

July 21, 1993

MEMORANDUM FOR: Martin Harwit

FROM: Tom Crouch

SUBJECT: A Response to the Secretary

We can read the Secretary's memorandum in two ways. His specific comments suggest that he would be satisfied with some relatively minor changes. He says, for example: "If I begin the planning document at page 4, with what is called Unit 1, I find that most of what is noted in the first five points is well attended to."

We could make some simple changes. Although I object on semantic grounds to "The End of World War II and the Atomic Bomb," the title is not carved in stone. We could come up with a new one. Rather than having the mushroom cloud as the central image of the entrance panel, it could be one of the many images that appear and fade. Michael could add a bit more material on the end of the war in Europe. If Adams is being honest with us, that should satisfy him.

I must add, however, that I think it would be a big mistake to take that approach, because it is clear the Secretary is not focusing on what really concerns him. In item 3 he notes that: ". . . I cannot accept the wording that this will be 'an exhibit about the wartime development of the atomic bomb, the decision to use it against Japan and the aftermath of the bombings.'" That is, of course, precisely what the exhibit outlined in the document is all about. Fiddling with the title and the introductory panel will not change that.

In a nutshell, the Secretary is not consistent. On the one hand he says: "Basically, I think the planning document from unit 1 on is in very good shape." On the other hand he identifies the exhibition outlined in that document as presenting an "unacceptable risk to the SI." What are we to make of that? You can't have it both ways.

I think that what really worries the Secretary is the fact that any morally responsible exhibition on the atomic bombing of Japan has to include a treatment of the experience of the victims. He knows we cannot escape that, and he would not think of suggesting that we do so. At the same time, he knows that any exhibition including an honest discussion of that topic is most certainly going to upset a lot of visitors.

You cannot solve the problem by obfuscation, by attempting to misdirect the attention of the visitors, or by discussing the very different end of the war in Europe and in the Pacific. None of that will fool our visitors, nor will make them any more comfortable with our treatment of bomb victims. Some of our visitors, perhaps a very high percentage of them, are going to be upset by the powerful images, objects, stories and voices in the Hiroshima-Nagasaki unit.

That being the case, let's be honest with ourselves. If the Secretary really wants an exhibition primarily aimed at contrasting the end of the European and Pacific wars, an exhibition in which the atomic bombing of Japan will only be a part, then we have to go back to the drawing board.

It is a mistake to think that by tweaking the introduction to the present exhibition we can delude visitors into thinking that it is not really about the atomic bomb, or produce an exhibition with which Mr. Conable will ever be comfortable. What we will accomplish is to transform a good, powerful, and honest exhibition into a mass of confused messages on the basis of ten million nickel-and-dime changes.

You and the Secretary are the ones who will have to accept responsibility for whatever we do. Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want 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. I wish I had a simple, up-beat answer for you. I don't. We will do as you direct, but I urge you to give some serious thought to the foregoing comments.