ENOLA GAY EXHIBIT

1. THE HISTORIANS' LETTER TO THE SMITHSONIAN

Mr. I. Michael Heyman
Secretary
The Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560

July 31, 1995

Dear Secretary Heyman:

Testifying before a House subcommittee on March 10, 1995, you promised that when you finally unveiled the Enola Gay exhibit, "I am just going to report the facts."[1]

Unfortunately, the Enola Gay exhibit contains a text which goes far beyond the facts. The critical label at the heart of the exhibit makes the following assertions:

* The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki "destroyed much of the two cities and caused many tens of thousands of deaths." This substantially understates the widely accepted figure that at least 200,000 men, women and children were killed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (Official Japanese records calculate a figure of more than 200,000 deaths--the vast majority of victims being women, children and elderly men.)[2]

* "However," claims the Smithsonian, "the use of the bombs led to the immediate surrender of Japan and made unnecessary the planned invasion of the Japanese home islands." Presented as fact, this sentence is actually a highly contentious interpretation. For example, an April 30, 1946 study by the War Department's Military Intelligence Division concluded, "The war would almost certainly have terminated when Russia entered the war against Japan."[3] (The Soviet entry into the war on August 8th is not even mentioned in the exhibit as a major factor in the Japanese surrender.) And it is also a fact that even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed, the Japanese still insisted that Emperor Hirohito be allowed to remain emperor as a condition of surrender. Only when that assurance was given did the Japanese agree to surrender. This was precisely the clarification of surrender terms that many of Truman's own top advisors had urged on him in the months prior to Hiroshima. This, too, is a widely known fact.[4]

* The Smithsonian's label also takes the highly partisan view that, "It was thought highly unlikely that Japan, while in a very weakened military condition, would have surrendered unconditionally without such an invasion." Nowhere in the exhibit is this interpretation balanced by other views. Visitors to the exhibit will not learn that many U.S. leaders--including Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower[5], Admiral William D. Leahy[6], War Secretary Henry L. Stimson[7],
Acting Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew[8] and Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy[9]—thought it highly probable that the Japanese would surrender well before the earliest possible invasion, scheduled for November 1945. It is spurious to assert as fact that obliterating Hiroshima in August was needed to obviate an invasion in November. This is interpretation—the very thing you said would be banned from the exhibit.

* In yet another label, the Smithsonian asserts as fact that "Special leaflets were then dropped on Japanese cities three days before a bombing raid to warn civilians to evacuate." The very next sentence refers to the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, implying that the civilian inhabitants of Hiroshima were given a warning. In fact, no evidence has ever been uncovered that leaflets warning of atomic attack were dropped on Hiroshima. Indeed, the decision of the Interim Committee was "that we could not give the Japanese any warning."[10]

* In a 16 minute video film in which the crew of the Enola Gay are allowed to speak at length about why they believe the atomic bombings were justified, pilot Col. Paul Tibbitts asserts that Hiroshima was "definitely a military objective." Nowhere in the exhibit is this false assertion balanced by contrary information. Hiroshima was chosen as a target precisely because it had been very low on the previous spring's campaign of conventional bombing, and therefore was a pristine target on which to measure the destructive powers of the atomic bomb.[11] Defining Hiroshima as a "military" target is analogous to calling San Francisco a "military" target because it has a port and contains the Presidio. James Conant, a member of the Interim Committee that advised President Truman, defined the target for the bomb as a "vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses."[12] There were indeed military factories in Hiroshima, but they lay on the outskirts of the city. Nevertheless, the Enola Gay bombardier's instructions were to target the bomb on the center of this civilian city.

The few words in the exhibit that attempt to provide some historical context for viewing the Enola Gay amount to a highly unbalanced and one-sided presentation of a largely discredited post-war justification of the atomic bombings.

Such errors of fact and such tendentious interpretation in the exhibit are no doubt partly the result of your decision earlier this year to take this exhibit out of the hands of professional curators and your own board of historical advisors. Accepting your stated concerns for accuracy, we trust that you will therefore adjust the exhibit, either to eliminate the highly contentious interpretations, or at the very least, balance them with other interpretations that can be easily drawn from the attached footnotes.

Sincerely,

Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin
Co-chairs of the Historians' Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima

(see the attached sheet for additional signatories)

References


9. See John J. McCloy interview with Fred Freed for NBC White Paper, "The Decision to Drop the Bomb," (interview conducted sometime between May 1964 and February 1965), Roll 1, p. 11, File 50A, Box SP2, McCloy Papers, Amherst College Archives.


11. The papers of Gen. Leslie R. Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, are filled with his statements to the effect that he wanted a virgin target large enough so that the effects of the bomb would not dissipate by the time they reached the edge of the city. See for example the letter from Groves to John A. Shane, 12/27/60 on target selection, in the Groves Papers, Record Group 200, National Archives. See also, Martin Sherwin, A World Destroyed, pp. 229-230.

List of Signatories

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