



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
*Washington, D.C. 20560*  
*U.S.A.*

August 16, 1994

Honorable Peter I. Blute  
U. S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Blute:

Your letter of August 10th expresses concern over issues of interpretation that are at the heart of the Smithsonian's planned exhibit, The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II. These issues are as difficult as they are important, and I welcome the opportunity to resolve them with you through a dialogue.

Let me begin by noting that a museum exhibition is unlike a printed publication which, once it has appeared, cannot be revised unless there is a second edition. Not a few of our major exhibits continue to undergo revisions even after they have opened, as visitors' criticisms alert curators to omissions, errors, or the possibility of misperceptions. Certainly that applies to an undertaking as sensitive and many-sided as this one has to be, on which virtually any thematic approach is likely to be the subject of critical reactions from some significant sector of the public.

The subject of your concern, I should point out, is a work in progress, still many months from its anticipated opening. While its development has already involved a substantial, prolonged effort, it is still only at an intermediate stage in an ongoing, iterative process. You take note of revisions that have already been made in an even earlier stage of development of the script for the exhibit. That version was given limited circulation in February of this year precisely in order to discover defects that those preparing it might somehow overlook through their immediate immersion in so many details. Whether the ensuing revisions were, by themselves, adequate may be in doubt. From your and other comments I have received, I would judge that they are not. But what that indicates to me is simply that the iterative process of revisions must continue.

Having discussed the question with Dr. Harwit, I can assure you that he readily accepts this assessment. As I hope you will agree on the basis of the record to date, the staff involved in the preparation of the exhibit has been very open in soliciting comments from responsible individuals such as yourselves, and in providing information on the present state of their planning efforts. That practice, too, will continue.

In the same spirit, Dr. Harwit assures me that he has no objection to making available to you the comments and critiques of the so-called "Tiger Team." But while you may find this informative, I would urge that you keep in mind the ongoing character of the revision process. To some extent, I have the impression that discussions of plans for the exhibition in their present form continue to encounter outdated criticisms of the script that was circulated on a strictly tentative basis in February. The "Tiger Team's" comments, too, will presently become obsolete as revisions continue. Our dialogue will be more mutually helpful if it focuses on what you perceive as current biases or inadequacies. In order to make this possible, the staff is prepared to discuss with you how its approach is continuing to evolve on some of the sensitive issues you have identified.

My impression has been, and remains, that a highly competent and dedicated group of staff at the National Air and Space Museum have been responsibly devoting themselves to this project, and that in most respects the results of their work to date have been excellent. Factual errors, almost always a problem in the initial versions of exhibition scripts, have by now been very nearly eliminated. Attention has been consistently paid to honoring the role of the American servicemen and women involved in the activities portrayed by the exhibition. All this does not exclude the possibility, of course, that there remain matters of approach and emphasis on which further revisions are essential.

I have no personal expertise in the subject matter of this exhibition, although I was a Navy enlisted man in the summer of 1945 and might conceivably have been involved had there been an invasion of Japan that fall. But the seriousness of your concern prompts some substantive comments on my part, in order that we not be perceived as seeking to confine the Smithsonian's response to your letter to procedural matters only. The planning has been in the hands of the director and specialized staff of the National Air and Space Museum, as is always the case with Smithsonian exhibitions. But I have personally followed at least some of the successive stages in the preparation of the script and have given some additional emphasis -- although at the time it seemed mostly obvious and redundant -- to the sensitivity and complexity of the theme, to careful balance as a prerequisite, and to the need to supply adequate context precisely in order to attain that balance.

The exhibit, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II and with the Enola Gay as its centerpiece, is one that the Smithsonian has an obligation to do, and do well. What makes the Enola Gay an important object in our collections is not some outstanding technical features of its performance as an aircraft but the part it played in ending the war and initiating the atomic age. Surely this was a fateful new development in warfare from which, quite possibly, there will never be a complete turning back.

The development of the atomic bomb took place in a hugely destructive war that the United States had no part in initiating. Going forward with this large and risky project was not a course that any responsible leader could have reasonably avoided -- certainly not in light of what was known at the time, and probably not even in later hindsight. The decision to use the bomb

at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a matter on which scholars as well as members of the public may well continue to differ indefinitely. But it would never fall within the province of the Smithsonian to sit in judgment on what was a great political as well as military turning point for our entire Nation. This was, in any case, a wartime decision, having to be made in "real time" and involving many uncertainties. In the end, President Truman and his advisors had to weigh the instantaneous destruction expected to result from these two bombs against the certain prospect of losses from an invasion -- including not only the massive casualties our own forces were likely to suffer but the even larger losses to all of Japan. And that it almost immediately led to a Japanese decision to sue for peace is indisputable.

The Enola Gay is important, and understandably induces deeply divergent reactions, precisely because it is a consequential symbol. The world was forever changed by the release of its bomb, and the proper task of the Smithsonian is neither to apologize for nor to celebrate this change but to account for it as well as illustrate it. The great majority of the American public living today were not yet alive when World War II ended, and this Institution has the responsibility of helping them to understand not only what it meant but the larger context in which it occurred.

To that end, a Smithsonian exhibition on this general subject must adequately deal with the background and character of the conflict, with (what is known of) the views of the military commanders of the time who had to make the decision, and, no less, with the immediate destruction associated with the bomb that has made the Enola Gay such a consequential symbol. A Smithsonian exhibition, in other words, needs to look both backward to the circumstances of the war and forward to what ensued after the bomb left the bomb-bay. And it needs to do so -- this seems to be the central question that has provoked your letter -- having not only maintained a respect for fact but also having achieved a very difficult, inherently controversial balance between the emphasis given to what led to the use of the bomb and the visual evidence of its destructiveness.

Clearly, we need to work further on achieving the proper balance. I appreciate your initiative in urging us to do so. My own part in that dialogue will terminate with my retirement as Secretary on September 19th, but Michael Heyman, my successor, has been consulted in the preparation of this letter and warmly indicates his readiness to do whatever he can in furtherance of that dialogue.

Sincerely yours,



Robert McC. Adams  
Secretary