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Political Exhibit Crashes at the Smithsonian

It was obvious that something had to give when eighty-one members of Congress called January 25 for the resignation or removal of Dr. Martin O. Harwit, director of the National Air and Space Museum. What gave was the plan of Dr. Harwit and his curators to use the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, as a prop in a politically charged exhibition, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II."

On January 30, with Congress breathing hard down his neck, I. Michael Heyman, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (of which the museum is a part), announced that the controversial program would be scrapped. Instead, the museum will display the forward fuselage of the *Enola Gay* simply, along with a videotape about the crew that flew it on the historic mission in 1945.

The public controversy began with an article, "War Stories at Air and Space," in AIR FORCE Magazine in April 1994. Over the next year, that built to national and international news coverage. Initially, Smithsonian officials disparaged AIR FORCE Magazine accusations of bias, imbalance, and lack of historical context. Those denials lost credibility, however, when the magazine published internal museum admissions that the criticism was valid.

The Air Force Association and other veterans' groups provided detailed commentary as the exhibition script proceeded through five full revisions. From November on, senior Smithsonian officials took a direct hand in modifying the museum staff, in whom veterans' groups had lost confidence.

What finally brought the roof crashing in was a letter — subsequently repudiated by Secretary Heyman — from Dr. Harwit to the commander of the American Legion on January 9, declaring the museum's intentions to mark down from 250,000 to 63,000 the number of American casualties that would have been expected from an invasion of Japan. Dr. Harwit explained that the basis for this change was a new examination by Stanford University Prof. Barton Bernstein of the diary of Adm. William D. Leahy, wartime chief of staff to President Truman, leading to "a different interpretation of what [Truman] might have had in mind."

The ensuing outrage led to the cancellation of the exhibit, although Dr. Harwit remains on the job. Secretary Heyman has said that he will oversee the new *Enola Gay* display personally. Media coverage has been generally critical of the Smithsonian, and congressional hearings are expected in both the House and the Senate.

This turn of events has caused consternation in Japan. "The government cannot intervene, but this is regrettable [in terms of] the Japanese people's feelings," said Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, according to Kyodo News Service. Also unpopular in Japan is a point that figured centrally in the whole debate about the exhibition — that the atomic bomb shortened the war and saved lives by making an invasion of the Japanese islands unnecessary. "I have never directly heard that opinion myself, but it would be regrettable if such an opinion exists," Foreign Minister Yohei Kono told Reuter News Service.

—John T. Correll