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Exhibit Blunders Force Smithsonian Probe

Shock over a "revisionist interpretation" of the use of atomic weapons to speed the end of World War II has led a Senate committee to review the management practices of the nation's premier museum.

The Senate Rules and Administration Committee, which has oversight responsibility for the Smithsonian Institution, held two public hearings, May 11 and May 18, following national controversy over a planned display of the historic bomber *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), chairman, established the framework for each hearing in his introductory remarks. He said that the *Enola Gay* controversy was not the first incident that has generated public concern about the museum and that the issues "raised serious management questions." He also said that the hearings were not being held to tear down the Smithsonian and that it is the duty of Congress to help preserve the Smithsonian as the central depository of the artifacts of our nation's history.

He added, "Those artifacts, together with facts proven at the time of decisions, permit judgments of history to be fair and unbiased."

Some of the committee members had served in uniform during World War II. A recurring issue for them — particularly those who served in the Pacific theater — was the museum's failure to consult individuals who had actually been there and seen the war firsthand. Responding to a question at the May 11 hearing, Maj. Gen. Charles W. Sweeney, USAF (Ret.), the World War II pilot who flew on both the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing missions, said that historians from the Smithsonian had never contacted him. In fact, Smithsonian officials even stated that they had "not exactly" consulted the NASM's advisory committee, which includes top military officers.

Dr. I. Michael Heyman, Smithsonian Institution secretary, said. "Our first script was deficient." He testified that the Smithsonian is incorporating a procedure "so exhibitions are quite well reviewed," adding that they will consult groups early enough to affect design and will include "explicit conversation at the outset" on a story line for exhibits.

However, Dr. Heyman and other Smithsonian officials maintained that they felt "the fundamental flaw [of the *Enola Gay* exhibit] was attempting to couple an historic dialogue of the use of atomic weapons with the fiftieth commemoration of the end of the war."

Throughout the second hearing, discussion centered on the attempts of some historians to "interpret" events. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) noted that there was a difference between what is acceptable for a public institution, such as the NASM, supported largely by taxpayer dollars, and a private one. She also took exception to what she termed the current theme of history books that "interpret" events rather than simply present facts that permit readers to reach their own conclusions.

Senator Stevens read aloud a section of the statute (Title 20 of US Code), dating from 1961, that provides guidance for the National Air and Space Museum. He then stated, "I don't think you have any authority to display an exhibit questioning US use of the atomic bomb under this statute." Museum officials stated that this was not their intent.

In his testimony, Rep. Sam Johnson (R-Tex.), who recently joined the Smithsonian Board of Regents, said that while the *Enola Gay* "was not the only exhibit that had been overcome by political correctness and revisionism, I do want to stress that the majority of exhibits at the Smithsonian are very impressive and historically accurate."

Dr. Heyman, who became secretary in September 1994, said that the Smithsonian should be "historically accurate and balanced in all of its exhibitions." He added, "We have an obligation to consider the opinions of the interested public in the framing of the exhibitions." Among other corrective measures, he also noted that guidelines the Smithsonian is developing would include "the extent to which historical exhibitions should speak within the context of time."

Noting that private funding had been decreasing steadily since the 1950s, from thirty-one percent to fifteen percent of the Smithsonian's budget, Senator Stevens said that with the country facing "severe budget cuts," the Smithsonian would need to increase its private donations. He added, "Eroding public support will threaten the ability of the Smithsonian to continue to be the central depository of our nation's artifacts."