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The Enola Gay, the Atomic Bomb and American War Memory

By Lawrence S. Wittner

Over the nearly six decades since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, a substantial majority of Americans has continued to defend the action. The heated controversies surrounding the opening in 1995 and 2003 of bomb-related exhibits at the National Air and Space Museum of the U.S. government's Smithsonian Institution help to clarify the bases for this stubborn defense. During the Smithsonian disputes, peace groups and historians provided a spirited and informed critique of the necessity for the Hiroshima bombing and highlighting its human costs. Nevertheless, more hawkish forces, appealing to narrow definitions of patriotism, easily won the battle for public opinion.

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In the early 1990s, with the approach of the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, the curators at the Smithsonian, a complex of eighteen museums in and around the nation's capital, proposed to display the fuselage of the Enola Gay, the giant B-29 bomber that had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The plane was the projected centerpiece for an exhibit that would inspire public reflection on the development and use of nuclear weapons, as well as on the dawn and denouement of the nuclear era. A preliminary script, drawn up by the curators, was approved by an advisory panel of prominent historians.

But when the museum submitted the script to interested citizens' groups, controversy erupted. The American Legion, the Retired Officers Association, and other veterans' organizations lashed out at an exhibit displaying pictures of dead Japanese civilians and raising questions about the postwar arms race rather than celebrating the quintessential American triumph. In the words of General Paul Tibbets, who piloted the Enola Gay, the planned exhibit was "a damn big insult." He and other veterans demanded that the bomber be displayed "proudly and patriotically" (Hogan 1996, 205; Tibbets website). They were joined by the Air Force Association--a military lobbying group focusing on the glories of American air power--in denouncing the planned exhibit as "anti-American" (Engelhardt and Linenthal 1996, 2).

The mass media joined in the attack. The Wall Street Journal declared that the Smithsonian had been influenced by "academics unable to view American history as anything other than a woeful catalog of crimes and aggressions against the helpless peoples of the earth" (Dower 1996, 74). Although a few newspapers wrote sympathetic editorials, the vast majority were venomously hostile. Calling for the firing of the museum director and the scrapping of the exhibit, the Indianapolis Star claimed that the exhibit was "tearing down national morale, insulting national pride, and debasing national achievements" (Kohn 1996, 280).

Politicians leaped into the fray. In August 1994, a group of 24 U.S. Congressmen denounced the proposed exhibit as "anti-American" (Hogan 1996, 215) and threatened that, unless it were changed, there would be a Congressional investigation and a cut in federal funding for the museum. Republican conservatives spearheaded the attacks. Pat Buchanan charged that historians were serving up a diet of "anti-Americanism" that denied the country's "greatness and glory" (Hogan 1996, 219). Ultimately, the U.S. Senate unanimously endorsed a resolution praising the Enola Gay for helping "to bring World War II to a merciful end" (Dower 1996, 73).

Faced with this assault, officials at the Smithsonian ordered the script revised to meet "patriotic" standards. As 1994 wore on, the debate over the atomic bombing, the pictures of dead Japanese, and references to the postwar nuclear arms race disappeared from the script, replaced by new sections on Japanese expansionism, atrocities, and fanaticism. The Smithsonian curators sat closeted with American Legion officials, transforming the script into a celebration of U.S. military might and of a uniquely virtuous United States while eliding all reference to the human cost of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This reduction of the exhibit to nationalist propaganda deeply disturbed two constituencies: historians and peace activists. In October 1994, the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association began criticizing what one group of historians denounced as "a transparent attempt at historical cleansing" (Lifton and Mitchell 1996, 291). That month, representatives of 17 peace organizations wrote to the museum's director, protesting the script changes and calling upon him to renew the focus on the suffering caused by the atomic bombs and to address the issues that historians had debated over five decades. In mid-November, a delegation of nine scholars and writers (among them this writer) organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation came to Washington to present the case for a balanced exhibit to museum officials and to a press conference.

Ultimately, media hype and the Senate resolution left no room for compromise. When Martin Harwit, the museum director, made a very small concession to the historians about the number of casualties projected by military planners, the American Legion demanded that the entire exhibit be canceled. In January 1995, 81 members of Congress likewise demanded cancellation of the exhibit and called for Harwit's dismissal. The beleaguered museum director resigned and the Enola Gay exhibit opened in mid-1995, stripped down to the Enola Gay, a plaque identifying the B-29, an upbeat film about the crew, and a cardboard cutout showing the crew members. This non-exhibit, bereft of all discussion of the atomic decision and its human consequences, continued for the next three years, drawing some four million visitors (Halloran 2003). The gutting of the original museum exhibit would cast a pall over subsequent attempts to address historical issues in the nation's museums.

Peace groups, dismayed by this turn of events, rallied to produce their own exhibit--Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and 50 Years of Nuclear Terror-- displaying it in over a hundred communities in the United States and five other countries. Similarly, researchers formed an Historians' Committee for an Open Debate on Hiroshima, which organized debates, seminars and teach-ins and placed critics of the bombing on radio and television talk shows. But, in contrast to the celebration of American nuclear might, these efforts had limited impact.

The issue resurfaced in 2003, as the Smithsonian announced plans for another Enola Gay exhibit, this one at the museum's vast, new Udvar-Hazy Center in suburban Virginia. The Smithsonian leadership and staff, by this time thoroughly purged or tamed, raised no issues that might cast doubt on the morality or necessity of the atomic bombing. That August, retired General Jack Dailey, the director of the Center, told the press that the museum would be "displaying the Enola Gay in all its glory as a magnificent technological achievement" (Elder 2003). The exhibit would state that the plane dropped the atomic bomb, but say nothing other than this about nuclear weapons and their much-debated consequences, past or present.

Peace activists and academic critics of the use of nuclear weapons once again responded. In late September, representatives of local peace groups (including Peace Action, the Catholic Worker, and the DC Antiwar Network) met with faculty from American university, local clergy, and representatives from Nihon Hidankyo (the Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations) to draw up plans to protest the new Enola Gay exhibit. Each of these constituencies carved out its own sphere of operations. The academics, led by Peter Kuznick--an historian and director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University--

organized a petition that called on the Smithsonian to display the B-29 bomber in an appropriate context for airing nuclear issues. The clergy prepared a liturgy that emphasized the devastation caused by the atomic bombing.
Hidankyo announced plans to dispatch a delegation of hibakusha to Washington to add the voices of atomic bomb victims to the debate over the exhibit. And peace groups, led by Pat Elder, Kathy Boylan, and John Steinbach, planned to welcome the hibakusha and to stage a protest at the museum on its opening day.

These constituencies joined together under the rubric of the Committee for a National Discussion of Nuclear History and Current Policy. They were, however, deeply divided over what to do about the exhibit. Kuznick argued that the group should publicly welcome an exhibit while insisting that it be presented in a non-celebratory, informative, and balanced way. The American public deserved to learn about the history of the atomic bombing and about the dangers of the nuclear arms race. Others, particularly Boylan, the representative of the Catholic Workers, called for opposition to any kind of exhibit of the Enola Gay, arguing that it represented the equivalent of Germany displaying its World War II gas chambers (Kuznick 2004b). Ultimately, Kuznick's call for a responsible exhibit prevailed among the critics.

This same division also surfaced in connection with a planned demonstration. Some activists proposed civil disobedience at the exhibit, leading to arrests. The academics, however, did not want to embarrass the petitioners, including many prominent social scientists, journalists and former government officials, by associating the campaign with behavior that might be viewed as disorderly or bizarre. Hidankyo, too, was uncomfortable with the prospect of arrests. Furthermore, some feared that announcing plans for the demonstration before the petition was presented to the Smithsonian might discredit the good faith of the petitioners. For a time, the campaigners considered dividing into separate groups. Eventually, however, their loose coalition continued "with the understanding that no actions would be taken, under the group's banner, that would embarrass any supporters" (Kuznick 2004b).

Another weakness of the campaign was that the major national peace organizations contributed relatively little to it. The executive director of Peace Action, the largest peace group in the United States, did play an active role in early planning meetings and did sign the call for signatures on the petition. But his organization and other prominent U.S. peace groups were preoccupied with the struggle against the Iraq war and their organizations never mobilized to support the new Enola Gay protest (Kuznick 2004a; Martin 2004).

The protest nevertheless moved forward. Calling upon the Smithsonian to include a full discussion of the atomic bombings of 1945 and of current U.S. nuclear policy, the petition of the Committee for a National Discussion drew over 400 signatures of Nobel laureates, distinguished intellectuals, and other celebrities (`Japanese Survivors' 2003). On November 7, 2003, General Dailey formally rejected the petition, and posted the museum's response on its web site (`Statement on Exhibition' 2003). One week later, speaking on behalf of the Committee, Kuznick charged that the museum was "abdicating its responsibility and abandoning its educational role." Furthermore, he challenged the general's claim that the text planned for the Enola Gay exhibit was "the same kind used for the other airplanes and spacecraft in the museum." In fact, the museum's discussion of B-29 raids maintained that these planes "devastated Japanese cities," while its discussion of the Enola Gay failed to include anything about the effects of the atomic bombing (Kuznick 2003).

Historians Martin Sherwin and Kai Bird, in a powerful article that appeared in the Los Angeles Times, pointed out that "the Smithsonian doesn't limit its observations to technological advances when it displays weapons invented and used by other nations." It was a "misguided sense of American exceptionalism" that "continues to dictate that public displays of American history be morally pure and patriotically correct" (Bird and Sherwin 2003).

The protest deepened in the days just before the opening of the exhibit. On the morning of December 12, representatives of Hidankyo held a press conference at the National Press Club. Later that day, they visited the Smithsonian to present letters from the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and a petition, signed by 25,000 Japanese, calling for significant changes in the planned exhibit (Daily Yomiuri 2003). In the evening, local peace groups held a community welcome for the hibakusha at a church on Capitol Hill. On December 13, an all-day conference--Hiroshima in the 21st Century: Will We Repeat the Past?--convened at American University. Sponsored by the Committee, it featured speeches by many of America's most distinguished writers on the history and use of nuclear weapons. They included Robert Jay Lifton, John Dower, Paul Boyer, Gar Alperovitz, Herbert Bix, Martin Sherwin, and Frank von Hippel. On December 14, an inter-faith/secular liturgy was held in honor of the hibakusha at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, two blocks east of the White House.

On December 15, the day the exhibit (and the museum) opened, U.S. peace activists and six hibakusha protested on site. Surrounding the Enola Gay, they held a solemn, nonviolent vigil. One U.S. protester threw a bottle of red paint at the plane, embarrassing the hibakusha and many of the other protest organizers. But, for the most part, the event proceeded as planned. Speaking to the press, Joseph Gerson of the American Friends Service Committee explained that an appropriate exhibit of the plane should include a display of "what it did to human beings" (Wald 2003).

The 2003 Enola Gay protests drew public attention to the fact that some Americans (and many Japanese) were dismayed at the atomic bombing of Japan. They evoked the 1995 protests over the earlier exhibit and other protests against American warmaking. The protests were widely covered by the press and a significant number of U.S. and international newspapers treated the peace protesters seriously, many supporting their contention that an Enola Gay exhibit should be accompanied by the display of the context for use of the bomb.

The protests failed, however, to generate broad popular support. Only about 50 U.S. peace activists, mostly from the local Catholic Worker group, participated in the opening day demonstration at the museum. Even the star-studded conference at American University (attended by this writer) drew an audience of only about 200 people. Moreover, many of the newspapers that endorsed the protesters' call for historical analysis simultaneously supported the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During the demonstration at the museum opening, spectators responded by chanting "Remember Pearl Harbor" (The Mercury 2003), "Go home" (Wald 2003), and worse. In addition, many letters about the controversy published in newspapers were hostile to the protesters. One of them declared that the U.S. critics "parade standard-issue, leftist anti-Americanism in their critique of the Enola Gay. Millions of lives were saved by the atomic bomb. . . . As an American, I am proud of the technology and the guts that produced the first atomic bombs, and I offer no apology for their use" (Glass 2003).

This heated support for the atomic bombing reflects the fact that the thinking of many Americans is deeply influenced by nationalism. Yes, lingering hostility toward Japan's wartime aggression and the fact that the end of the war followed the atomic bombing (and, thus, seemed to result from the bombing) have contributed to the popular view that the bombing was necessary. But the major reason for the fervent defense of the bombing is that many Americans believe that, if the United States did something to another country in wartime, then that action must have been justified. The United States, they believe, is a virtuous nation, incapable of wrongdoing.

Ironically, U.S. peace groups have been remarkably successful in turning Americans against nuclear weapons. In 1945, 69 percent of Americans thought that the development of the atomic bomb was a good thing and only 17 percent thought that it was a bad thing. But, thanks to the peace movement's education of the American public about the horrors of nuclear weapons and nuclear war, these

attitudes were gradually reversed. By 1998 (the last year for which there is polling data), only 36 percent of Americans thought the Bomb's development was a good thing, and 61 percent thought it was a bad thing (Gallup 1999, 77). Most Americans came around to opposing nuclear testing, nuclear weapons, and nuclear war. And this antinuclear sentiment, plus massive antinuclear pressure from other nations, convinced U.S. government officials, reluctantly, to accept nuclear arms control and disarmament measures and to back away from waging nuclear war.

But, symptomatically, U.S. peace groups have been far less successful in changing U.S. attitudes toward the atomic bombing of Japan. Between 1945 and 1991, approval of the atomic bombing did decline gradually from 85 percent to 53 percent of Americans. Thereafter, however, approval began to rise again, reaching 59 percent in 1995 (the last year for which there is polling data). That year, only 20 percent of Americans thought that the U.S. government should apologize for using the atomic bombs (Newport 1995, 4).

Thus, what this brief account suggests is that, although U.S. peace groups have succeeded in turning most Americans against future use of nuclear weapons, the powerful influence of nationalism has blocked widespread American repudiation of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima.

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Lawrence S. Wittner is Professor of History at the State University of New York, Albany, New York. His latest book is Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present (Stanford University Press). He prepared this article for Japan Focus building on an earlier text that appeared in Social Alternatives. Posted June 14, 2005.

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