

## Viewpoint



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### Truth in Labeling

Four years ago, just before joining the National Air and Space Museum, I found myself at a fine museum in London, where I came across a V-1 missile from World War II. A surprisingly genteel label made no mention of these missiles' being dropped on London during the war, but I marked that up to British reluctance to complain.

Some days later I was visiting Munich's Deutsches Museum, where a V-2 rocket label in contrast clearly stated that 7,000 people had been killed when these rockets were launched against Allied cities.

I mentioned the difference to my German host curator and he nodded matter-of-factly. But a minute or so later he looked at me and said, "Actually this label is new. We used to say nothing about casualties. And then people began writing in saying, 'What do you mean by displaying this missile without also describing the casualties inflicted?'"

When I started to work at the National Air and Space Museum some weeks later, I was naturally interested in comparing how the Museum had chosen to handle the issue. The label that was there told how the V-2 was the first really effective rocket to be used in war, and how it had contributed to early space science during the post-war years, when Americans had used captured V-2s to probe the upper atmosphere. No mention at all of war casualties.

Coincidentally, early in 1989, David DeVorkin, curator of space history, suggested that we work toward a more explicit exhibit around the V-2, which opened late in 1990. It shows a picture of the young Wernher von Braun briefing German officers at the height of his successes in wartime Germany. It tells of forced labor, with many prisoners literally worked to death, building these rockets in subterranean factories. There is a picture of a laborer, still in prisoner uniform, showing Allied soldiers a stockpile of V-2 parts. And we see the extensive damage done by a V-2 dropped on a populated square in Antwerp, where a fatally wounded man lies in the foreground.

A review of this exhibit in the *Washington Post* begins with the words, "Truth in labeling has finally come to the Smithsonian...." It praises the Museum for not mincing words, and for trying to tell the story with some sense of balance.

Of course it is always nice to be praised, but we also know that for everyone who appreciates our approach, there will be many who disagree. Some visitors feel we should be showing only the bright side of aviation and spaceflight, and nothing on the debit side. Others understandably worry about the children who love to come to the Museum but might be frightened by pictures of death and destruction.

There are other problems as well. Nowadays, all the Museum's major new exhibitions are funded through industrial or private sponsorship. We depend on generous donors who are willing to help the Museum, in exchange for not much more than public acknowledgment of their support. In this way we are putting together a new exhibit on the aerial combat of World War I, which will complement our longstanding exhibition of the fighter war in World War II.

Recently, we began to plan for an exhibition on the air war in Vietnam, and we quickly learned that corporate support was not likely to be found. Corporations, understandably, want to be associated with popular, upbeat events, and Vietnam was not one of those. We are now approaching philanthropic foundations to see whether funding might be forthcoming there. We hope to persevere, but it may take a lot of persistence.

The Museum and *Air & Space/Smithsonian* share a concern for telling stories straight and pulling no punches. We do that because we want our visitors and readers to trust what we say. And the only way to gain that trust is to portray events the way they actually happened—or at least get as close to that truth as we can.

That's never easy, nor is the straight message always nice.

—Martin Harwit is the director of the National Air and Space Museum.

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