Enola Gay and a Nation's Memories

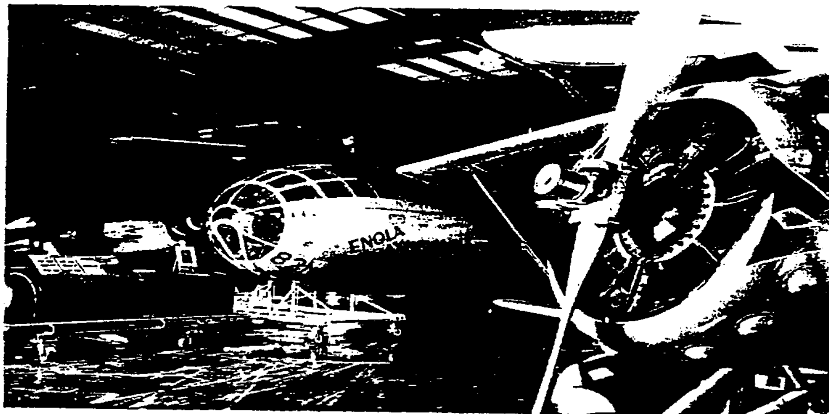
by Martin Harwit, Director, NASM

If the second world war was the pivotal event in the history of the 20th century, the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, was arguably the most important single event of the war. Next spring, the National Air and Space Museum will open an exhibition entitled "The Last Act—The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II." And as we approach this commemoration of the final chapter in the war, the Museum is grappling with some of the most profound issues it has ever encountered.

The Museum wants to ensure that the history represented in the exhibit is true to the documented facts. But 50 years may not be enough time to prepare the nation to confront such a history. How we resolve this fundamental issue will determine what we choose to remember about World War II in this exhibit and in our collective memory as a nation. George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." It's a crisp, astute admonishment, but one that we may not fully comprehend. If we want to avoid the fate Santayana warned us about, we cannot afford to remember selectively.

For almost 10 years the Museum has been working on restoring the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that carried out the raid on Hiroshima; it is the most ambitious project of its kind ever undertaken here. During the restoration effort, the huge bomber has been the centerpiece of the Garber facility's restoration shops, and the exhibit we are preparing now will occupy a prominent place in the Museum on the Mall. The focus of the exhibition will be the last months of the war in the Pacific and the role of the *Enola Gay* in bringing a fierce conflict to a sudden, merciful end for the millions of young American servicemen who were poised to sacrifice their lives for their country.

During the restoration effort, veterans of the Pacific war frequently asked us to put the airplane on display as soon as it was feasible. The question was: Where? Waiting to exhibit the *Enola Gay* at its proposed permanent site at the planned Dulles airport extension in Virginia would have meant a lapse of several years, and life passes by us so fast that unless we act quickly to preserve history, we risk losing it forever.



This fuselage section of the Enola Gay, *shown here at the Garber facility, will be the centerpiece of a new exhibition.*

The U.S. Congress acknowledged the need to learn from history even as history was being made when it established the National Air and Space Museum in 1966, superseding the National Air Museum. Acting less than 10 years after Sputnik 1 had flown, the Congress legislated that the Museum would "provide educational material for the historical study of aviation and space flight." In that instance, the Congress sensed the historic proportions of the enterprise and acted before the record of the pioneering space efforts was lost in the rush into space.

In launching the exhibition featuring the *Enola Gay*, the Museum is keenly aware of the passage of time. The aircraft became part of the Smithsonian collection on July 3, 1949, when Colonel Paul Tibbets flew it to Park Ridge, Illinois, and the Air Force officially transferred it to the Smithsonian. In 1952, the Air Force needed Park Ridge for Korean war mobilization, so the airplane was moved to Pyote Air Force Base, Texas, for a brief period, then on to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C., where it was kept outdoors for seven years. It was vandalized, and over time, it deteriorated. The Smithsonian's curator for aviation at the time was the legendary Paul Garber, who personally gathered over half the aircraft in the Museum's collection, including the Wright *Flyer* and the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Knowing Paul, I am sure he must have fought hard to have the *Enola Gay* placed under cover in a hangar. But hangar space is always at a premium; the Air Force probably felt it had more important things to store than a museum piece, and the Smithsonian had no airfield of its own for storing the big bomber.

Had there been public interest in the *Enola Gay* at the time, the airplane might have gotten better housing. But in the

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1950s the men and women who had come back from the war wanted to return to peaceful lives, raise families, and forget about combat. Public interest in an old B-29 was minimal, and the Smithsonian had to act without outside help. By 1960 the condition of the *Enola Gay* was so alarming that the Museum staff saw no alternative but to take the aircraft apart and transport it to our storage facility, where further deterioration and vandalism could be prevented.

Still, the damage had been done, and restoring the *Enola Gay* to pristine condition has been an arduous process. By the time the job is completed, taking the aircraft apart and putting it back together with every assembly cleaned and preserved will have required around 25 worker years and will have cost the Museum $1 million.

With a 140-foot wing span, the *Enola Gay* is too large to fit into the Museum on the Mall. But even if it could fit inside, it is so massive it would break through the floor. Ultimately, when we complete construction of the Museum's extension at Dulles airport, we intend to display the aircraft completely assembled. But that will not be for several years, and in the meantime the story of the *Enola Gay* must be told. To do that, we will bring the airplane's 60-foot forward fuselage into the Museum, enough so that visitors get a sense of its size.

Everyone acknowledges that the *Enola Gay* is an important artifact because it was the airplane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. But the bombing of Hiroshima was not an isolated event; it was part of a complex war. The exhibition we are planning will describe the Japanese invasion of China in the late 1930s; the atrocities perpetrated at Nanking; the attack on Pearl Harbor; the ferocious fighting in the Pacific; the escalating bombing of cities, first by the Axis powers and later by the Allies; the massive destruction of Japanese cities by incendiaries; the Manhattan Project; the design and construction of the Boeing B-29 bomber and its special *Silverplate* version, modified to carry the atomic bomb; President Truman's distrust of Stalin and ambivalence about the desirability of the Soviets' entry into the Pacific war; the decision to drop the atomic bomb; the mission of the *Enola Gay* and *Bockscar* of the 509th Composite Bomb Group under the command of Colonel Tibbets; the destruction on the ground at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and finally, the post-war evolution of atomic weaponry, which increased the destructive power available worldwide by a factor of a million beyond that experienced by the two Japanese cities.

From the outset, we wanted to tell the story with the utmost care, supporting every fact with documentation drawn from official wartime sources. Letters have poured in from all sides on how the aircraft should or should not be displayed. Most urge that it be exhibited with patriotism and pride. But a significant minority strenuously objects to any display whatever, arguing that dropping the bomb was a terrible act and that any exhibit would celebrate it. The passions of 50 years ago are one of the lessons of the war and part of its history. When we look back, we can see the deep impressions carved by those feelings, and we must come to understand them with the wisdom that only time can provide.

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Establishing the history of the atomic bomb and the end of the war has required vigilance on our part in seeking out the most reliable archival documents. We have also obtained memorabilia from veterans and have recorded video interviews with more than half a dozen crew members who participated in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki raids in order to capture the true tenor of the times. In keeping with our practice in every major exhibition, we submitted a first draft of our label script for the exhibition to the scrutiny of a distinguished advisory committee. We asked the members to ensure that we had not overlooked important facts or misrepresented events, and most important, that we had not been biased in our selection of material.

The advisory committee included Richard Rhodes, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*; Edwin Bearss, chief historian of the National Park Service, a decorated veteran of the war in the Pacific, and organizer of the Pearl Harbor Commemoration in 1991; Barton Bernstein of Stanford University's history department, an authority on U.S. nuclear policy during and immediately after World War II; Victor Bond, a physician from Brookhaven National Laboratory with long experience in studying radiation effects; Stanley Goldberg, a leading scholar of the history of the Manhattan Project; Akira Iriye, a professor at Harvard University and an expert on Japanese-American relations; Edward Linenthal of the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, who has studied American attitudes toward war memorials; Richard Hallion, the Air Force Historian; and Martin Sherwin, director of the John Sloane Dickey Center at Dartmouth College. This group offered us valuable comments and excellent advice that helped us to strengthen and balance the first draft, eliminate ambiguity, and generally streamline the script.

Some weeks before the first draft was ready to send to the advisory committee, we invited the executive director of the Air Force Association (a non-profit organization for current and former members of the U.S. Air Force) to the Museum to let him know about the anticipated exhibition and to seek his advice. At his request, he brought along his colleague, the editor in chief of the association's *Air Force* magazine. Over lunch, they asked us for an opportunity to see the draft script so they could comment on it. We were happy to comply, anticipating that the advice of the association would be informed and useful. For reasons that remain unclear, the association never sent us their comments; instead, they chose to publish a critique of the exhibition in *Air Force* magazine.

We had accepted the Air Force Association's offer precisely because we thought their advice and criticism would help us improve on our first draft; in fact, some of the points the magazine raised were quite useful. But the article has so alarmed some veterans who read it that many have written to express their outrage.

The *Air Force* article took the script to task on two counts: first, it argued that certain aspects of the atomic bombings should *not* be displayed. In particular, the article expressed dismay that the exhibition would show images of the devastation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, implying that showing the scale of destruction would be tantamount to an accusation against the United States, would dishonor our servicemen who had fought so bravely in the Pacific, and would constitute a tacit apology to Japan.

The Museum understands the sensitivity to those images and the ways they can be interpreted. But it is precisely

the horrendous destruction wielded by the atomic bomb that so decisively determined the outcome of the war. What else could have motivated the Japanese to end the war so suddenly? Take away the destruction of Hiroshima and there is little left to distinguish the mission of the *Enola Gay*.

A second point raised in the *Air Force* article concerned some long-cherished beliefs held by many veterans of the Pacific campaign, beliefs that in some instances have been contradicted by documentary evidence. Where there are discrepancies—in estimates of the number of casualties that would have resulted from an invasion of Japan, for example, or whether the atomic bomb should have been used as a negotiating chip in tough bargaining with the Soviets—the Museum has sought to include both the widely held views and the facts supported by documents. *Air Force* magazine objects to such practices, labeling them "political correctness," implicitly disloyal to veterans.

Those who fought in the Pacific war have a strong sense that the *Enola Gay* belongs to them. For those who would have been called upon to invade Japan and bring an end to the war, the airplane came to symbolize the way American technology saved lives. To generations who followed, though, the bombing of Hiroshima represents both the end of the war and the beginning of the atomic age. They see the airplane through a very different lens, and to them, the *Enola Gay* symbolizes far more complex issues. The commemoration the Museum has planned is designed largely for the benefit of those generations of Americans too young to remember how the war ended. It is they who will have the most to gain from the lessons to be learned.

The honor and bravery of our servicemen, their willingness to offer their lives in the fight against a ferocious aggressor, the heartbreak suffered by families who lost fathers, sons, and brothers, the strength of the nation's leadership in successfully fighting and concluding a war the United States had not sought, and the justice of the cause for which we were fighting—*all will be featured in our exhibition*. I emphasize the point only because so many doubts have been voiced.

With passions running so high, the worrisome question is whether we will succeed in providing a historically accurate account of the atomic bombings and the end of the war. If we cannot mount a thoroughly documented exhibition, then we have little hope of learning from these epochal events. And if we are unable to draw wisdom from the war's conclusion, we will have marked its anniversary with a deplorable failure.

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