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An Independent Non Profit Aerospace Organization

MONROE W. HATCH, JR.
Executive Director

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Dr. Martin Harwit
Director
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Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC 20560

Dear Martin:

I received your letter of August 23 and was somewhat surprised. While you rightly point out that the Air Force Association has not provided you with a list containing “line-in, line-out” points of criticism on your last two scripts, I believe we have, from the start, provided substantive comments on what is wrong with your current plans – both in private and in public.

The problems associated with this exhibit are not simply minor problems of language or technical issues – they are structural and more fundamental in nature, and, to date, they have not been addressed by the museum.

While we are pleased that you have received the kind of “line-in, line-out” comments provided by the service historians and others who have undertaken a “technical” review of the script, the issues of context and balance need to be addressed on the “broad” structural and conceptual levels. For instance, you yourself wrote in an April 16 memorandum to your curators that two-thirds of the photos of death and suffering should be removed from section 400. You also said that pictures of American prisoners of war should be included in that section, but the curators apparently ignored your direction in preparing the May 31 script.

We have pointed out the overall imbalance in terms of the number of photos in different sections, and have pointed out issues related to context by citing some of the most egregious examples of the underlying theme that the Japanese were victims and the Americans aggressors in World War II. Much of this criticism, included in the advance copy of our September AIR FORCE Magazine article I sent to you, is very specific.

Going back almost a year, on September 12, 1993, I sent you a letter that addressed your July 1993 concept paper on this exhibit. Even at that stage, I pointed out the problems in treating the United States and Japan as if they were morally equivalent in World War II; I mentioned the lack of attention paid to Pearl Harbor; I noted the emotional approach to Hiroshima; I also brought up the issue of the Japanese refusal to surrender, and the implications for casualties in a land invasion. I urged you to provide greater context and balance in your overall approach. We noted the need to discuss Japan’s aggression in East Asia and subsequent attack on Pearl Harbor;

the issue of allied casualties as the war progressed; the rationale for the decision to drop the atomic bomb; the missions against Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and the role of the atomic bomb in ending the war.

You may also recall our November 19, 1993, meeting when we further elaborated on these points in person. There again, your curators resisted these comments. As they prepared two massive scripts, one dated January 12, 1994, and one dated May 31, 1994, these points were largely ignored. Ignored as well in the May script were many of the comments of your own Tiger Team and many of the criticisms in AFA's published report of March 15, 1994.

The notion of balance and context is not simply a slogan. In a thematic and structural way, the museum's treatment of the end of World War II continues to portray the Japanese as victims and the Americans as the aggressors. This tilt has been aptly described by critics as historical revisionism. In fact, I understand that one of your curators does not even believe that Truman's decision to drop the bomb can be justified. No matter how many sentences are modified in the current script, such a bias is sure to come through --and it does.

While it was good to hear that you plan a photo gallery that will set up aspects of Japanese aggression in the Pacific and the attack on Pearl Harbor, this alone will not satisfy the growing number of critics. This is like applying a band-aid patch when clearly more radical surgery is required.

I believe you would be better served if you expanded the charter you have given to Col. Tom Alison, Col. Don Lopez, and Capt. Tim Wooldridge, to include all sections of the exhibit, allowing them to make modifications throughout. This team should consider the following broad points as they undertake to restructure the exhibit.

1) Section 100, "A Fight to the Finish," should be renamed "War in the Pacific" and broadened to include 1931-1945 Japanese casualties that were being sustained in the Pacific, American hardships on the Home Front, and aspects of Japanese resistance to include the code of Bushido (without glorifying the Kamikaze).

2) Section 200, "The Decision to Drop the Bomb," should be renamed "The Decision that Ended the War" and revised to reflect widely accepted scholarship – that President Truman analyzed the numbers of mounting American casualties, especially on Okinawa (48,000), and the estimates of potential casualties, and made the decision to use an awesome military weapon in order to save lives on both sides and to end the war. All revisionist speculation should be eliminated.

3) Section 300, "Delivering the Bomb," should be renamed "The Mission of the Enola Gay" and revised to ensure that an adequate discussion of strategic bombing tactics is included. It should also explain the military nature of the targets selected, and more emphasis should be placed on the training and nature of the mission. The bizarre treatment of the 509th's leisure activities should be eliminated.

4) Section 400, “Ground Zero,” should be renamed “Japan: Defiance and Devastation” and dramatically restructured and cut down in size. As you suggested, two-thirds of photographs should be eliminated and more information should be added on the military casualties and the military facilities that were destroyed. Lighting and other dramatic effects should be eliminated or made consistent with the lighting in other sections that deal with American casualties and Japanese aggression. Another subject that should be treated in section 400 is the extensive preparations made by Japan to defend itself against a land invasion. The perspectives of American soldiers waiting to invade Japan and prisoners of war who survived should be included in the personal recollections here alongside those of the survivors of the atomic bomb.

Section 500, the current discussion and presentation of “The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” is so out-of-place and out-of-context that it should be entirely eliminated. The speculative and limited treatment of nuclear deterrence has no place in this exhibit; a more scholarly treatment of this issue can be included in the museum’s later “Cold War” exhibit.

In place of “The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” a new section should be included: “VJ Day and the Legacy of the Last Act.” It should be a section about the tense deliberations at the highest level of the Japanese government over the issue of surrender, the ultimate surrender on J-J Day, along with a discussion about the invasion that did not have to take place, with a focus on the celebration on the U.S. Home Front. It would also be appropriate to discuss the American role in helping rebuild Japan (Constitution, infrastructure, etc.), a benevolent role that led to Japan becoming one of the leading economic powers in the world.

These are the structural issues that should be addressed. While we will certainly continue to look at tone and language, it is the overall structure that must be altered to address context and balance. I do not know any other way to get this point across – it is a point that many critics understand and agree with.

Finally let me say that the Air Force Association has made a good-faith effort over a number of months to work with the museum before it became clear that your curators were not interested in taking our suggestions seriously or those from other veterans. Once it became clear that these concerns were going to be largely ignored, we felt it necessary to make interested parties aware of your plans. Our approach to the media and Congress has been to tell them to “judge for themselves.” This controversy is one that AFA would prefer had not occurred. The real issue, though, is how scholars and high-level curators at one of the finest museums in the world could ever produce concept papers and drafts of scripts so out of tune with historical scholarship, the published memoirs of the leaders who made these awesome decisions, and with the firsthand reports from veterans who fought the war.

We are looking forward to seeing the next revised script. You have an incredible amount of expertise at your disposal. Please use it to seriously restructure the exhibit. I urge you to go beyond the limited approach to changes that your curators have taken to date.

Sincerely,
SIGNED
Monroe W. Hatch, Jr.