post. A-bomb exhibit plan modified. August 30, 1994:C1.

3. Washington Post. At ground zero. September 26, 1994:A1

4. Washington Post. The Enola Gay: A nation's and a museum's dilemma. August 7, 1994:C9.

5. Washington Post. Context and the Enola Gay. August 14, 1994:C8.

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