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Air and Space Museum Hit by Academic Backlash

Under fire from the Air Force Association and other veterans' groups, the Smithsonian Institution and the National Air and Space Museum were moving to correct blatant political biases and imbalances in the museum's plan to exhibit the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. On November 16, however, forty-eight "historians and scholars" delivered a letter of protest to Smithsonian Secretary I. Michael Heyman demanding that the imbalances and biases be restored.

The scholars charge that by giving in to the Air Force Association "and other special interest groups," the Smithsonian has subjected its exhibition, scheduled to open in May 1995, to "historical cleansing." (Illustrative of the material "historically cleansed" out of the museum's original script was a preposterous assertion that "for most Americans, it was a war of vengeance," whereas "for most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism." The initial script had forty-nine photos of Japanese casualties compared to only three of American casualties. In effect, it portrayed the Japanese as victims rather than aggressors in World War II.)

The letter to Secretary Heyman was distributed at a press conference held November 17 by eight scholars who had presented an even stronger protest statement to Dr. Martin O. Harwit, director of the Air and Space Museum. The group of eight wants the exhibit to speculate further about whether the use of the atomic bomb was necessary and to declare that Japan was "near defeat" when the bomb was dropped. The scholars call on the Smithsonian to revise the impression that Hiroshima was "a legitimate and primarily military target."

It should also be made clear, the scholars say, that estimates of American casualties in the event of an invasion of Japan are inflated and that "military planning documents at the time showed no more than 46,000 expected US deaths." (It is not known whether the protesters know about Medical Plan Olympic, dated July 31, 1945, which was based on the assumption of 394,859 casualties in the first 120 days of an invasion. The requirement for whole blood was set at 149,000 pints. Anyway, even if 46,000 "expected US deaths" had been the worst-case estimate, that is hardly a prospect to dismiss lightly.)

The scholars also want the museum to restore the deleted parts of the "Ground Zero: Hiroshima and Nagasaki" section, which was designed as the "emotional center" of the exhibition. This section originally had more than 100 visual elements including life-size pictures of the dead and dozens of personal artifacts, including a schoolgirl's lunch box with remains of peas and rice reduced to carbon. The museum director said the emphasis on women, children, and mutilated religious objects was "happenstance," not a deliberate ideological twist.

"The Institution is now being criticized from both ends of the spectrum--from those who consider the exhibition as a 'revisionist' product critical of the United States to those who accuse us of staging an exhibition which glorifies the decision of the United States to use atomic weapons," Secretary Heyman said. "This indicates to me that we are probably squarely in the middle, which, as a national institution, is not a bad place to be."

—John T. Correll