

NEWS

NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

Contacts: Mike Fetters (202) 357-1663
National Air and Space Museum
Phil Budahn (202) 861-2790
The American Legion

Sept. 22, 1994

**NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM AND THE AMERICAN LEGION
ANNOUNCE WORKING RELATIONSHIP REGARDING EXHIBITION ON THE
ATOMIC BOMB AND THE END OF WWII**

The American Legion and the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum announced today that the two organizations have agreed to meet and discuss differences regarding the National Air and Space Museum's exhibition marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II and the atomic bombing of Japan. "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II" is scheduled to open in May 1995.

The agreement to meet comes as a result of actions taken at The American Legion's recent national convention and as a result of ongoing discussions between representatives of the two organizations.

"I believe that both organizations recognize the importance of this subject, and that both organizations want to see an exhibition open that is historically accurate, objective, balanced and recognizes the sacrifices that American servicemen and servicewomen made and were prepared to make during the war" said National Air and Space Museum Director Martin Harwit. "The only way we can try to understand each other's point of view and reach agreement is by sitting down and talking about our differences. We appreciate the willingness of The American Legion, the largest and most respected veterans organization, to do so."

-more-

-2-

In the latest of a series of face-to-face discussions between the two organizations, The National Commander of The American Legion, William M. Detweiler told museum officials and exhibit curators that major disagreements remain, and will not be easily remedied.

"More than anything else, our disagreements center on the estimate of the number of lives saved by the use of atomic weapons in 1945. Was it 30,000, or was it 500,000 potential invasion casualties? To the museum, this seems to be a matter of some significance, a matter of relative value to the decision. To The American Legion, the use of the weapon against a brutal and ruthless aggressor—who had vowed to fight and die down to the last schoolchild and was organized to do just that—to save 30,000 American lives was as morally justifiable as to use it to save a half a million. In fact, for any government with the means to end the slaughter on both sides, not to use those means would be morally indefensible," Detweiler said.

The National Commander, armed with a National Convention mandate to continue discussions with the museum, indicated that even the line-by-line evaluation of the current script may not resolve the differences, but he has approved additional discussions. "We want this exhibit to succeed, but we insist that it be accurate, that it present the service and sacrifice of America's veterans as the legislative charge to the Institution mandates, and that the role of the Japanese as the cause of the conflict be fully detailed. Failing that, we will not hesitate to exercise the options available to us to actively oppose the exhibit."

The museum's original exhibition concept, as represented in the draft script prepared in January 1994, has been criticized by a number of organizations and individuals for its lack of balance and context. In response, the museum has expanded the exhibition review process beyond its original advisory committee, to include additional scholars, military historians and representatives of The American Legion.

On Sept. 3, 1994, Harwit and Smithsonian Under Secretary Constance Newman briefed members of The American Legion's Internal Affairs Commission at The

-more-

-3-

American Legion's National Convention in Minneapolis, Minn. The American Legion subsequently passed a resolution expressing the organization's continuing concern that the exhibition contained biases against the U.S. role in World War II and questioned U.S. motives in ending the war. The resolution also called for the organization's National Commander to appoint one or more representatives to participate in a review of all materials related to the exhibition.

On Sept. 21, members of the National Air and Space Museum's exhibition team and representatives of The American Legion met at the museum and discussed "A Fight to the Finish," one of the exhibition's six units. Both organizations will meet continue discussions next week on each of the other units in the planned exhibition.

The American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic, mutual-help, and community-service organization which now numbers more than 3.1 million members--men and women--in nearly 15,500 American Legion Posts worldwide. The American Legion has its headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana, with offices in Washington, D.C.

#

8-24

OPENING REMARKS
WILLIAM M. DETWEILER, NATIONAL
COMMANDER
OF THE AMERICAN LEGION
NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM EXHIBIT
PRESS CONFERENCE
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1994

I, too, want to thank you for being here

The National Air and Space Museum is truly a national treasure ... and is so highly regarded by the People of the United States that the current controversy over the World War II exhibit is causing not only pain to many veterans ... but also concern and confusion among our citizens, and active interest among our lawmakers. No responsible organization can -- or should -- refuse to work with the Institution to rectify this situation.

When we were asked to add our perspective to the barrage of criticism leveled at the exhibit, it was cause for deep consideration and discussion. During that period, we tried to balance our primary charge -- that of representing the interests of veterans -- against our broader concern for the welfare of the nation. Guided by the expressed conviction of 3,500 delegates at our just-concluded National Convention, we have decided to participate in a line-by-line review of the script. That review began yesterday and will continue next week.

We have reason to believe this process will help immensely, but the review has not yet touched on the core issues that underlay our deepest concerns.

More than anything else, our disagreements center on the estimate of the number of lives saved by the use of atomic weapons in 1945.

Was it 30,000, or was it 500,000 potential invasion casualties? Does it matter? To the Museum, it seems to be a matter of some significance. To the historians, it seems to be a matter of great importance to determining the morality of President Truman's.

To The American Legion, it matters less, if at all. The use of the weapon against a brutal and ruthless aggressor to save 30,000 American lives was as morally justifiable as to use it to save a half a million. We are aware of the recent historic discoveries that appear to discount the higher estimates, but we also know that the points of comparison by which the lower estimates were determined are questionable. Comparisons to the Normandy Invasion, for example, do not take into consideration the Japanese vow to fight and die down to the last school child. They do not take into consideration that Pulitzer Prize winning historian Richard Rhodes has pegged the 30,000 casualty figure to the first 30 days of an invasion of the southernmost home island -- and concluded that an invasion of the main island of Honshu across the plain of Tokyo would be far more violent.

Nevertheless, the number of potential casualties is really not the issue. It is our view that, for any government with the means to end the slaughter on both sides, not to use those means would be morally indefensible.

We want this exhibit to succeed, but we insist that it be accurate that it present the service and sacrifice of America's veterans as the positive charge to the Institution mandates ... and that the role of the Japanese as the cause of the conflict be fully detailed. Failing that, because of our broader responsibilities to the people of the United States ... to our common heritage ... to future generations and, most specifically ... to those who have taken up arms in defense of our way of life ... we will have no choice but to exercise the options available to us to actively oppose the exhibit.