

Overview of the enola gay controversy history essay



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The term “ History Wars” was coined in the United States in 1994[1]. It was based on the controversy over how history should be represented for the decision of dropping an atomic bomb on Japan when the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum drafted an exhibit entitled “ The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Cold War” around the refurbished Enola Gay to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995. This controversy centred around the failed 1995 Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum’s exhibit of the Enola Gay, which intended to examine intersection the end of World War II beginning with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Along that process, various stakeholders in the representation of this historical event were embroiled including Smithsonian curators, veterans such as the Air Force Association and the American Legion, members of the United States Congress, academic historians, media, American public and even the Japanese.

As early as in 1988, Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum (NASM) announced that they would display the Enola Gay as part of an interpretive exhibit on the end of World War II and the origins of the Cold War[2]. This announcement brought the museum into contact with a variety of interested groups. As the scripts developed, the exhibit had set off a heated controversy concerning national ideologies, the collective memory of self-victimization, and contestation over historical knowledge. The story of the Smithsonian and the Enola Gay reflected a larger battle in America over academic goals, cultural superiority, sacrifices, heroic effort and how should American remember their past.[3]

This essay explores the ways in which the Enola Gay debate was fought out primarily in the American public media and in congressional hearings about history and memory. It will focus on various predicaments in an attempt to produce a nation's single and definitive public history and memory shared commonly and objectively by a nation. The Enola Gay controversy or some might call it the Smithsonian atomic bomb exhibit debates sparks a History Wars in American public. In fact, any attempt to produce or exhibit narratives about the past will always spark a controversy and incite various arguments and struggles over historical truth. This essay furthermore attempts to situate the Enola Gay debates within the larger context of the condition of the knowledge that describes those who were involved in this polemic.

The Enola Gay controversy was not really about facts, nor was it about which side represented the facts more accurately. Rather, it centred on questions about for whom, for what objectives, and for whose community the event need to be remembered. The difference between the two different factions did not actually portray whether one side distorted the facts more than the other, although there were a number of events that which conservative politicians and veterans deliberately refused to acknowledge the existence of certain information, records and archives materials. Although those who involved in this debate be it veterans, Air Force Association, American Legion, news editors, conservative politicians, academic historians, Smithsonian curators and American public agreed that the main objective of the exhibit is to commemorate the important mission that led America to victory, there will always be different approaches on how to portray

American as a saviour of the world and to acknowledged the United States as the nation that ends the war.

The conflation of the history wars with rhetoric of educational over the exhibit escalates during the development of the script. The exhibition main objectives were to showcase the plane that had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima to end the war.[4]The script would have taken visitors through five sections moving from victory in Europe through the nuclear proliferation of the Cold War.[5]Along with the script preparation, gradually there are contradiction and different perspectives among the groups involved. The heated discussion of the initial script became public when the Air Force Association accused Smithsonian curators of politicizing the script.[6]These debates between veterans and curators foreshadowed a two-year struggle over plans for the exhibition. Veterans insist that the bomb had ended the war and thus prevented further loss of American soldiers' lives, while academic historians and curators believed the other way round. The contradiction of the story which is 'one of a weapon that brought peace and victory' and the other side 'weapon that brought destruction and terrify the world' had created different views to American public[7].

Martin Harwit, the Smithsonian's director, along with his curators, had held numerous discussions with veterans, academic historians and other interested groups in preparing the script of the exhibit.[8]During the preparation of the script and long before the official opening exhibition which is planned in August 1995, criticism on this exhibition increased largely due to the alleged 'political correctness' and 'historical accurate' polemic. There was an intense pressure against the Smithsonian from the veterans

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especially from the American Legion and the Air Force Association in developing the script. The Smithsonian wanted to tell a narrative purely based on the factual historical event while veterans insist on the portrayal of the struggling American troops, their heroic action that eventually fought to end the war and how the bomb could save approximately hundred thousand lives of American soldiers[9]. Tom Crouch, Chairman of the Institute of the Aeronautic Department at the Smithsonian Institute, already getting fed up with the continuous unresolved debates over the objectives of the exhibit, had asked this very important question in his memo to Harwit:

‘ whether the museum was producing an exhibit that was intended to make veterans feel good or an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don’t think we can do both”[10].

Veterans boasted that they had a number of powerful lobbying groups in Congress and they have the strength in number. They claimed that they have public backing and the American is always behind them. Their claim is true; on 27 August 1994, twenty four Congressmen sent a letter to the Smithsonian calling the exhibition as ‘ anti-American’ and a “ historically narrow, revisionist view” of the Enola Gay’s mission[11]. When the veterans felt that they were going to be portrayed unfairly in the exhibition, they began to react and gather the support from those who felt the same way they did and started to interfere in the Smithsonian script. Veterans organization had a very high expectation that the exhibition would provide enough balanced historical context so that the reason to drop the bomb were justified enough or at least reasonable, legitimate and might be a necessary

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to avoid unbalance inference that will equal the bombing with more tragic incident such as holocaust.

The politicians were also jumped into the bandwagon in support of the veterans' resistance. Newt Gingrich, a Republican leader in House of Representative said that ' American had been tired and sick of being told by some so called historians that they ought to be ashamed of their country in the way they end the war'[12]. In the following month, the Senate adopted " Senate Resolution 257" which stated:

' . . . any exhibit by the National Air and Space Museum with respect to the Enola Gay should reflect appropriate sensitivity toward the men and women who faithfully and selflessly served, and should avoid impugning the memory of those who gave their lives for'[13].

The Smithsonian is being criticized from all corners, from those who consider the exhibition as revisionist which is critical of the American History Wars to those who accuse the curators and the historians of staging and exaggerating which glorifies the decision of dropping the bomb. The curators and historians wanted the exhibition to be devoted solely to the justifications in using such a weapon and the task of the curators is to educate people, not to spread some kind of propaganda. Curators have not always been comfortable creating exhibits to celebrate technological prowess, devastating impact, losses of lives and wartime sacrifices. The curators saw the chance to display the Enola Gay as an opportunity to bring to a wider audience the issue of the consequences of the devastating impact for using such a terrible weapon and helping visitors to have better understanding the

meaning and implication of the decisions and events that have shaped the subsequent history of the twentieth century.

The veterans accused the Smithsonian in denying the justification to drop the bomb at that time by questioning the morality and motives of President Truman's decision to end the war soonest possible[14]. On the veteran's point of view, the decision is just a noble thing to be made which is to save as many American lives possible and to end the war immediately. As the script developed, both parties seem to be at loggerheads. The Smithsonian refusal to change the script infuriates the veterans. The American Legion insists that the script inferred ' that America was somehow in the wrong and her loyal airmen somehow criminal'[15]. The congressmen step into the debate sided with the veterans and accusing the Smithsonian as ' a blatant betrayal of American history', ' biased and anti-American'[16]. According to veterans, the script was a ' politically rigged program that made the Japanese in World War II look like victims instead of aggressors,' and showed ' Americans as ruthless invaders, driven by racism and revenge.[17]'

Veterans reacted strongly to any Smithsonian attempt to remember the bombing that questioned the good war. They heavily criticized the progress of the script and particularly disturbed by the script's suggestion that there were element of US aggression and imperialism even in what had been described as the most just and sacred of American wars ever fought.

[18]While the curators wanted the public to interpret the consequences of the terrifying weapon and the horror of the war, veterans wanted the exhibit to commemorate the sacrifices they made to end the war. Their complaints reflected a perception that the curators and historians refusal to restructured <https://assignbuster.com/overview-of-the-enola-gay-controversy-history-essay/>

the script as what the veterans wanted was seen as ‘slap in the face of all Americans, including our courageous fallen, who fought from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay.’⁵⁰ Bob Dole, a war veteran and a Republican Presidential candidate, told the American Legionnaires during the speech in Labor Day added that a generation of historians were in fact tend to be ‘intellectual elites who seem embarrassed by America’⁵¹. Charles B. Sweeney, the pilot who dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, heavily criticized the curators and described it as an ‘assault on our language and history by the elimination of accurate and descriptive words’.⁵²

The media also inflames the controversy by bringing the exhibition into disrepute. A day after the exhibition were cancelled, the editorial of the Washington Post wrote :

“It is important to be clear about what happened at the Smithsonian. It is not, as some have it, that benighted advocates of a special interest or right-wing point of view brought historical power to bear to crush and distort the historical truth. Quite to the contrary, narrow-minded representatives of a special-interest and revisionist point of view attempted to use their inside track to appropriate and hollow out a historical event that large numbers of Americans alive at that time and engaged in the war had witnessed and understood in a very different and authentic way”[19].

The main problem is to decide who the decision maker in this exhibition is. Curators is just doing their job and they have the right to interpret the past based solely on their scholarly credentials and other primary resources such as archives, historical records, photographs, interviews, bibliographies and

also advised from academic historians. In contrast, the veterans claimed that they too have the rights to portrayed the exhibition based on their personal and wartime experience.

As far as the veterans concerned, their criticism is not solely against the suffering of the Japanese people due to the dropping of the bomb, but they call for more balance and the completeness of the story rather than for accuracy or fidelity to what happened in fact. Apart from contrary belief that veterans were at all time against the historical accuracy, veterans greatly appreciated the curators' effort to portray the exhibition as much attractive as ever but they wanted them to be displayed more on the American's favour rather than Japanese one. As a whole, all parties came into agreement that they wanted to make this exhibition a success. Everybody involves in the controversy over the exhibition seems to agree that the decision to drop the bomb will resulted various interpretation but it is clear that the decision made in 1945 will be viewed differently as in present day. The veterans came into agreement that the exhibition should tell another side of the story about Enola Gay so that the balanced display would allow visitors to make their own judgement about what happened, how and why.

The Enola Gay controversy clearly demonstrates that one cannot effectively seek proper representation in a national public sphere solely by claiming to possess knowledge that is solidly based on factual authenticity. To differentiate between factual history and imaginary commemoration is problematic precisely because it can prove debilitating when trying to prevail over those who adhere to opposed understanding of history. Moreover, as observed in the Smithsonian dispute, to rationalize the demand for the <https://assignbuster.com/overview-of-the-enola-gay-controversy-history-essay/>

representation in the public sphere by opposing one's legitimacy on factual authenticity alone may unwittingly help perpetuate the myth that the subaltern history is more accurate than mainstream history.

As The American Legion's national commander, William M. Detweiler declared in November 1994:

' More than anything else, our disagreements centre on the estimate numbers of lives saved by the use of atomic weapons in 1945. Does it matter? To the museum and the historians, it seems to be of great importance in determining the morality of President Truman's decision. To the American Legion, it matters less, if at all'.[20]

In truth, to all concerned, it mattered a great deal. In the end, everyone believed that memory and history had been abused, and the controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit became a useful symbol for all sides in the history wars going in America. Controversies over museum exhibition clearly demonstrate that political correctness has displaced historical accuracy over issues of humanities, race and history itself.[21]

If this is true, then the controversy accompanying this fiftieth anniversary marked a dark spot in America's collective memory, when latent struggles came to the surface about which histories needed to be remembered or forgotten. These are not just academic questions, because public memories are also forms of cultural practice. Scholars should therefore attend to the ways historians, curators, the media, and ordinary citizens participated in the creation of the symbolic repertoires that made up the Enola Gay dispute.

For the veterans, the exhibition will display not only the historical memories of the American veterans but also at their sense of personal and national identity. They wanted the exhibition to reflect their past glory and to portray themselves as the saviour of America who risks their lives in order to bring peace to America and the entire world. The exhibit floundered when pressure from conservative politicians and veterans groups denounced it and Congress threatened to cut the museums funding[22]. In the end, after the exhibit had finally been cancelled, Harwit admitted that his curators were defeated by 'veterans' organizations whose summed membership stands six million strong.'[23]

The history wars have a negative influence not because they encourage public debate about historical matters, thereby removing control of them from the authority who really in the know about the subject matters. History is unceasingly controversial because it provides so much of the substance for the ways a society defines itself and considers what it wants to be. The history wars, though unnerving and nasty, offer the public an opportunity to talk with historians and about how history is written, how research has changed in recent decades, and how arguments about the past illustrates the future. History does matter, and it is important for American at the end of the twentieth century to understand how the recent history wars have unfolded, how these struggles are connected to earlier arguments over interpreting the past and what does it tell us of current state of present society. This controversy became a new battle in a war over American culture life and the exhibition is a new experience for American public especially in the way the debates were fought between various sides.

History Wars are not only occurred or debated in America alone, but in other countries as well. Around the world, various History Wars have sparked over museum exhibits, national commemoration, public anniversaries, history textbooks, usage of jargon and parades. 5 Where ever there are past event, there will be History Wars sparked by that particular event. In the past twenty years, there are debates about events that happened in the past. These debates all exhibit the same characteristics: the same obsessive collective pronouns and terminology, as well as the same parochialism and national preoccupations. Such example was a tragic event of infamous holocaust that still been debated until today by different party. There will always be a group of history revisionist, left wing or far-right denial that will keep on debating the truth about events that happened in the past. The debates on History Wars are not restricted in the western society but it also being debated everywhere. In the Far East during the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the Japanese Army committed atrocities against the inhabitant of Nanking which will be remembered in history as “ The Rape of Nanking”. The Japanese aggression caused the massacre of more than 260, 000 Nanking civilian[24]and the Japanese government refusal to confess their past aggression and apologizing their atrocities infuriates the Chinese Government and its people. In the Japanese textbook, there were nothing being mention about their atrocities in the past and refusal had been condemned by China and other nations[25].

In Australia, History Wars represent an ongoing conflict between conservative, leftist groups, politicians and academic historians over the early white settlements and the behaviour of Australia’s settlers in regard to

the indigenous peoples. The History Wars have also been an integral feature of the cultural war conflicts in Australia of recent years and of the consequent attacks on the academic historian publicly. The politician, journalists and revisionist and academic historians try to interpret issues about treatment of Australia's indigenous people, the stolen generations, 'Black Armband' view and others[26].

Such questions dominate the History Wars; in this case a Smithsonian lengthy politicised and polarised debate that have raged over years. Such dispute show how issue on nation's past has become in US, as academic historians, curators, veterans, politicians and media find themselves increasingly entangled in a heated public debate. It was a paradox where while school children in US found that the subject of American history is being too boring[27], the perspective wasn't shared by the people of the older age, in fact it seems more fraught than ever, in this case at least in this Smithsonian debate. As Richard H. Kohn, professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said that the cancellation of the original Enola Gay exhibition ' may constitute the worst tragedy to befall the public presentation of history in the United States in a generation' .[28]In my opinion, this exhibit is a major opportunity to inform not only the American people but to all mankind about war and its consequences and the tragedy of the cancellation was a great loss.