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Smithsonian horizons

A Smithsonian artifact for 39 years, the Enola Gay is still a long way from being put on permanent exhibition

The significance of most human artifacts found in museums lies safely in the past. Even when they are the enduring symbols of primordial hopes or loyalties, their more entangling meanings are put at a distance from visitors by railings or neutral display cases. Whether by design or not, viewers tend to be channeled toward moods of introspective contemplation and away from any stirring of strong emotions. There are, however, certain classes of objects that erase the possibilities of detachment. Icons of the atomic age are one of these.

As Alfred Kazin wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* on May 1: "The atomic bomb was called 'Little Boy' and the B-29 the *Enola Gay* after the pilot's mother. The bomb was inscribed with autographs and derisive messages to the Emperor of Japan, some of them obscene. But for all the fun and games, the fearful power, terror, hopes and delusions released by Little Boy changed everyone, forever. . . . Forty-three years later we are still struggling . . . with every effect and implication of that change. For war, the state, for science and art; for language, for individual and mass psychology; for human destiny in the smallest particulars of health and well-being, to say nothing of human destiny as a whole in dependence on the very survival of the Earth."

The *Enola Gay*, though never exhibited, has been an artifact in Smithsonian collections for 39 years. In operable condition when it was accessioned, it subsequently had to be moved. Years of exposure then followed before it could be disassembled and placed under cover. Even now, with a National Air and

Space Museum (NASM) that for a dozen years has been the most massively visited museum in the world, the outlook for the *Enola Gay*'s early exhibit (at least in fully reconstructed form) is still clouded. It is understandable, in light of this record, that some have asked whether the Smithsonian once made a private decision never to place the aircraft on public exhibit. If not, how did things go so wrong?

The answer to the first question is that we are in the business of confronting and learning from history, not suppressing it. It *will* be exhibited. Neither in the surviving records nor in the memories of staff members of those years is there any hint of ambivalence on that score. There is none now.

The answer to the second question is less clear. The National Air Museum, in effect the parent of NASM, had a minuscule staff and an equally small budget. Forced out of its storage facilities at what is now Chicago's O'Hare International Airport by the Korean War, it was apparently overwhelmed by the task of moving its collections to Andrews Air Force Base, which is located just outside Washington, D.C.

Now undergoing painstaking reconstruction in our specialized facility at Silver Hill, Maryland, the *Enola Gay* has been seen by visitors in small, prearranged groups. And while NASM was planned to contain a gallery big enough to house it when the museum was authorized in 1964, a substantially smaller structure had to be built when funding was finally approved in 1971. A B-29 is a big (141-foot wingspan) airplane. Short of some desperate remedy like removing a lot of other historic aircraft and crowding it in diagonally, we must await a major extension of NASM (not on the Mall, but rather adjoining a regional airport like

Dulles) in order to be able to exhibit it.

We must live with these practical details, seeking more imaginative, quicker, perhaps only partial solutions. But as we do so, the wider ramifications of exhibiting the *Enola Gay* echo around us. For the men of the 509th Composite Group, 20th Air Force, who flew her or escorted her, the window of visibility was narrow and clouded. Behind lay knowledge of the Bataan death march and other Japanese war atrocities. Immediately in prospect was an invasion, immensely costly in lives. Save for Col. Paul W. Tibbets, the plane's pilot, they knew little of their bombload until the last moments. Even he, along with all American experts, expected merely an immensely powerful blast. But for us, 43 years later, the view can never again be so circumscribed.

An indissoluble part of an exhibit of the *Enola Gay* should be some account of what happened at Hiroshima—before and afterward. Probably the somewhat doubtful overall effectiveness of earlier and subsequent non-nuclear bombing—in Germany during World War II, and in Vietnam—also should be looked at, to provide a comparative perspective.

In taking advantage of a rare moment of absolute technical superiority to bring to an end one war, the coupling of the *Enola Gay* with Hiroshima placed before us the limitless horrors of another in which the grossly destructive powers would be more evenly divided. Beyond this, it must cause us to reflect on how much of the extraordinary human achievement of ascending so far, and so abruptly, from the Earth has been funded and energized by the general scramble for superiority in ways of killing one another.

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