History and National Identity in Museums
The Controversy of the *Enola Gay*

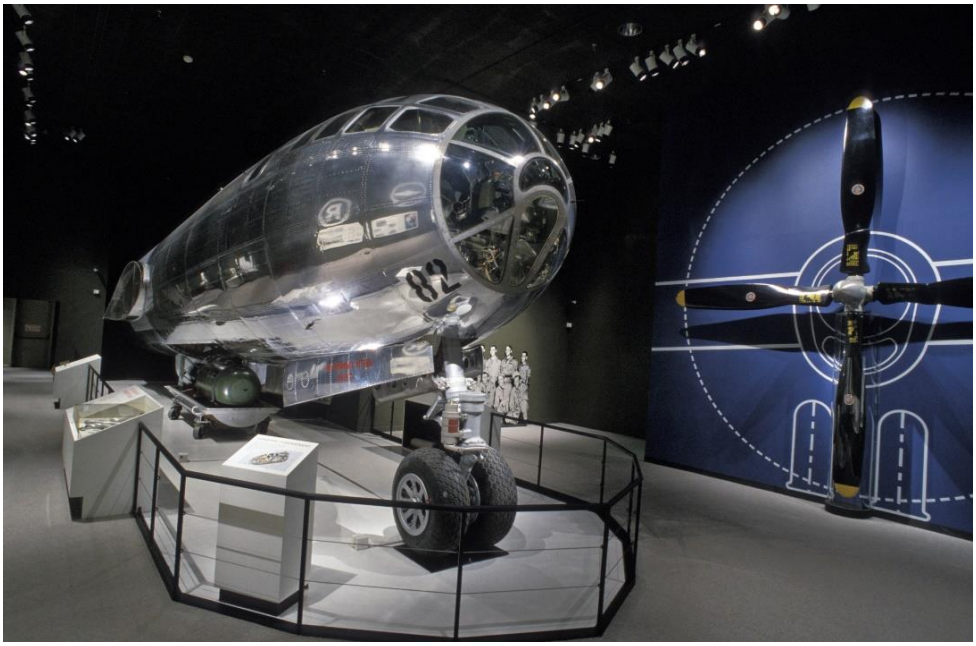

Photo taken by Mark Avino, available from https://airandspace.si.edu/multimedia-gallery/95-4625hjpg

Abstract

This essay explores the challenges faced by historians whose work deals with the intersection of national identity and history in the public domain. Examination of the so called ‘sacred narratives’ that form the keystone of national identity pose even more problems than most topics, because their highly emotional stories do not lend themselves to the traditional process of historical revision. The aim of this essay is to use the case study of the cancellation of the planned exhibit *The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Cold War* as a way of examining the effect of the presentation of public history that does not conform to the ‘sacred narrative’. The central question of research was, “what forces could create an argument so emotional and widely accepted it could overturn 40 years of historical debate, and how was it used to bring the downfall of the exhibit?”

The essay examines how the national identity informs our understanding of history, and how differing groups seek to use the ‘sacred narrative’ for different, and often competing narratives. The controversy of the *Enola Gay* also serves as a warning for historians attempting to address the ‘sacred narrative’ as public history in the same way that they would an academic piece, because the emotions and feelings stirred up by a topic have proven to be irreconcilable with rationality. The essay also examines the groups that protect the ‘sacred narrative’- veterans groups, politicians and the media amongst others- and for what reasons they wish to maintain the traditional interpretation of an event despite ever mounting historical evidence the interpretation is outdated.

"Dialogue about historical interpretation and representation is relatively easy when it has to do with history that is not intimately tied up with personal or national identity. However, when we seek to interpret or represent those stories deemed to be a prized part of who we are- *the sacred narratives*- the situation changes."

--- *Edward Linenthal, Problems and Promise in Public History (Emphasis in original)*

To what extent was the planned 1995 exhibition '*The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Cold War* cancelled because it failed to engage with the 'sacred narrative'?

'*The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Cold War'* was, to a great extent, cancelled because of its attempts to present historical debate about 'the sacred narrative'[1] of the end of the Second World War. Although *The Crossroads* was an exhibition grounded in the reality of academic history, its curators failed to adequately realise the magnitude of the debate they would create by addressing a topic "intimately tied up with national identity."[2] The ensuing controversy highlighted longstanding tension between history and memory that has resulted from a disconnect between the continued revision of history by historians and the communication of these debates to the wider public. Exacerbating the problems of the exhibition were special interest groups who sought to preserve their interpretation of history by dismissing the debate entirely by using the emotional strength of the 'sacred narrative' to dismiss any attempt at debate, a debate for which the Museum was wholly unprepared.

In 1994, the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) announced plans for an exhibit focusing on the display of the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima at the end of WWII. The exhibition, scheduled for 1995 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, examined the decision to use the atomic bombs and its lasting impacts, firstly in Japan, then on global diplomacy.[3] The museum had changed to a new director, Martin Harwitt, in 1990, who envisioned shifting the focus of the museum heroic narrative of American progress to be concerned with "the grand issues in our time."[4] This change in attitudes towards historical scholarship would manifest itself in an exhibition which offered an examination of the historiography of the event, a clear challenge to the sacred narrative of the

Enola Gay. The initial draft, a collaboration between academic and public historians from with a wide variety of perspectives, was hailed by Richard Halion, head of the Air Force historical program, as "a most impressive piece of work… obviously based on a great deal of sound research, primary and secondary."[5] Upon the release of the draft script to the public it was heavily criticised by several special interest groups, most notably, the American Air force Association (AFA) and American Legion, both veterans' organisations and self-styled defenders of patriotic orthodoxy in American history.[6] They argued the museum was "questioning the moral and political wisdom involved…which infers that America was somehow in the wrong."[7] A vocal campaign was launched, initially by these two associations but growing into support from many politicians and journalists who thought cancelling the exhibition would help them 'win' the culture wars of the 1990s and rid a "sector of American life [that] has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos."[8] Attempts to satisfy the demands of veterans' organisations to bring the information in line with the museum's traditional narrative of 'American Exceptionalism' led to successive revisions of the original script, but none satisfied them and after 10 months, the exhibit was cancelled. Critics called it a triumph of the truth, the public were more or less apathetic and the museum community reeled at the Orwellian dismissal of 50 years of historical debate.[9]

The fundamental flaw of *The Crossroads* was that it tried to engage with academic history in an area that historical scholarship had not been able to touch. Various interest groups and politicians deliberately failed to engage in any form of debate that would have secured the ability of the museum to address the 'sacred narrative.' For example the language used in the debate was deliberately twisted by the AFA to allow for only one point of view. Their attacks on the museum labelled it "revisionist," which whilst being technically correct in the historical sense of the word, had the effect of connoting to the unaware media and public that it was "a perverse practice peculiar to anti-American left wing dialogues."[10] To these groups a museum exhibit where meaning was produced "by the museum visitor from their own point of view, using whatever knowledge and skills they bring with them, according to the contingent demands of the moment,"[11] was unacceptable given the importance of the 'sacred narrative' in maintaining the 'American' conservative cultural heritage that was falling apart in the face of rapid social change.[12] As a means of rebuttal, notable figures in the campaign praised the exhibition of *Bockscar* the lesser known aircraft that dropped the second bomb, on Nagasaki, for presenting a celebratory, and didactic, exhibit that displays the plane "proudly and patriotically,"[13] as "the plane that ended WWII."[14] Museum director Richard Uppstrom of the

USAF museum in Ohio where *Bockscar* is displayed said that "there have been no protests, no angry letters and no fuss,"[15] precisely because it conforms so perfectly to the 'sacred narrative' of American exceptionalism. The challenge faced by the NASM was trying to create a bridge between the forces that create the sacred narrative, history and memory.

Central to the 'sacred narrative' of the *Enola Gay* are the forces of history and memory, which both inform the 'sacred narrative' but to extents. In the end the memory of the exhibition held the greatest sway over the public discourse of the event, leading to the dominance of the 'sacred narrative' above historical scholarship and the cancellation of the exhibit. Memory differs from history in that it is experienced rather than constructed, and forms the overwhelming part of "a project for sustaining cultural identities."[16] The collective memory of people of an event creates the greatest part of the 'sacred narrative,' because the sacred narrative is formed through experiences that create identity. The atomic bombing's position as "the Banquo's ghost of WWII"[17] means that in order to maintain the heroic memory of the war, the remembrance of the atomic bombings focuses completely on the idea of a military justification, drawing strength from veterans' memories of encounters with suicidal Japanese defenders in locations such as Okinawa and Iwo Jima. The strength of this belief in the 'sacred narrative' caused by memory can be seen in public opinion, such as a Gallup poll which in 2005 found 57% of Americans surveyed approved the use of the atomic bombs, compared to 85% at the time, a 28% difference.[18] Given the magnitude of social and political change over the intervening 60 years, this difference is quite small and reflective of the strength of the 'sacred narrative' in the public memory. By contrast the academic debate on the subject has been both strong and diverse, with even the historians ascribed to the most orthodox interpretations agreeing that there was more to the story than 'the atomic bomb saved American lives, ended the war and repaid Japan for Pearl Harbour.'[19] The problem that *The Crossroads* faced, as it tried to introduce academic debate into the public arena marked by a lack of understanding of the diversity of debate around the topic, was trying to bridge the "disparity between the mythic past inscribed in popular memory and the past that is the raw material of historical scholarship."[20]

The intended purpose of the exhibition also played a role in the cancellation of *The Crossroads*, because each side of the debate went in with divergent ideas about how the 'sacred narrative' could be best portrayed. The *Enola Gay* is a unique artefact, able to both educate and celebrate, but its importance to the 'sacred narrative' meant that being used in an educational role would be to those opposed to the exhibit tantamount to desecration of a sacred icon. In any museum,

artefacts become symbols of the ideas, deeds and, most importantly, stories of the great men and women who have gone before. More than any other medium, the reverence that artefact of the past enhances the responder's reaction because "the mental state involved in emotionally responding to the object can be very different from the mental state involved in reading and thinking."[21] The power objects hold is clearly recognised in the charter of the NASM- it is to "memorialize the development of aviation and provide educational material for the study of aviation."[22] Early exhibits in the NASM focused on the celebration of American Exceptionalism, with the educational factor being limited to the "a kind of civic education… reminding Americans of their rich heritage."[23] For this reason, most of the exhibits of the NASM pre-Harwitt had conformed to the 'sacred narrative' of American History, celebrating progress without considering too deeply the consequences. The *Enola Gay* is a unique artefact because it had the ability to symbolise "the end of one era and the beginning of another."[24] To those who lived through the war or heard it as an oral history from their parents, the bomb was a decisive factor that ended "The most sacred icon of [American] 20th century culture, World War II… a symbol of national virtue."[25] They see the atomic bombings as a crucial part of the 'sacred narrative' of WWII- the final step necessary to defeat a bestial enemy. For who time had separated from the event, the atomic bombings are the beginning of the Cold War, with the threat of a nuclear holocaust and 'mutually assured destruction' able to be traced back to August 1945.[26] Attempting to address these conflicting but cohabiting narratives of education and celebration would be the downfall of the exhibit.

Whilst it was dealing with the 'sacred narrative' that created the controversy, the failure of the NASM to deal with the response from the public sealed the fate of *The Crossroads*. The curatorial staff saw that the "original script was balanced and did not insist on any interpretation of the decision to bomb or its necessity to end the war," and did not "anticipate the massively negative reaction that awaited." [27] When this reaction came, they proved to be completely unprepared. They assumed that there would be room for competing and conflicting views, just as there should be in any historical debate. But as stated by historian Marilyn Young, "it is one of the less visible ironies of the democratic system that the Academy's freedom of expression rests securely in it being ignored."[28] When the highly emotional attacks on the exhibit began to become publicly known, little attempt was made at refutation by the NASM, and when attempts were made to state the exhibit's case, the emotional claims of the 'sacred narrative' won over rationality every time. AFA Press Chief Jack Geise, in an interview after the cancellation talked about how, when doing a head-to-head interview with a Smithsonian

official on the *Today* Show, the best and most emotional slogans were picked to try and give their message the widest reach to appeal to the lowest common denominator. Geise stated "he'd [The NASM representative] be doing a rational discussion. He did not know the media he was in."[29] The media "permitted itself to be force fed,"[30] by the critics arguing the emotionally charged 'sacred narrative,' and the NASM could never have mounted a comparable response to this in the heated environment of the debate. A topic so intimately tied with national identity, could never be debated to an uninformed public, and the AFA knew that, capitalising on the powerful emotions the controversy uprooted to bring forth the downfall of the exhibition. Therefore the 'sacred narrative' not only caused the controversy, but restricted the museum's ability to deal with it.

The cancellation of *The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Cold War* can be attributed almost wholly to its address to engage with the 'sacred narrative' of American victory in WWII. The exhibit dealt with history academically in an area where public discourse is overwhelmingly emotional, and called into question the very notion of American memory of WWII. Its (pseudo) unpopularity was exacerbated by deliberate and planned attacks by special interest groups using the debate as a vehicle for their own ideological purposes, to try and conserve their idea of American cultural heritage by protecting the public understanding of the 'sacred narrative.'

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[1] The 'sacred narrative' of the atomic bombings of WWII is best summarised by historian Marilyn Young, who states (with heavy sarcasm) "There was a Good War: it ended when Good Men flew a Good Plane and dropped a New Bomb on Bad People" (Taken from Young, M, *Dangerous History: Vietnam and the "Good War"* in Linenthal, E. and Engelhardt, T. (1996). *History wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. New York: Metropolitan Books. P208-9

[2] Linenthal, E. (1997). Problems and Promise in Public History. *The Public Historian*, [online] 19(2). Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3379140?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [Accessed 11 Feb. 2016].

[3] Harwit, M. (1994). The Enola Gay: A Nation's, and a Museum's, Dilemma. *Washington Post*. [online] Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1994/08/07/the-enola-gay-a-nations-and-a-museums-dilemma/e6354e7f-e190-4f0e-816b-6969edd6213d/ [Accessed 2 Feb. 2016].

[4] Honan, W. (1990). A Feisty Chief Shakes Up the Smithsonian. *New York Times*. [online] Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/11/arts/a-feisty-chief-shakes-up-the-smithsonian.html?pagewanted=all [Accessed 12 Jan. 2016].

[5] Halion is quoted in Linenthal, E *Anatomy of a Controversy*, in Linenthal and Engelhardt (1996). *History wars* p37

[6] This exhibit is not the first time the American Legion have sought to maintain 'patriotic' history. In 1925 they declared "Textbooks should inspire children with patriotism." (Details can be found in Loewen, J. (1995). *Lies my teacher told me*. New York: New Press. p 272)
[7] American Legion, (n.d.). National Executive Committee Meeting of the American Legion Indianapolis Indiana Resolution Number 22 (May 4-5). [online] Leigh University Digital Library. Available at: http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/enola/files/round2/americanlegion.pdf [Accessed 7 Feb. 2016].
[8] Irving Kristol, quoted in Renmick, D. (1994). Lost In Space. *New Yorker*.
[9] Kohn, R. (1995). History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition. *The Journal of American History*, 82(3), p.1036.
[10] Dower, J *Three Narratives of Our Humanity* in Linenthal and Engelhardt(1996). *History wars* p74
[11] Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*. London: Routledge. p 5
[12]Sherry, M *Patriotic Orthodoxy and American Decline* in Linenthal and Engelhart (1996). *History wars* p99
[13] Hirsch, A. (1994). Deadly Courier Retains its Place in History. *Baltimore Sun*. [online] Available at: http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-03-24/news/1994083002_1_enola-gay-atomic-bomb-space-museum [Accessed 24 Feb. 2016].
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[15] Hirsch, Deadly Courier
[16] Featherstone, M. (2006). Archive. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2-3), pp.591-596.
[17] Boyer, P *Whose History Is It Anyway?* in Linenthal and Engelhart (1996). *History wars* p139
[18] Stokes, B. (2015). *70 years after Hiroshima, opinions have shifted on use of atomic bomb*. [online] Pew Research Center. Available at: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/04/70-years-after-hiroshima-opinions-have-shifted-on-use-of-atomic-bomb/ [Accessed 7 Nov. 2015].
[19] A thorough discussion of the historiography is beyond the scope of this essay, but a review can be found in Ide, D. (2014). Dropping the Bomb: A Historiographical Review of the Most Destructive Decision in Human History. [online] The Hampton Institute. Available at: http://www.hamptoninstitution.org/hiroshima-historiography.html [Accessed 24 Nov. 2015].
[20] Boyer, *Whose history is it anyway?* 139
[21] Pekarik, A. (2002). Feeling Or Learning?. Curator: The Museum Journal, 45(4), pp.262-264.
[22] Roland, A. (1993). Celebration or education? The goals of the U.S. national air and space museum. History and Technology, 10(1), p 81
[23] Ibid
[24] Harwit, A nations, and museums, dilemma
[25] Young, *Dangerous History* p203
[26] Harwit, A nations, and museums, dilemma
[27] Young, *Dangerous History* p206
[28] Ibid
[29] Harwit, M. (1996). *An exhibit denied*. New York, NY: Copernicus.
[30] Ibid

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Linenthal, E *Anatomy of a Controversy*

Dower, J *Three Narratives of Our Humanity*

Sherry, M *Patriotic Orthodoxy and American Decline*

Boyer, P *Whose History Is It Anyway?*

Kohn, R *History at Risk: The Case of the Enola Gay*

Wallace, M *Culture War, History Front*

Young, M *Dangerous History: Vietnam and the "Good War"*

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