

## WRAP-UP SESSION AND CLOSING REMARKS

Speakers: John D'Arms, Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs; Dean, Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies; Gerald F. Else Professor of Classical Studies; Professor of History, University of Michigan

Richard Kurin, Director, Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies, Smithsonian Institution

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

### SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY JOHN D'ARMS

John D'Arms began by observing that the symposium had allowed learning to take place by fostering respect "between those who advocate different points of view." Rather than attempting to recount the complex arguments made during the day, he would instead offer his own "uneasy reflections on the academy and its relationships with the public."

Over the last thirty years, D'Arms remarked, academic historians have expanded their viewpoints tremendously. Rather than using words such as "objectivity" and "truth" to describe their interpretations of historical events, many have come to understand truth as composed of "the whole set of protocols, conventions, and beliefs that prevail in a specific society at a specific time," incorporating multiple perspectives.

While this recognition of the limits of "objectivity" and "truth" is in many ways an advance for historical understanding, it does not prevail outside the nation's universities. "The belief in some solid and single fundamental objectivity and truth persists in the larger public arena in which the *Enola Gay* controversy played itself out," D'Arms noted. Historians who attempted to share "empirically warranted accounts of what actually happened in 1945" met with sharp attack.

As both Harold Skramstad and Daniel Martinez discussed, our country is currently experiencing "one of the worst crises ever in the relationship between the historical profession and the public." While members of the academic community may be tempted to lay the responsibility for this predicament with society's conservative elements, D'Arms suggested that perhaps historians themselves have not "tried hard enough to explain in accessible, public language just why and how their current conceptions of truth-gathering, truth-justifying, and truth-displaying are important."

For all their difficulties, he noted, the nation's museums have met with much greater success "in drawing interested general citizenry inside their walls." In fact, D'Arms saw museums as "a potential meeting ground" for the public and historians. He further speculated that perhaps "the push for public history has been aimed too narrowly, first at local history and second at social history. Has insufficient attention been paid to the national and international scale of history? Is it possible that the political and military aspects of history have been slighted?" He wondered if historians have been "reluctant to deal with the questions about history that engage the public and rather too eager to focus on questions the historians themselves think are important." American military, diplomatic, and political history are subjects both the public and their elected representatives "are most responsive to and prone to engage." A greater willingness on the part of historians to explore them might help restore public confidence in the nation's universities "and the contributions their professors can offer to society in general."

## SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY RICHARD KURIN

While not speaking for the Smithsonian in an official capacity, Richard Kurin declared that he would address the consequences of the day's discussion for the institution that is "the most highly regarded cultural icon in the nation." He paraphrased a question from the President's press conference of the previous evening that demonstrated the Smithsonian's impact upon cultural discourse in the United States: "Given the effort to end the Smithsonian's exhibit on the nuclear bomb, is the issue now a taboo subject in America?" The question itself, Kurin contended, reminds us that "if the Smithsonian cannot talk about something, it has a questionable place in our public discourse." This responsibility is unique to that institution, he reflected. "If people do not like a history book, they do not buy it. If they do not like a television documentary, they change the channel. But history, when done by the Smithsonian as a public institution, is not so easy to ignore."

The controversy provoked by the *Enola Gay* stems from the fact that the bomber "serves as an icon in an elaborate, contentious, historical narrative created by the Smithsonian in its role as a national museum." No one should be surprised, Kurin maintained, that America's history is contentious at this point in time—"a period of exacerbated nationalism" and also one in which "the idea of the public itself [is] shrinking, receding, and even problematic. We wonder about our ability to hold together given our diversity, disparity and division of wealth, race, language, and interest." Public discourse has become fraught with disagreement, and civic institutions "seem to be failing us."

In this context, the concepts of public trust and responsibility become particularly complex. "The things that the Smithsonian holds it does not own," Kurin stated. "It holds them in trust to the people." Rather than having been elected to their posts with responsibility to represent a constituency, the Smithsonian and its curators "are supposed to operate on the basis of knowledge," with responsibility to the people of the United States, as well as to Congress, to scholarship, and to sponsors, partners, and employees. "Sometimes," he admitted, "these responsibilities are difficult to sort through and are even in conflict."

Part of the problem is that "knowledge is not an easy and clear path to the truth." Determining and defining the truth is a far more difficult task than during the enlightenment and the beginnings of the empirical sciences. In 150 years, "we have moved from a pre- to a post-disciplinary world." Perhaps, Kurin acknowledged, the trend of multiparadigmatic and deconstructive frameworks has "gone too far, and the pendulum will swing back to a stronger empiricism." Certainly scholars recognize the imperative that historical interpretation be supported by hard evidence. This symposium has suggested three elements that make possible a better presentation of scholarly understanding to general audiences: 1) increased rigor in evaluating the data to be presented; 2) a clearer understanding of and choice between possible narrative frames; and 3) a more complete portrayal to the audience "of the status of our presentation." Kurin admitted that scripts such as that first created for the *Enola Gay* "distinguish too little between fact, narrative frame, and speculation." They also have an anonymity that "conveys a sense of disembodied authority we know to be inappropriate." Finally, he stated, more thought must be given to the "pragmatics and context of presentation" itself, including signage, labels, and object juxtaposition.

Compounding the problem of defining and presenting the truth is the fact that not only is knowledge now more surrounded with ambiguity, but it is far more widely distributed than in the past. No longer is a small group of scholars and curators in sole possession of knowledge. This is even more true of historical knowledge, Kurin declared, which is "almost always firstly oral, personal, and experienced." Therefore, the voices of those individuals who participated in the *Enola Gay* mission must be considered in determining facts, constructing narratives, and developing exhibitions. Curators and scholars need not, and should not, relinquish their professional responsibilities, but they must "fully and honestly intellectually engage those they seek in full or in part to represent."

Especially in America's national museum, those who are being represented must be allowed to meaningfully participate. In most cases, the multiple voices of the past can "speak directly to our audiences to convey the complexity of those events." However, museums typically begin "not with people but with objects in the collection we use as touchstones to tell the stories." While these objects are limited in number and variety, they nonetheless "provide a sense of the authentic and the power that accompanies it. They become distillates of meaning. Doing and presenting history compresses time. Doing an exhibition brings together a disparate assemblage of stuff and thus compresses space." Mounting a history exhibit creates what Kurin called "a potent blend, especially when enshrined in a national museum."

Should the Smithsonian and its curators use "more or less resolution in our historical exhibitions?" he asked. "More of the raw stuff of history or more reasoned, clearer choices of alternative stories laid out for the audience to make up its own mind? Is the exhibit a station in a national pilgrimage . . . or a court case with the visitor as juror?" The Smithsonian museums contain many examples of both. "Much of the time, curators are the priests of the temple and the public likes it that way." At other times, curators and scholars "want to be prophets, repeating not the familiar liturgy, but changing the language of the whole service." When this occurs, Kurin cautioned, they must "have a strong case with clear evidence, well-supported interpretation, and perhaps some savvy about how it will be received."

Kurin recalled his father's response to the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. As a merchant seaman stationed a few hundred miles southeast of Japan, his father and shipmates were relieved. Like millions of Americans, what they were celebrating, he observed, was not destruction but, rather, the end of the war. "A script perceived as blaming American servicemen for dropping the bomb on innocent women and children and for shouldering them with the cold war, nuclear waste, and nuclear terrorism was too much of a stretch," he contended. "Veterans felt the national museum was doing them a disservice." Kurin recalled President Clinton's statement the evening before that "the time we were celebrating the end of the war was not the time to launch this re-examination." The President noted that individuals could write or say whatever they want, but when the Smithsonian speaks it, the implication is that it is being done officially, of, and for, the nation as a whole.

Importantly, the Smithsonian itself is not an agency of government. The institution was founded 150 years ago "as a trust held in the name of the people with a purpose: the increase and diffusion of knowledge that transcended the policies of a particular government." What this means is "that our scholars and curators have a responsibility to the public and must be accountable to it." This responsibility is far deeper than to simply pander to the opinion of the current government. "We, the people, would be deeply distressed with museums under the dictates of the state," he declared. "We need some dissonance and distance so the scholars and curators can perform their responsibilities."

For this reason, an exhibit displayed at the Smithsonian "simply does not conform to any single party line, even that of Smithsonian secretaries. And while the national nervousness over our sense of self makes the celebratory so attractive, we still need curators and exhibits to strive for the analytical, the questioning, and the challenging in our national life. The sobering, analytical view is needed, not as a subversion of the public trust, but as part of our responsibility to it. Hard feelings, disrupted careers, public hearings, and media attention may sometimes be the price, but what is the alternative?" Our world is full of places that remind us what happens when "civic dialogue" has been muted, or been "replaced by violence and destruction."

Finally, Kurin called the *Enola Gay* exhibit "a victory for the democratic process" in important ways. Although he resents the personal attacks that have been part of the controversy, "in the end, it was citizens talking to their national museum that led to the present. It was a free press that aired the issue for the public." Kurin concluded by declaring that the Smithsonian's stance "at the crossroads of American and even human understandings and celebrations of self" is in fact "what defines it as a unique and important institution broadly shared and cherished."

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

### **SUMMARY OF REMARKS BY HOMER A. NEAL**

Homer A. Neal thanked both John D'Arms and Richard Kurin, as well as all the panel members "who helped elucidate the myriad of complex issues faced by museums today." His belief is that the symposium achieved its goal and laid a basis for future discussions on this important topic. He noted that the University of Michigan is proud to have cohosted this conference.

Neal acknowledged the efforts of Mara Mayor of the Smithsonian Institution and Gary Krenz and Kim Clarke of the University of Michigan, as well as the faculty and staff of both institutions. He expressed gratitude to the audience for its involvement in the symposium, noting that "many of the key points of enlightenment derive from the audience."

The proceedings of the symposium have been shared by satellite with the Smithsonian Institution staff and several other colleges, universities, and museums, Neal noted, and covered by media from the United States, Japan, and Germany. "We hope this will foster other symposia and discussions at other institutions. For it is through genuine interchanges that the gulf that often emerges between museums and the public can be reduced and placed in proper context."