FEATURE REVIEW

Beware, the Historian! Hiroshima, the Enola Gay, and the Dangers of History


In 1927 Charles A. Lindbergh became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. His silver-winged monoplane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, subsequently became the prime exhibit when the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) opened. Visitors gazed at this small craft hanging from the ceiling and marveled at Lindbergh’s solitary achievement. But if the fact of Lindbergh’s accomplishment seemed clear, its meaning remained debatable. In an intriguing assessment of the reaction to Lindbergh’s flight, historian John William Ward observed that Americans who hailed him celebrated both the flier’s solitary achievement and the technological prowess that made the flight possible. Citizens simultaneously looked back toward their simpler, mythic past, even as they looked forward to a more complex, interdependent, and technological future.¹

Nearly seventy years later, another plane found its home in the Smithsonian. The arrival of the *Enola Gay*, which had borne the first atomic bomb to Hiroshima, however, occasioned nothing but controversy. As most schoolchildren now know, the curators of the Smithsonian had planned to feature the *Enola Gay* in a commemoration of the end of the Second World War, with all its complexities. As they pointed out, not only did the atomic bomb end the greatest conflict in world history; it ushered in an era of great anxiety, dominated by Soviet-American confrontation and an arms race that seemed at times to have its own, possibly unmanageable, dynamic.

When NASM curators, advised by several scholars, decided to tell this complex story, they did so in a multicultural spirit. But NASM knew, in the

words of exhibit director Martin O. Harwit, that “there were two points everyone agreed on. One, [the Enola Gay] is a historically significant aircraft. Two, no matter what the museum did, we’d screw it up.” In fact, for reasons explored fully in these two fine books, Harwit and his associates learned quickly how right they were. The collection of essays edited by Michael J. Hogan, solicited to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan, stretches from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the Enola Gay fracas.

Questions regarding the meaning of the bomb since 1945 dominate essays by J. Samuel Walker, Barton J. Bernstein, and Herbert P. Bix. Walker interrogates historians’ evolving understanding of the bomb, focusing on the necessity and motivation for its use. Until the appearance of Gar Alperovitz’s Atomic Diplomacy (1965), most scholars agreed with President Harry S. Truman’s assertion that the bomb ended the war quickly and saved thousands of American lives. Alperovitz, however, endowed Hiroshima with new meaning: rather than being solely a military weapon, the atomic bomb served as part of the larger political strategy to keep the Soviet Union out of the Pacific war and to render Moscow more pliant in postwar diplomacy. Since 1965, influenced by widespread scholarly outrage at the Vietnam War, this geopolitical explanation has drawn many adherents, although Walker finds “no moral, military, diplomatic, or bureaucratic considerations that carried enough weight to deter dropping the bomb and gaining its projected benefits” (p. 32).

Bernstein, meanwhile, suggests that Truman had reasons to drop the bomb even had the Soviet Union not existed, although the president also saw the weapon as a means to pressure Moscow. But even if other, non-atomic strategies to end the war were useless, Bernstein contends, no reason existed for the United States to drop the second bomb on Nagasaki. Bix’s essay, drawn from the author’s work in Japanese history, examines Japan’s political and military situation at the end of the war. Bix argues that Japan was not interested in negotiating with the Soviets and that Emperor Hirohito, thoroughly in charge, bears responsibility for prolonging the war. The idea that the emperor would have surrendered owes its strength to the postwar campaign by Japanese leaders to portray him as a benevolent ruler ready to prevent further destruction. Nuclear bombs dropped on Japan gave Hirohito reason to concede, to save face, and to avert a turbulent popular reaction against the throne.

The second set of essays in Hogan’s volume explores the sociocultural construction and use of collective recollection of the conjoined dropping of the bomb and victory in the war. The new cultural history of the 1970s and 1980s, sparked by the work of French theorist Michel Foucault, emphasized the power of the state and related corporate institutions and political and religious entities in delineating key historical traditions to serve their interests against groups challenging dominant cultural conventions. Here the orthodox view of the

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bomb – as an agent of triumph, no questions asked – clashed with the inquiries of historians like Alperovitz and Bernstein. After all, the United States not only won World War II; it won the Cold War as well – again, despite (or because of) the embarrassing Vietnam Syndrome – no questions asked. In the past two decades, spurred by Ronald Reagan’s (and Hollywood’s) tendency to dismiss the messy realities of history in favor of nostalgic celluloid repackaging, an idealized popular memory of past American greatness emerged as a powerful force in the culture wars searing the Republic.

If collective memory “installs remembrance within the sacred,” as Pierre Nora asserts, history as “an intellectual and secular production,” usually executed singularly, remains singularly profane when compared with the core of myths and traditions constructed over time by privileged Americans to ennable their history. The Republic’s national creed, imparted in civics classes, popular magazines like *Time* and *Life*, government proclamations, televised holiday spectacles, movies, and other cultural outlets, possesses its own vaunted public values (freedom, liberty, and individual responsibility); myths (George Washington’s cherry tree, “Fifty-Four Forty or Fight!” “Remember the Maine!”); hymns (“The Halls of Montezuma,” “Eternal Father Strong to Save,” “America the Beautiful”); and, of course, holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving).

Tension exists, therefore, between avowedly objective history, with its emphases upon the complex relationship between cause and effect and change over time, and “subjective, selective, and present-minded” collective memory (p. 4). From V-J Day onward, formulators of national culture in both Japan and the United States fashioned recollections of the conflict at odds with reality. John Dower shows that Japanese rage against the United States and their own government found expression in Japan’s feeling of injury and inferiority. But this anger proved short lived. Once General Douglas MacArthur’s proconsuls—hip (with its attendant censorship) ended, a Japanese countermemory emerged, undercutting nascent peace and anti-nuclear movements. This countermemory fueled Japan’s drive to create a superior technology. Later, though, Japanese anti-nuclear literature and art came to reflect the growing recognition

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that Japan had been a victimizer (the slaughter of Chinese civilians, for example, and the use of Korean “comfort women”), as well as a victim.

These complex emotions, Japanese scholar Seiitsu Tachibana adds, were intensified by demands for compensation by hibakusha (surviving bomb victims), and by thousands of Asians exploited by Tokyo during the war. Yet several developments in the subsequent decade “weakened democratic elements in Japan and strengthened the hands of militaristic and conservative elements” (p. 170). The East-West conflict, a rightward swing in Japanese politics, and the evolution of the nuclear arms race – combined with Japan’s view of its Asian neighbors as inferior peoples – undermined recognition of Tokyo’s wartime culpability. This nationalistic, elite reading of Japanese history persisted into the mid-1960s, subverting what Tachibana calls a deeply rooted peace culture. In recent years, hibakusha voices have grown stronger, supported by other Asians seeking redress for Tokyo’s violations of human rights.

In concluding essays, Walker and Hogan assess this cultural fault line, as they return, respectively, to the decision in 1945 to use the bomb and to the Enola Gay controversy fifty years later. Walker outlines long-standing discrepancies between popular memory and scholarly views of history. He notes that events like the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, and the passage of immigrants through Ellis Island in the early 1900s look very different in popularized versions stressing idiosyncracy and political utility than in scholarly accounts stressing complexity, structure, and process. Citing the work of cultural historians Michael Kammen and John Bodnar, among others, Walker suggests, for example, that Henry Stimson’s claim that the bomb prevented one million American casualties was itself a carefully crafted, politicized statistic. Memory, Walker argues, criticizing Paul Fussell’s influential Thank God for the Atomic Bomb, often distorts history by leaving judgments of important events to persons who “often do not have a full or accurate picture of the reasons for Truman’s decision” (p. 191). Not surprisingly, Stimson’s suggestion that the bomb saved a half-million American lives has not survived scholarly scrutiny – though one would not know this from most high school and university textbooks. According to Frances FitzGerald, most texts convey “not any particular series of facts, but an atmosphere, an impression, a tone.” Walker agrees: Many textbooks not only contain “inexplicably flagrant” factual errors, but, unfortunately, influence millions of American students whose knowledge of the end of World War II, murky at best, reflects the solipsisms of texts and popular histories that ignore the best scholarship.

6. Only in 1991 did Japan’s government enter into negotiations to establish state relations with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (p. 171).
This myopia, Hogan concludes, strengthened groups that attacked the scholarly credentials of the Smithsonian curators and the reality authenticated by historians. “Everything depended on who controlled the process by which the exhibit was framed,” Hogan observes, sounding like George Orwell. And here, echoing the strategy of “unconditional surrender” that guided the Allies in World War II, exhibition opponents focused on one meaning alone—victory. Hence the fourth section of the proposed exhibit, designed to reveal what transpired under the mushroom cloud, became a veritable no-man’s-land, at least for Americans who embraced the triumphal text. Nor were advocates of the victory story enraptured by the scholarly estimate (which would have appeared in the exhibit) that a mere forty-six thousand Americans would have died or been injured in an invasion of Japan.10 Hogan cites letters from several veterans’ groups denigrating that figure, supporting the half-million, as a symbol, in Enola Gay pilot Paul Tibbets’s words, for “the thousands of [American] graves from Pearl Harbor around the world to Normandy and back again” (p. 215). Newspapers from the heartland picked up this cry, and despite some support for the Smithsonian curators’ position, opponents succeeded in linking the museum’s desire for inclusiveness to prima facie intent to defame the United States, its exceptional history, and its status as the most moral nation in the world.

Rejoinders from such scholars as Martin Sherwin, Kai Bird, Edward Linenthal, and Michael Kammen denounced the know-nothingism of these detractors, while sixty scholars charged the Smithsonian itself with “historical cleansing.” These learned rebuttals notwithstanding, the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian was—in the word its adversaries desired—“history.” The plane would hang alone—iconic testimony to its centrality within the culture wars of fin de siecle America.

In History Wars, eight scholars employ the Enola Gay controversy as a launch pad to inquire why the teaching of American history has become so contentious. In their introduction, editors Linenthal and Engelhardt identify three intersecting fault lines that destroyed the display. Subsequent essays by the editors, Paul Boyer, John Dower, Richard H. Kohn, Michael S. Sherry, Mike Wallace, and Marilyn B. Young explore these borders with an unremittingly critical eye on the politics of the exhibition, Smithsonian officials who gave way to political pressure, and most important—the place of the Enola Gay controversy in the context of the broader “history wars” that now engage Americans on issues of what (and how it) should be taught in high schools and universities. No isolated incident, the shootout at the Smithsonian corral marked high noon in a larger cultural war. Put bluntly, the cowboys vanquished the Indians once again, proving that commemorative popular myth is far more potent as a means for

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Americans to connect with the past than the monographs we scholars produce. When patriotism and scholarship collide outside the academy, the former generally prevails. But this outcome is not surprising in a country where the popularity of firearms over the years still constitutes a primitive method of birth control.

The Smithsonian imbroglio also raised fundamental discord on the *Enola Gay* as triumphal symbol vs. ambiguous fact: Did the craft’s mission merely signify victory in World War II, or did it also initiate the lengthy conflict with the Soviet Union and prolonged nuclear arms race? Was pilot Paul Tibbets’s view from above the blast the politically correct perception? Or did Americans and Japanese alike need to recognize that the view at ground zero and environs also revealed important truths long shrouded by official secrecy on both sides of the Pacific?

We now know the answers. Curators, scholars, and consultants who supported the Smithsonian’s original plan to look under and beyond the nuclear penumbra to raise questions about its strategic geopolitical impact faced charges of having “hijacked history,” of being “anti-American,” and of “projecting” the values of the 1960s counterculture onto America’s “last good war.” Representative Newton Leroy Gingrich, the failed West Georgia historian, and media pundit Rush Limbaugh, among other conservatives, spearheaded “the opening of a history front in the decade-old culture wars” (p. 5).

Linenthal, no stranger to controversy involving museums and the concept of “sacred ground,” served on the original *Enola Gay* advisory committee. He clarifies the roles of Smithsonian personnel (especially Harwit), assesses the National Air and Space Museum as a “temple, forum, and tribunal,” and analyzes the colliding narratives of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In “Three Narratives of Our Humanity,” John Dower examines contrasting images of Hiroshima as Japanese victimization, as American triumph, and, ultimately, as tragedy for both sides. Like Bix in the Hogan volume, Dower illuminates Japan’s own “historical amnesia” in refusing until recently to confront its role in the war. This denial, influenced by the lingering argument that Japan went to war

11. We all recall conferences and panels where we have heard an admiral, or a general, respond to a scholarly paper by bellowing, “It was not that way at all! You weren’t there!” And, on occasion, we’ve heard a presenter or two respond to critical assessment by a commentator by suggesting, “if you don’t like it here you can always go back to Russia!” Edward Schapsmeier responded in this manner to Thomas G. Paterson’s critique of his paper on Everett Dirksen at the OAH annual meeting in Detroit in 1981. Walter LaFeber, panel chair, whispered in Paterson’s ear, “don’t answer that.” Shortly thereafter, David Green of Saskatchewan noted from the floor that if Schapsmeier felt that Paterson had treated him unfairly, he should note that it is “difficult to tell the lions from the Christians. Outside this room the situation is reversed.” Organization of American Historians annual meeting, Detroit, 1981. Author’s notes and telecon, Smith to Paterson, 19 November 1995.


to challenge Western imperialism and Asian communism (the “white” and “red” threats), fed the popular Japanese view that Japanese were “the sole victims of the bombs” (p. 65).

As for the United States, Dower finds that many arguments for using the atomic bomb “involved postwar rather than present-war considerations” (p. 85). Many arguments and rationalizations present in 1945 did not become central to America’s victory narrative. Dower also scores Smithsonian antagonists for their unwillingness to acknowledge publicly the unparalleled human suffering the bomb generated. The “valor and sacrificial service” (p. 87) mandated by American public institutions transforms terribly mutilated men, women, and children into “Japs” and “beasts and savages.” This American narrative of achievement dictated that images and artifacts (a child’s lunch-box) from ground zero, which would “best enable us to comprehend Hiroshima,” could not be shown at the Smithsonian. This “linkage of veneration for cataclysmic weapons of destruction and the psychic denial of what they destroyed,” he concludes, “is a fit subject for students of cultural pathologies” (p. 90).

In noting the surge of patriotic culture during the 1980s and 1990s, Michael Sherry proposes as explanation the ironic decline of American world power. The need to redeem the “lost cause” of the failed Vietnam War (without confronting the truths of that conflict) led to symbolic military action in places like Grenada, Panama, and Iraq, the popularity of “Rambo” films, and the development of a potent POW/MIA mythology. Opposition to the Smithsonian show was consistent with this “brittle, nostalgic, and inward-looking” celebratory culture (p. 97). Sherry deems the view that “veterans alone could divine the meaning of the atomic attacks” (p. 100) far more “revisionist” than the derogatory use of that term by conservatives to dun historians. Moreover, while censuring the “1960s gang” the latter ironically borrowed from that source in their campaign to marginalize their foe. Sherry also finds current patriotic culture shot through with hypocrisy, a poor basis for constructive engagement in the post-Cold War world.

Paul Boyer underscores this point by asking, “Whose History Is It Anyway?” Boyer outlines the ways in which the “new” social history of the 1970s challenged elite paradigms, generated a negative response from traditionalists, and lay the groundwork for the culture wars that exploded in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan attempted to resuscitate the America of Norman Rockwell. If historical debates on the atomic bombing of Japan and origins of the Cold War remained

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15. Sherry develops this critique further in *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, 1995).
for most Americans “arcane and remote, a matter of no concern” (p. 131), the new history clashed with the assumptions of patriotic America. That World War II was the “last good war” was axiomatic, a fulcrum of belief in this ambience. Those historians challenging this premise were deviant, part of the conspiratorial “intellectual elite” known since the days of Spiro Agnew. Boyer also suggests that attitudes toward the Smithsonian exhibit differed on gender, generational, and racial grounds. Women, younger Americans, and minorities offered more support for the exhibition than older white males more likely to identify with the victory narrative of World War II.

In his analysis Richard H. Kohn, chief of air force history for the U.S. Air Force from 1981 to 1991, excoriates right-wing “historical cleansing.” Kohn warns that in threatening the open and critical examination of the past, the politicization of the exhibition appeared part of a larger process threatening the nation’s political system and “the liberty on which that system is based and which it is designed to preserve” (p. 141). 16 In Kohn’s view, the Enola Gay conflict comprised five converging stories commencing two decades earlier: the provocative exhibition script, reflecting the transformation of NASM over two decades from celebrating air and space technology to scholarly research; the public attack on the exhibit by the powerful Air Force Association lobby; the wider culture wars that tied the controversy to such larger issues as multiculturalism, abortion rights, issues of gender and sexual orientation, and avant-garde art; the huge Republican victory in the 1994 congressional elections, a signal to conservatives that culture would become the prime political battleground, and that Smithsonian purse strings might be tightened; and, finally, the arrival of the new Smithsonian secretary, I. Michael Heyman, recruited from the University of California, ironically, to strengthen the museum on scholarly and financial fronts. “What was not possible,” Kohn concludes, quoting Martin Harwit, was “to honor the veterans in an exhibition that was, in its first form, essentially antiwar and antinuclear, one that emphasized the reality of atomic war and its consequences” (p. 169).

Mike Wallace, Marilyn Young, and Tom Engelhardt complete History Wars with essays probing further cultural strains and implications of the aborted exhibit. Wallace dissects the decisive role of the Air Force Association lobby; the bombastic peevishness of commentators like Gingrich and Limbaugh; and the misleading conservative condemnation of left “political correctness.” He finds a huge disparity between the political right’s censure of big government and its resort to authoritarian solutions to shut down the intellectual marketplace. The Enola Gay crashed in the same vicinity, he concludes, as the new National History Standards and Robert Mapplethorpe’s controversial photographs. Ironically, Wallace adds, as Japan (goaded by the left) begins to confront its wartime past, the United States (hounded by the right) ignores its own

16. Yet in his conclusion (p. 168), Kohn suggests that the circumstances and conditions that wrecked the exhibition were specific and “unlikely to be duplicated in the future.”
history in favor of what conservative guru William Kristol admits is a “schlocky, patriotic, and heroic version” of the past (p. 192). Marilyn Young, meanwhile, equates the contemporary right’s appropriation of Orwell’s famed dictum in 1984 (“who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past”) with the long history of revisionism (“state-sanctioned narratives”) in the Soviet Union (p. 199). She scores the long-standing disposition of American historians to bind the Republic’s history teleologically to the ideals of the Founding Fathers rather than with uncomfortable reality. Building upon her analysis of Western combat in Vietnam since 1945, Young finds the American patriotic metanarrative replete with contradiction — most notably the Republic’s errand into the jungles of Southeast Asia to defend democracy, juxtaposed with the violence inflicted upon African Americans seeking equality and justice at home. Vietnam not only “brought into question the founding premise of U.S. history itself” (p. 201); the conflict also exposed the counternarrative of violence that characterized American continental and overseas expansion, demonized adversaries, and deflected attention from domestic problems.

In his denouement, Tom Engelhardt locates both the dropping of the atomic bomb and the exhibition failure within the collision between American narratives of triumph and defeat and Japan’s culture of ruin. As in his larger study of American Cold War elite and popular cultures, Engelhardt finds commemorative history synonymous with the denial that the United States has more in common with other nation-states than with any exalted city on a hill. A half century after Pearl Harbor, the United States still searched vainly (and in vain) for the kind of victory achieved in 1945. This “disturbing blankness between the USS Missouri and Desert Storm” gave increasing space to “the darker tale of World War II” (pp. 214–15).

By 1995, as Americans prepared to celebrate V-J Day, they faced the “Gulf War Syndrome” with its mysterious medical symptoms, the Oklahoma City bombing with its image of army vets gone berserk, and their leader, Bill Clinton, the “draft-dodger” become president with a mere 43 percent of the vote. But patriots gazing at this sleek cultural expanse found one front where the victory narrative might be repackaged and triumph scored anew. That venue was the Enola Gay exhibit. The ambiguities of 1945, the Cold War that followed, and the ways in which hot and cold war overlapped to structure American lives on all fronts thereafter were not part of that story. What transpired under the mushroom cloud would remain officially blocked from view, as in 1945.

Both of these books deserve a wide audience and debate. They provide an excellent introduction to cultural studies for students and the public generally, indicating many ways in which exploring cultural parameters helps illuminate the emotive content of key questions in, and perceptions of, foreign relations.

The books also underline the need for historians and museums to work harder to reach the general population explaining what they do and how they do it. Finally, the debate on the atomic bomb and the blocked Smithsonian exhibition indicate that history — and historians — are dangerous, in the best sense of the word.