

National Air & Space Museum Concept Document 3 (July 1993)
(From Air Force Association Enola Gay Controversy Archive)

NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
EXHIBITION PLANNING DOCUMENT
JULY 1993

TENTATIVE EXHIBIT TITLE:
**THE CROSSROADS: THE END OF WORLD WAR II, THE ATOMIC BOMB, AND
THE ONSET OF THE COLD WAR**

Projected Dates: May 1995 to January 1996

For the United States, the Second World War was not only fought on two different fronts, it was, in many respects, two different wars. While Europe as well as the Pacific were witness to battles of terrible ferocity, there is a striking contrast between the conduct of the war and its ending in Germany and in Japan. In Europe, American forces battled an enemy similar to the foe their fathers had met, in a conventional war of slow attrition culminating in Germany's collapse. In the Pacific, opposing forces engaged an unfamiliar enemy; racial and cultural differences fanned fears and inflamed hatreds. Perhaps most strikingly, the war ended abruptly, without the conquest of the enemy's homeland.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and of Nagasaki three days later, were the first—and thus far—the only use of nuclear weapons in anger. Although mankind has lived with war and violence throughout its history, the atomic bombings announced the arrival of a new and qualitatively different peril, one that still threatens humanity: sudden, mass and indiscriminate destruction from a single weapon. From the vantage point of fifty years after these events, the atomic bombings and the end of World War II in the Pacific thus mark a turning point, an historic crossroads.

Beginning in May 1995, the National Air and Space Museum will mount an exhibit about the end of the Second World War, the development of the atomic bomb, and the onset of the Cold War. Museum staff members recognize that this subject is marked by strong feelings and a broad range of opinion. The primary goal of this exhibition will be to encourage visitors to undertake a thoughtful and balanced re-examination of these events in the light of the political and military factors leading to the decision to drop the bomb, the human suffering experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long-term implications of the events of August 6 and 9, 1945. While there will undoubtedly be other commemorations in connection with the fiftieth anniversary, this exhibit can provide a crucial public service by reexamining these issues in the light of the most recent scholarship. The Museum hopes that the proposed exhibition will contribute to a more profound discussion of the atomic bombings among the general public of the United States, Japan and elsewhere.

Entry to the Exhibition

The exhibition will be held on the first floor of the Museum, in Gallery 103, which is roughly square and encloses an area of 505 square meters (5436 sq. ft.). The gallery's entrance will be widened to create a distinct entrance and exit for exhibit visitors, but this widening will also allow the movement into the gallery of the forward fuselage of the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Visitors entering the exhibition will walk past a series of images relating to the end of the war in Europe. There are pictures of victorious American soldiers, images of the liberation of the concentration camps, VE Day celebrations, and newspaper headlines proclaiming Victory in Europe.

A label will call attention to the fact that Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen had brought the war in Europe to a close by forcing the complete and unconditional surrender of the enemy. They had won total victory in a just cause. But war continued in the Pacific, where the fighting was increasingly bitter and losses continued to mount. The possibility of an invasion of Japan, and even higher casualties, loomed on the horizon.

The main label will prepare visitors for the exhibition by indicating that it is about technology, war and decisions and consequences: the decision to drop the bomb and the consequences of doing so, something that has remained controversial for half a century. The exhibit will present as objective and balanced a presentation of these issues as possible.

A notice at the entrance will also refer visitors interested in the general history of World War II aviation, on land and at sea, to the Museum's galleries that cover those topics.

Unit 1: A Fight to the Finish

Upon turning the corner after the entrance, visitors will enter the first of four major sections of the exhibit. This unit, "A Fight to the Finish," will set the stage and create the historical context for the other units, particularly the second, "The Decision to Drop the Bomb." Unit 1 will focus on the last months of the war in the Pacific, but will also cover the end of the war in Europe and the increasing escalation of the strategic bombing of cities, which began in Europe.

The main theme of this unit will be the increasing bitterness and brutality of a war that was also, for Americans, a war of vengeance for Pearl Harbor. Visitors will encounter, soon after entering the unit, a film that will put them back into the spring of 1945 and provide them with some basic historical information. This video will be primarily made from American newsreels, but may include Japanese footage or propaganda films, if these are available and appropriate. This film will set the mood for the unit by giving visitors images of the end of the war in Europe, the fighting in the islands, firebombing, and exhortations to victory on the home front. Also striking, upon entering "A Fight to the Finish," will be a view of the Japanese Okha suicide bomb hanging overhead and diving toward the visitor. The kamikaze attacks expressed and symbolized the bitter resistance of the Japanese forces, which contributed to American racial and

cultural perceptions and the assumption that war would end with a fight to the finish on the beaches and in the home islands of Japan.

“A Fight to the Finish” will have three major subunits of text, photos and artifacts: “Two Nations at War,” “Combat in the Pacific” and “The Firebombing of Japan.” The first of the three sub-units, “Two Nations at War,” will discuss the attitudes and atmosphere on the home front in the United States and Japan, as well as the stereotypes through which each side saw the other. On the American side, the subunit will discuss, on the one hand, war-weariness at the end of the European war and the desire to get the Pacific war over as quickly as possible, and on the other, the stereotypes and the assumption of fanaticism that characterized American views of the Japanese. These attitudes reinforced and were reinforced by the bitterness of fighting on the islands, the kamikaze campaign and the firebombing campaign. On the Japanese side, this unit will look at Japanese stereotypes of Americans and Westerners and will discuss the atmosphere in the country and preparations for a last-ditch defense of the home islands. Posters, magazine images and similar artifacts and photos from both sides will make the atmosphere of the period more vivid.

The second sub-unit, “Combat in the Pacific,” will discuss the fighting in the islands and the kamikaze campaign. (The Okha is actually an artifact of this section.) The sub-unit’s purpose will be to show how different the Pacific war was for Americans—no quarter was given and few prisoners were taken—as well as the Japanese, who increasingly felt compelled to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend the Emperor and the nation. “Combat in the Pacific” will focus particularly on the Okinawa invasion, which began on April 1, 1945, and which led to frightening casualties among the Japanese defenders and civilians, as well as among American forces on the ground and at sea, where kamikaze and other attacks made Okinawa the most costly battle for the U.S. Navy in its entire history. This campaign reinforced the perception among Americans that the invasion of the home islands was inevitable and would be very bloody. Okinawa also played a significant role in the secret deliberations over how to use the atomic bomb.

Finally, “The Firebombing of Japan” will begin by looking at the escalation of strategic bombing in World War II from 1939/40, when President Roosevelt was appealing to all sides to avoid all indiscriminate bombing, to 1945, when wholesale destruction of cities became a matter of course. Most of the sub-unit will then examine the origins and course of the firebombing, especially the Tokyo raid of March 9/10, which about equaled the casualties of Hiroshima in the short run. Artifacts in this section will include leaflets dropped from B-29s and, if possible, bombs and incendiary canisters such as those used in the raids. This section will point out that air raids killed at least half a million Japanese civilians in the last six months of the war—about as many as in five years of bombing Germany. These raids were an important context for the decision to use the atomic bomb without warning on Japanese cities.

Unit 2: The Decision to Drop the Bomb

Upon leaving Unit 1, visitors will enter a unit which will begin by indicating that, unbeknownst to the people and fighting forces of both sides, the United States almost had ready a new and revolutionary weapon that would change the way the war would end: the atomic

bomb. Visually, Unit 2 will be dominated by the “Little Boy”-type uranium bomb casing, such as the one used on Hiroshima, which symbolizes the availability of this new weapon to decision makers in the United States.

This artifact will probably follow the first sub-unit, “Deciding to Build the Bomb,” which will give a quick overview of the origins and history of the Manhattan Project, from the discovery of fission in Germany in 1938/39, through the beginnings of the project in this country, its acceleration in 1941/42 as a project directed against the Germans, and finally its scale-up to be a huge engineering and industrial project for the production of fissionable materials. The section will also discuss in very simple terms the physics of the bomb and the different mechanisms of the uranium gun-type vs. the plutonium implosion-type. It will note that, under President Roosevelt, the assumption was always that it would be used, either on Germany or Japan.

The exact order of the second sub-unit, “Deciding the Use the Bomb,” has not yet been determined, but it will include the following topics: Truman’s sudden accession to the Presidency and his first encounter with the Manhattan Project; the Target Committee, the Interim Committee, and the discussion of a demonstration; the “speed-up program” and the compulsion to justify the expense of Manhattan; the Szilard/Frank/Chicago petition; the Soviet factor in American government deliberations; the change in the Japanese government and its ineffective peace initiative through Moscow; American decryption of Japanese diplomatic traffic and knowledge of the initiative’s plans for an invasion of Japan and likely casualties (which were projected to be far fewer than the post-war figures of half-a-million or more American lives); the question of the Emperor’s role in the post-war era and the politics of unconditional surrender in the US; final target selection; Stimson and Kyoto; the Potsdam conference and Declaration; the Trinity test of July 16, and the order to drop the bomb.

This complicated material can be made comprehensible by adhering closely to chronology and using a telegraphic style with lots of quotations from participants and original documents. Important documents and artifacts will also be used in this section to hold visitors’ interest, including the originals or facsimiles of Einstein’s 1939 letter to Roosevelt, the July 25 Army Air Forces order to drop the atomic bombs, personal effects of Harry Truman, a “Purple Analog” decoding machine used to decipher Japanese diplomatic traffic, and physicist Emilio Segre’s goggles and jumpsuit from the Trinity test.

The purpose of this section, which forms the intellectual heart of the exhibit, if not its largest section by area, will be to show that there may have been no “decision to drop the bomb: in the usual sense, but rather there was a process of moving toward use that was difficult to deflect. Neither the atomic bomb nor an invasion was probably needed to end the Pacific war, but this is much more obvious in hindsight than it was at the time. The exhibit will thus point out to visitors the difference between the knowledge and understanding of actors in historical events and our ability to understand them later through research and the advantage of perspective.

Unit 3: Delivering the Bomb

The second unit stops at the point where the dropping of the bomb is inevitable; the exhibit now turns to how the weapon was to be delivered. When visitors walk into this unit, they will

immediately see the nose of the “Enola Gay,” plus some view of the rest of the gigantic forward fuselage, which is about 18 meters (56 ft) long and 3 meters (10 ft) in diameter. On the port side is the evocative lettering of the name? Visitors will also be attracted to the Plexiglas nose, with its view of the cockpit and the bombsight that was used on the Hiroshima mission. It will also be possible to view the forward bomb-bay, with NASM’s reconstruction of the atomic bomb sway-braces and latch, either through one of the wing holes in the fuselage or via mirrors under the aircraft. As space permits, we will also use an engine and a propeller from the “Enola Gay,” which will give a further sense of the scale of the aircraft. As a technological artifact, the engine was particularly important because it had a troubled history, but it made the B-29’s range and payload capacity possible.

The theme of Unit 3 is thus the creation of the instruments for delivering the bomb—the B-29 aircraft and the special atomic weapons unit, the 509th Composite Group—and the actual missions against Hiroshima and Nagasaki as viewed by the crews. The first major sub-unit of “Delivering the Bomb” will discuss the history of the B-29 Superfortress, which was not designed with the atomic bomb in mind but rather as the next-generation conventional strategic bomber. Among the aspects that will be covered are: the early troubled history of the aircraft program, the huge industrial investment in its manufacture (twice the \$2 billion expenditure of the Manhattan Project), the difficulties of deploying it against Japan from India, China and the Marianas, the construction of the airfield on Tinian, and the final breakthrough to effectiveness with the fire raids, although not without considerable cost to the many B-29 crews who carried out these dangerous, long-range missions.

The second sub-unit of “Delivering the Bomb” will cover the origins and history of Col. Paul Tibbets’ 509th Composite Group which was formed in 1944 to drop the atomic bomb, although only one other person in the unit besides Tibbets was informed of the nature of the weapon. Through labels, photographs and artifacts from members of the 509th, the sub-unit will then discuss training in Utah and the Caribbean in 1944-45, then transfer to Tinian and practice and combat missions in the Pacific during the summer of 1945. Personal items and photos from the veterans themselves will convey a sense of the personalities who made up the 509th and their life at various bases.

Finally, after passing the “Enola Gay’s” fuselage, the last sub-unit will discuss the preparations for the atomic missions, the loading of the bombs and the actual missions themselves, as experienced by the crew members of the attacking and accompanying aircraft. After discussing the historic Hiroshima mission, the exhibitry will go on to discuss the hurried preparations for a second atomic mission before the weather turned cloudy over Japan. The labels will make the point that there was an order to drop “bombs” on Japan and no separate decision regarding what became the Nagasaki attack. This part of the exhibit will be dominated visually by the “Fat Man” atomic bomb casing, which is over 1.5 m (5 ft) in diameter and 3 meters (10.5 ft) long. This section of the exhibit will conclude with the trouble-plagued mission of “Bockscar,” which attempted to drop the “Fat Man” three times on Kokura before unleashing it on the northern part of the secondary target, Nagasaki. This sub-unit will also have a 5-6 minute video on the preparations for the missions, the missions themselves and aerial views of the mushroom clouds.

Unit 4: Hiroshima, 8:15 AM, August 6, 1945/ Nagasaki, 11:02 AM, August 9, 1945

When visitors go from Unit 3 to Unit 4, they will be immediately hit by a drastic change of mood and perspective: from well-lit and airy to gloomy and oppressive. The aim will be to put visitors on the ground during the atomic bombings of the two cities. The opening of “Hiroshima.../Nagasaki...” must convey that stunning, searing moment of the initial flash, heat and burns through pictures, through the words of survivors themselves and through bomb-damaged artifacts that will be lent by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, if their city governments are agreeable. The opening to this unit could include burnt watches and broken wall clocks, symbolizing moments frozen in time: the cataclysmic explosions of the atomic bombs on Aug. 6 and 9, 1945. Stark pictures of burned-in shadows and possibly a wooden panel from Nagasaki of washing on a line would also help to bring this moment home.

If Unit 2 is the intellectual heart of the exhibit, Unit 4 is its emotional center. Photos of victims, enlarged to life-size, stare out at the visitor. Photographs of dead bodies will, however, be presented in such a way that parents can choose whether or not to allow their children to see them. The emphasis will be on the personal tragedy of this experience. The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will tell their own stories.

The first major subunit will cover the bombings in the two cities chronologically, that is, since the experiences in Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the moment of the explosion are fundamentally the same, the two will be treated in parallel. Through labels, pictures and artifacts, this sub-unit will cover the initial flash, the blast wave, the ignition of fires, and in Hiroshima, the creation of a firestorm. This approach can be made much more affecting and real at each stage by using the words, the personal artifacts, and in some cases, the drawings of the survivors to give individual stories of death, suffering and survival. Among the artifacts that could be used, if permission were granted are a schoolgirl’s lunchbox with completely burned contents, burned and shredded clothing, and melted and broken religious objects. Where possible, photos of the persons who owned or wore these artifacts would be used to show that real people stood behind these artifacts. Photographs of the cities before and after would also be used to make the extent of the destruction more comprehensible. Of course, the sub-unit would also indicate the differences between Hiroshima and Nagasaki, particularly how geography and weather led to a more powerful bomb in Nagasaki only producing about half the victims.

The second sub-unit of “Hiroshima.../Nagasaki...” would then look at the two cities and their people in the days, weeks, months and years after the bombings. Among the most important subjects to be covered in this section are the overwhelming medical crises in the two cities and the lack of hospital facilities, the search for relatives and loved ones, the confrontation with a mysterious and, for a few weeks, steadily worsening epidemic of radiation sickness, and the long-term radiation effects of the bombs. The story of the later wave of cancer, particularly the leukemia wave of the 1950s, can be told through the story of particular victims, such as that of Sadako and the paper cranes. For the period immediately after the bombings, there are also many powerful visual images from both cities, but particularly from Nagasaki. Hibakusha (bomb survivors) would also give their stories in a video or on a videodisk system that would allow visitors to select particular ones to watch.

Finally, the last, brief sub-unit of Unit 4 would look at the surrender of Japan and the role of the atomic bombs (and the Soviet declaration of war on Japan) in producing that sudden event. It would look at the intervention of the Emperor in breaking the deadlock of the Japanese government and at the thinking of President Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes in formulating their replies. If possible, this section will include a recording of Emperor Hirohito's historic radio address of August 15, alongside a Japanese radio of the period. This section of the exhibit because it provides viewers with information about the controversial question as to whether atomic bombs were needed to shock the Japanese government into ending the war and whether the human suffering they produced was outweighed by the lives saved by an early surrender. These are, of course, difficult moral and political questions and the Smithsonian Institution can take no position in that regard. All the exhibit can do is provide visitors with the information needed to think more deeply about these questions.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Upon leaving Unit 4, those visiting the exhibit will emerge into a solemn and contemplative space near the exit, where they will be invited to think about and respond to the exhibit. The brief labels in this section will note that the bombings are not only a subject which will forever remain debatable, they also heralded a new age of nuclear weapons. If Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not trigger the Cold War and the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, they certainly symbolized the new age and gave a glimpse of the reality of nuclear war.

The Conclusion will include a video giving a range of perspectives on the bombing—from 509th or other veterans (or Paul Fussell) talking about how they believe the bombings saved lives and giving their views and peace messages, if they accept our invitation to do so. This video will encapsulate the many perspectives of the bombings, but it (and the exhibit) will embody one common wish: that nuclear weapons never be used in anger again.

We will end by recapitulating the legacy of the atomic bomb after World War II—fusion bombs a hundred times more powerful than the fission bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima; warheads numbering in the tens of thousands making up the nuclear arsenals of the United States and the former Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War; war heads which may have become lost as the Soviet Union has unraveled; and smaller countries like South Africa or North Korea producing or trying to produce atomic bombs of a caliber comparable to those of World War II—all of which suggests an uncertain, potentially dangerous future for all of civilization.

At the exit, visitors will be able to share their own feelings and thoughts by writing on prepared cards, in comment books or with a light pen on a computer screen. Interesting comments written by previous visitors can be made visible in some way, increasing the feeling of participation. Those who have toured “The Crossroads” will thus leave, we hope, thinking and debating these most crucial historical events of the twentieth century.