

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

20D-219

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Dear Mr. Bennett,

I read your letter with much interest. I was aware that the Enola Gay was -- or at least had been -- in flying condition, having read some of the local Texas news reports of the air shows that regularly featured the plane in a simulation of the bombing of an undefended city intended to slaughter tens of not hundreds of thousands of civilians. This exhibition of depravity shocked much of the world, including people who approved of the use of the atom bomb, though it does of course have deep roots in one element of American culture which deeply shames those who have some respect for their country and its culture, an element that can be traced back to the earliest genocidal massacre, when the brave colonists waited until the men had left the Pequot villages and then entered to murder the women and children, taking great pride in their accomplishment. Unfortunately, our history is stained by many similar examples, up to the present, as is familiar to people who care about their country and find this feature of its history and culture contemptible.

But I hadn't known, until your letter, that the veneration of this act had reached such a scale of idolatry that the plane was delivered to the Smithsonian "in pristine condition," and would therefore appreciate it if you could refer me to some quotable documentation, since naturally I can't refer to a letter as a source.

As for the rest, I quite agree with you that the Smithsonian exhibit radically eliminated relevant context. You can easily check that. Thus, you might ask how it handles the 1000-plane raid on Japanese cities arranged as a "finale" (to borrow the term of the official air force history) after Japan had surrendered but before the surrender was officially received, another bombing of completely undefended targets that is an shameful blemish on the honor of the American military -- in which, according to survivors, the planes actually dropped leaflets among the bombs announcing that Japan had surrendered. Or you might ask how it deals with the overwhelming evidence that right at the time, US officials expected that Japan would surrender well before the invasion that was being planned for 1946, with or without the bomb.

Or how it deals with the even more crucial question of why it was proper to invade at all. True, Japan had committed many horrendous crimes before the US entered the war, but that's hardly relevant, since the US had little objection to them, as long as it was permitted freely to share in the spoils. There's a rich documentary record on that. Also true, Japan did commit a crime on Dec. 7-8 1941, bombing military bases in two US colonies that had been stolen from their inhabitants, in one case by deceit and treachery, in another by slaughter of hundreds of

thousands of defenseless people in the traditional style. But these Japanese crimes, though real enough, rank so low in the scale of those we have regularly committed, before and since, that no honest person could take them very seriously as a justification for invasion. So the unasked question remains.

Or you might ask how the exhibit deals with the fact that after the bombs, the US accepted the earlier Japanese surrender initiatives, which it had not explored, with virtually no change, and then proceeded, within a few years, to restore the basic fascist institutions while destroying the anti-fascist resistance. Again matters well-documented, and highly relevant, obviously.

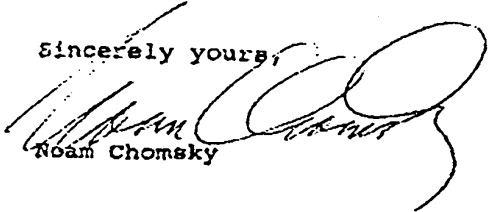
We can easily proceed.

So I agree that the original exhibit was radically decontextualized. But as a strong opponent of totalitarian tendencies I naturally oppose the efforts of interested pressure groups to alter the decisions of the Smithsonian (and would never have thought of doing so myself). I would have been equally appalled if a group claiming to represent Soviet veterans of the Afghan war were to pressure some allegedly independent Soviet institution to alter a version of the Afghan invasion to satisfy their preferences as to how history should be told. I presume you don't agree, perhaps in either case. Or if in only one, there are some questions you might want to ask yourself.

As for your examples of alleged removal of context, even if taken seriously, they are so trivial in comparison with the real cases as to be hardly worth discussion. If you think otherwise, you should contact the authors of the statement, not the signers, most of whom, like me, probably only agreed with the general drift, not necessarily the details.

I assume you are aware that that is the accepted norm for signing of statements, for obvious reasons. Thus if I had agreed to sign statements supporting Salman Rushdie or Sakharov only if I found the statements accurate in detail, I would have signed practically none -- and the same is true of most other signers. I don't doubt that the commissars in the Kremlin and the Mullahs in Qom reacted much as you do -- but that's not my problem.

Sincerely yours,


Noam Chomsky