

STATEMENT BY I. MICHAEL HEYMAN
SECRETARY OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Monday, January 30, 1995

This morning I shared with the Board of Regents my decision to replace "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II" (the Enola Gay exhibition) scheduled to open in May at the National Air and Space Museum. I have taken this action for one overriding reason: I have concluded that we made a basic error in attempting to couple an historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the end of the war. Exhibitions have many purposes, equally worthwhile. But we need to know which of many goals is paramount, and not to confuse them.

In this important anniversary year, veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and, frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke.

Once the controversy was upon us, our staff made a sincere effort to create a more balanced exhibition. Within a month of my becoming Secretary of the Smithsonian last Fall, plans for the exhibition were substantially revamped. They included a new 4,000-square-foot section on the War in the Pacific and extensive revisions to the script throughout. In all, I believe we eventually succeeded in creating plans for a more balanced presentation. However, the problem was more than one of balance. There was, in fact, a fundamental flaw in the concept of the exhibition. In retrospect, I now feel strongly that despite our sincere efforts to address everyone's concerns, we were bound to fail. No amount of re-balancing could change the confusing nature of the exhibition.

Therefore, I intend to take several actions. Let me just say that it is rare for the Secretary of the Institution to step in and take direct charge of an exhibition, but I have concluded that given the complexity of the circumstances, it is the best course of action. As a first step, I intend to replace the exhibition to eliminate the fundamental inconsistency of purpose. I think the new exhibition should be a much simpler one, essentially a display, permitting the Enola Gay and its crew to speak for themselves. The focal point of the display would be the Enola Gay. Along with the plane would be a video about its crew. It is particularly important in this commemorative year that veterans and other Americans have the opportunity to see the restored portion of the fuselage of the Enola Gay.

Although there will be no formal consultation process for this undertaking, I will work with whomever I believe necessary to produce it.

Secondly, the Institution has much to learn from this experience. To that end, the University of Michigan has agreed to co-sponsor a forum with the Smithsonian this spring on the subject of the appropriate ways for museums to handle controversial subjects. In particular we will discuss the Smithsonian's role and responsibilities as a national museum.

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Thirdly, I believe that the issue of atomic weapons is one which the Institution, in its role as a public forum on important issues, can address well in the future, but not necessarily in an exhibition. Therefore, I am considering a series of public symposia to be held at a later date. It is a serious and difficult undertaking, and I intend to enlist the assistance of national experts, curators, military historians, representatives of veterans groups, representatives of peace groups and others to consider what happened.

Finally, sometime in the future the Enola Gay will be displayed at the Air and Space Museum's extension at Dulles International Airport in Virginia. That extension will, for the first time, allow the Smithsonian to display this important icon in its entirety.

I have a number of regrets about this sad situation. One is that it has gotten in the way of the commemoration of our nation's victory over aggression 50 years ago. We at the Smithsonian do not want to have this controversy overshadow the recognition that our veterans so richly deserve.

I also regret that the Enola Gay controversy has led some to doubt the value of historical inquiry by museums. I believe that important artifacts of American history ought to be exhibited in an historical context. However, I do intend to conduct an extensive management review of the National Air and Space Museum.

And finally, I regret that this action will be seen by some as a criticism of those responsible for this exhibition. The central problem was not their lack of skill or hard work, but rather our collective inability to anticipate the difficulty of presenting this complex subject in conflicting contexts.

Just over four months ago, I came to the Smithsonian Institution imbued with great hopes I still feel. This Institution is a splendid array of museums and research centers with an extraordinary staff. But I also came in the midst of a controversy that is now consuming me and the Institution and is interfering with the important work our nation asks us to do. It is time to move forward. On this, the eve of our 150th anniversary in 1996, we can work to achieve our fundamental goal of making the Smithsonian, the nation's museum, representative of and accessible to greater and greater numbers of Americans. The public's trust is sacred, and we intend to do all in our power to be worthy of that trust.