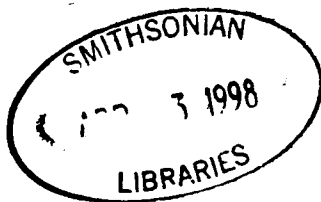


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Presenting History: Museums in a Democratic Society

a symposium sponsored by

The Smithsonian Institution
and
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WELCOMING REMARKS

Speakers: James J. Duderstadt, President, University of Michigan
I. Michael Heyman, Secretary, Smithsonian Institution

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY JAMES J. DUDERSTADT

James J. Duderstadt welcomed participants on behalf of the University of Michigan and noted the symposium's purpose: to engage in scholarly discussion on the role of historical museums and exhibitions in democratic societies. "The fact is there is continuing public controversy surrounding exhibits," Duderstadt acknowledged. Today's symposium was stimulated by the events surrounding the *Enola Gay* exhibition ten months ago. This exhibit is the most recent and well-publicized of a number of public controversies surrounding museum exhibits, a phenomenon that the historians, museum directors, and curators assembled for this conference will examine through scholarly discourse.

Duderstadt expressed hope that the symposium would increase public understanding of historic museums and exhibitions. He noted that a number of institutions were observing by satellite, including Wright State University; University of Dayton; Wright-Patterson Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio; Earlham College; the Museum of Flight in Seattle; the Cincinnati Museum of Art; and the University of Toronto museum-studies program.

Duderstadt then welcomed and introduced Smithsonian Secretary I. Michael Heyman to the symposium audience.

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY I. MICHAEL HEYMAN

"If there is a bright side to the controversy" surrounding the *Enola Gay* exhibit, I. Michael Heyman declared, "it comes from the opportunity to ask for counsel and insight in defining critical issues. When Homer Neal, vice-president for research here and a regent of the Smithsonian, suggested hosting this conference, I jumped at the chance to listen to all of you assembled here today. I am grateful to the University of Michigan for providing a forum."

Heyman observed that criticism of the Smithsonian has come "out of a sense of our importance" as a "vital and cherished public institution." To maintain its public trust, the Smithsonian has a responsibility to be responsible. "In measuring the responsibility to our many publics and to the pursuit of knowledge, education, and national goals, we look to you to help us achieve and balance these responsibilities," he concluded. "With your help, I hope we will get it all right."

SYMPOSIUM WHITE PAPER

Speaker: Homer A. Neal, Vice-President for Research, University of Michigan; Member, Board of Regents, Smithsonian Institution

SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY HOMER A. NEAL

The unusual and emotionally charged circumstances that led to the symposium "Presenting History: Museums in a Democratic Society" have created diverse expectations regarding its accomplishments. Homer A. Neal began by explaining the symposium's purpose: to carry out a scholarly discussion of 1) the roles of historical museums and exhibitions in a democratic society; 2) the factors contributing to public controversy about exhibits that interpret history; and 3) the means through which these factors can and should be handled during exhibit planning. Hopefully the discussion will begin to articulate principles that museums might employ as they develop historical exhibits.

Neal then stated that it is also the hope of symposium organizers that the meeting will enhance public understanding of the roles that historical museums and exhibitions play in public life, as well as of the manner in which scholarly discourse about history takes place, the very real public value of that discourse, and the way in which that discourse bears upon the creation of exhibitions.

In recent years, a number of public controversies have surrounded museum exhibitions. In addition to the exhibition planned by the National Air and Space Museum on the *Enola Gay*, examples include the National Museum of American Art's "West as America," the National Museum of American History's "Science in American Life," the re-creation of a slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg, various controversies surrounding the Columbus quincentenary, and tensions involved in the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

However, although the symposium was announced in the context of the National Air and Space Museum's cancellation of the *Enola Gay* exhibit, its focus is neither that exhibition as such, nor the proper presentation of that historical event. Rather, the intent is to examine the broader theme of controversy and museums. While there are many kinds of museums and exhibitions besides those that are historical, Neal reported that the symposium required the tighter focus that would be gained by concentrating on historical exhibitions.

Important issues transcend the narrower topic of historical exhibitions. These include the nature of historical understanding and the scholarly interpretation of history; the public use of history and the complex relationships among the recollection of events by those who participated in them; and the recognition and appreciation of events by the public.

Neal had originally suggested to Michael Heyman, well before the cancellation of the exhibition "The Last Act," that a university co-sponsored symposium might provide an appropriate forum for discussion of the issues that were being raised by the controversy surrounding the exhibit. When the decision to cancel the exhibition was being reached, Secretary Heyman asked Neal if the University of Michigan would be willing to host such a symposium as a follow-up to the cancellation. The symposium will be structured with three basic components:

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Session 1: Exhibiting Controversial Subjects

This session will examine general issues facing museums creating potentially controversial exhibitions. Among the questions expected to be addressed are: What are the responsibilities of curators in creating exhibits? How do they integrate their responsibilities with those represented in the exhibit, the general public, museum sponsors, and the historical truth? To what extent is controversy to be expected? Is it inevitable when museums analyze recent history? Is increased controversy the product of an increasingly diverse society? How can museums best manage exhibit preparation to ensure their diverse responsibilities are well served? How should they respond when controversy arises?

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Session 2: The *Enola Gay* Exhibit: A Case Study in Controversy

Strong feelings have been generated among World War II veterans in response to the originally planned exhibit. This controversy has raised important issues for scholarship. What is its place in our public life and in museums? The exhibit exemplifies many of the questions raised above.

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Section 3: Museums in a Democratic Society

Museums have played a key role in the development and public dissemination of public historical understanding. In a democratic society, ideally there are no officially sanctioned interpretations. Exhibitions become part of a public discourse about alternative interpretations. Is the role of museums to instill common values and beliefs? Do museums have special opportunities and/or limitations in furthering public understanding of ideas? Do national museums bear special responsibilities? Can museums integrate and synthesize diverse historical and cultural interpretations for public understanding? How can museums effectively balance scholarship and celebration or memorialization?

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