

BOOKS

Academic Verities vs Political Realities In the *Enola Gay* Exhibit Dispute

An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of *Enola Gay*

▶ Martin Harwit
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Reviewed by J. L. Heilbron

On 30 January 1995, I. Michael Heyman, four months into his tenure as secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, canceled an exhibition titled "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," which had been in planning at the institution's National Air and Space Museum for seven years. Heyman acted under strong pressure from the then-new Republican Congress. The NASM's director, Martin Harwit, resigned three months later.

Congress had been mobilized against the exhibit by the American Legion and the Air Force Association. To the Air Force veterans, the flight of the *Enola Gay* symbolized the service and sacrifices of B-29 crews in bringing the war across the Pacific. To the larger number of veterans scheduled to participate in the invasion of the main islands, the *Enola Gay* signaled not death but life, relief from battles that they expected to be as bloody as the fights for Okinawa and Iwo Jima. To Harwit and his staff, the old bomber meant an opportunity to bring dramatically before a large public (the NASM is the most visited of the Smithsonian's museums) the moral, military and political questions raised by historians who have studied the records. In *An Exhibit Denied*, Harwit recounts, with the detail of military history, the battles between the veterans and the NASM over the restoration of the *Enola Gay* and the script for "The Last Act."

When Heyman canceled the exhibition, he said the Smithsonian had "made a basic error in attempting to couple an historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons with the 50th

anniversary commemoration of the end of the war." Harwit condemns this formulation. To him it implies that "a true history of the mission of the *Enola Gay* could not adequately honor the nation's veterans, and that it was more important for America to accept a largely fictitious, comforting story in this commemorative year than to recall a pivotally important twentieth-century event as revealed in trustworthy documents now at hand in the nation's archives."

Many will agree with Harwit that no exhibition commemorating the mission of the *Enola Gay* that omitted the tragic effects of the bombing should be mounted at an institution dedicated by its charter to "the increase and diffusion of knowledge." That does not mean that the revisionists' story would have had a stronger claim to being "true history" than the veterans'. The original script insinuated that, because Japan was defeated militarily and several options for compelling its surrender existed, the use of the atomic bomb was not morally or militarily justified. In an extreme form of this theory, President Truman bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki to keep the Russians out of Japan and to encourage them to make concessions in Eastern Europe. In any case, he did not enter into the sort of moral calculus presupposed by the revisionist historians: "How can I minimize the total loss of life if one American life equals 100 or 1000 Japanese lives?" Truman's primary purpose was to end a costly war in which American servicemen and women were still dying.

Harwit expected that the exhibition would enable its visitors to draw their own conclusions by displaying the various stories and documents without editorial comment. This was an illusion. The presentation would have skewed the conclusion. In particular, the exhibit's emphasis on the decision to order the flight of the *Enola Gay* would have created the impression that, for Truman and his aides, the atomic bomb presented the same sorts of problems it does for historians.

Heyman's distinction between a commemoration and a historical treatment also is an illusion. However badly a commemoration misrepresents the past, it is a view of history. Political propaganda, electoral campaigns, edu-

cational reforms—most of the important decisions we make—are based on views of history. Professional historians study history but do not own it. When, as in the battle over the *Enola Gay*, history as perceived by former actors differs importantly from history as presented by professional historians and curators, the actors have every right, even a duty, to speak out.

The veterans used tactics not approved for academic warfare. They lobbied politicians to end a head-to-head combat in which they were not trained. But it is not only they who lobbied. Harwit's historians and their advisers also fought for their version of the truth. That is the way in our democracy. Our school history books are battlefields. Parties contend for space for accounts of women, minorities, the military, religions and so on, now advancing, now retreating, as fads in history and pedagogy change and outside lobbies wax and wane.

By the time Heyman canceled the exhibit, Harwit's patient negotiation had produced a revised script that satisfied most of the parties. Thereafter the pressure was merely and meanly partisan. It is a shame that Heyman could not withstand it. The public would have learned much from a presentation of a significant and controversial episode in our history in a form that concerned actors and informed historians had forged together.

Conceptual Developments of 20th Century Field Theories

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Conceptual Developments of 20th Century Field Theories is a work of remarkable scope that integrates physics with the history and philosophy of science without being superficial in any of these diverse disciplines. It surely stands alone as a unique intellectual undertaking. Physicists (including professional theorists as well as students) and historians and philosophers

J. L. HEILBRON, formerly professor of history and vice chancellor at the University of California, Berkeley, and now at the Oxford Museum of the History of Science, lives in rural Oxfordshire, England.