



Is the public history museum an appropriate forum for contemporary historical debate? The “Enola Gay” Exhibit: A Case Study.

Inhibited by external purpose, internal structure, and the exhibit form itself, the museum is not an ideal forum for the complex evaluation of contemporary historical interpretations. Existing traditionally as a site of national enshrinement, the museum is bound inextricably to mainstream historical monolithism, thus casting any attempts at critical revisionism to be perceived as an affront on national identity. Moreover, economic structures within the museum grant compromising influence to politicised public benefactors, invalidating historical autonomy to create institutional bias. Finally, public misperception of the absolute nature of museum history corroborated by features inherent to the exhibit form engenders misunderstanding of exhibited content. Comprehensive examination of the case of the “Enola Gay” exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum and its resulting cancellation reveals the incapacity of public institutions to present a polyphonic historical discussion of the contemporary past.

In order to effectively evaluate this case, background information is required on the events that precipitated the exhibit’s cancellation. Shifting trends in Western museology concurrent with the increasing prevalence of constructionist approaches to history have significantly transformed the aims of the museum in the past fifty years.¹ Traditionally a factual repository of military enshrinement, the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) in Washington DC experienced this evolution in the early 1990s as it struggled to offer a more meaningful discussion regarding the social impact of the technologies it exhibited.² In 1993 the NASM began planning *The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, a polyphonic examination of the perspectives surrounding the atomic bombings of Japan for display on the event’s 50th anniversary.³ The exhibit examined the final years of World War II, the Manhattan Project, factors motivating US President Truman’s decision to drop the bomb, the training of the bomber crew, ‘ground-zero’ in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the beginning of the Cold War.⁴ It sought to explore perspectives beyond the dogmatized official narrative, with internal reports asserting that the primary aim was to encourage visitors to undertake “*a thoughtful and balanced re-examination.*”⁵ During the project’s development, the veteran community, led by the Air Force Association (AFA), developed objections to some of the perspectives presented, arguing that the exhibit was excessively sympathetic to the Japanese perspective. The AFA began an extensive campaign to cancel the display, meeting with Congress members and

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writing a letter to President Clinton. With the exhibit villainised in the mainstream media, Smithsonian secretary I. Michael Heyman announced the exhibit's cancellation In January 1995. In May an expurgated, retitled version of the exhibit was opened, containing only the fuselage of the Enola Gay, a commemorative plaque and a video of the bomber's flight crew. The exhibit's cancellation raises significant historiographical questions regarding the viability of contemporary historical debate within the museum.

The function of the museum as a site of national memory significantly impedes its freedom to develop an exhibition that presents diverse interpretations of contemporary historical issues. Museums since the nineteenth century have played an important role in constructing national collective memory by "*promoting the monocultural notion of [a] nation's identity.*"⁶ They tend to be sites in which a nation's values are advertised, sites in which "*patriotism, or at the least, a sentiment of national cohesiveness is evoked.*"⁷ For example, in its early years the NASM was integral to the Cold War veneration of the American 'space dream,' with its exhibition on the success of the moon landing in 1971⁸ a prideful and patriotic occasion at a time when America was rife with Vietnam War dissension.⁹ Stemming from its nationalistic function, the history that a museum presents is rarely able to explore controversial perspectives and is instead often limited to fostering the status quo by perpetuating the unanimous, often official narrative of the past.¹⁰ This official narrative is usually the basis for the general public's perception of the past, and the museum (bound above all to serve the public)¹¹ is restrained by an ethos that differs substantially from the standards of conventional academic inquiry. For example, while the scholarly publications of universities aim for an isolated truth, a "*let the chips fall where they may*" approach with regards to the final narrative created, public museums cater for the sensibilities of an audience.¹² The collections interpreted and presented by the museum are expected by the public to be synonymous with the dominant values and collective perceptions of the society in which the museum exists. In the case of the "Enola Gay" exhibit "*the veteran's narrative of Hiroshima became the basis for [America's] official narrative, and for the American public's embrace of that narrative,*"¹³ thus excluding any potential discussion of perspectives not contained within the memory of the veterans.¹⁴ Indeed, in attempting to revise public remembrance the museum risks inciting the subliminal conflict between memory and history. Memory, a personal connection to the past, arranges and excludes events to serve the individual. History, on the other hand, aspires to be a more objective arrangement with a less personal point of view.¹⁵ By presenting an exhibition that encouraged debate, the curators of the exhibition were confronted with a phenomenon Yeingst

and Bunch call the '*primacy of memory*';¹⁶ the notion that, as one can remember an event one has ownership of that event's history.¹⁷ As historians Lifton and Mitchell note, "*public memory is contested memory*"¹⁸ and the aforementioned sense of ownership meant that "*visitors for who the episode has direct meaning may be less likely to defer to the curatorial prerogative,*"¹⁹ thus claiming the exhibition to be invalid or untrue. From this stemmed the wave of public criticism faced by the NASM,²⁰ criticism that ultimately caused the exhibit's cancellation. By presenting a historical debate that questioned the official State narrative, the NASM failed to fulfil its basic socio-historical function as a site of national validation, exhibiting interpretations on Hiroshima that offered veterans, and to an extent the public, "*a history that was not of their memory.*"²¹ This oversight ultimately engendered conflict not only with veterans, but with the shared public memory of America as a nation. Therefore, the museum is notably encumbered in its capacity for historic discussion by its presupposed role as an espouser of national cohesion, bound inextricably by the sensitivities of public memory.

As a result of its corporate management structure, a museum's dependence upon financial supporters significantly limits its autonomy to exhibit and engage in historical debates. Museums are often large institutions with extensive responsibilities and thus require substantial amounts of money to operate, with costs including maintenance and supplementation of collections, creation of exhibitions, and staffing.²² For example, at the time of the "Enola Gay" controversy the NASM totalled US \$20 million in expenditures.¹²³ A public museum's funding is obtained from an array of sources derived from governmental funds (such as appropriations, grants, and contracts) and non-governmental funds (such as private donations, corporate sponsorships and site revenue). Of this, governmental funds remain a majority, partially because of the historically nationalistic role of museums mentioned previously, yet also due to the fact that private sponsorships are often looked upon with suspicion by curators, who argue that the acceptance of money from a corporate sponsor is a form of "*academic prostitution,*" an inhibition of museum agency through fiscal sway.²⁴ While public funding does not initially appear to involve this ostensibly unseemly compromise, examination of the museum corporate hierarchy reveals that, in return for financial support, museums lose autonomy to their chief financial supporter regardless.²⁵ The internal funding structures of a museum tend to be organised on three levels; the chief financial supporter, an intermediating agency, and the museum itself. The chief financial supporter, in the NASM's case Congress, lacks expertise

¹ US \$34 million in 2018.

and rarely involves itself directly with museum operation. Instead an intermediary agency, such as a government department or a board of trustees, oversees the running of the museum on the supporter's behalf.²⁶ Fulfilling this role above the NASM was the Smithsonian's Board of Regents, comprised of powerful political figures such as Vice President Al Gore and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court William H. Rehnquist.²⁷ On the bottom level are the various individual museums, united in this case under the Smithsonian banner. Standard operation of this common system permits a museum significant freedom in its activities, generally for reasons of inattention from financial supporters rather than deliberate liberality.²⁸ However if controversy arises, the chief financial supporter takes a sudden concern with the affairs of the museum and works directly and rapidly with the intermediators to restrict its sovereignty.²⁹ As Otto Mayr notes, "*no museum can win a direct confrontation with its chief financial supporter,*"³⁰ and thus its sovereignty is permanently compromised. Indeed, historian Marilyn B. Young states, "*it is one of the less visible ironies of the democratic system that an academy's freedom of expression rests securely on its being ignored.*"³¹ Hence the politics of funding inflicts undeniable limitations on the historical focus of a museum, forcing the implicit adjustment of institutional focus to the tastes of financial supporters in order to avoid conflict.³² This can be seen clearly in the case of the NASM, when the introduction of a far-right Republican majority in the November 1994 elections placed immediate pressure upon the Smithsonian to cancel the "Enola Gay" exhibit.³³ Through its presentation of a historical debate that questioned the official state narrative, the exhibition directly compromised the conservative beliefs of the political right, thus bringing it into conflict with Congress. In doing so the Smithsonian confronted its chief financial supporter, and risked "*facing very real and long-term financial consequences.*"³⁴ At the time of the controversy the Smithsonian budget for the next five years was being negotiated by secretary I. Michael Heyman.³⁵ Congress utilised their significant power as the institution's chief financial supporter to directly interfere with the "Enola Gay" exhibit, with Senator Ted Stevens threatening "*you will not get it [funding] from this Congress.*"³⁶ Thus, with the survival of the institute in mind,³⁷ Heyman was forced to cancel the original exhibit, instead displaying a heavily curtailed version featuring only the fuselage, a plaque and a video of the flight crew. By compromising its exhibit in exchange for government acquiescence and monetary support the NASM diminished the integrity of its scholarly enterprise, indicative of the significant power held by a museum's fiscal supporters. Therefore, the internal financial structures of a museum create an irrefutable reliance on politicised fiscal support, compromising academic autonomy and preventing discursive historical debate.

Public expectations of history validated by the authoritative form and features of the exhibit medium limits potential for complex historical debate within the museum. The intense public criticism of the planned "Enola Gay" exhibit as 'revisionist' and 'politically correct'³⁸ (with one American senator even implicitly likening the Smithsonian scholars to Holocaust deniers),³⁹ is highly indicative of the limited public understanding of the nature of historical writing and construction. The NASM's quest to explore and present the varying interpretations regarding the manner of the ending of the World War II contrasted strongly with public expectations regarding the nature of museum content. Canadian museologist Duncan F. Cameron notes the traditionally monolithic nature of museums and resulting impact on visitors, remarking;

*The public generally accepted the idea that if it was in a museum, it was not only real but represented a standard of excellence. If the museum said that this and that was so, then that was a statement of truth.*⁴⁰

In this sense, public museums could be seen to be what Cameron calls a 'temple' for the past in which history, in all its seemingly complete truth, is immortalised and observed without question or reconsideration.⁴¹ Instead, by exploring historical debate, the NASM sought to present itself as a 'forum' for the past; a place in which history is composed of often conflicting accounts and interpretations.⁴² In doing so the museum comes from an academically informed position, with a strong historiographic understanding regarding potential for a multiplicity of valid representations of the past. The museum-going public, however, has little to no exposure to the concept of historiography, epitomised in US Senator Dianne Feinstein's questioning of historian Edward T. Linenthal during a 1995 post-controversy government enquiry. Feinstein asked if it was the concern of the museum to "*interpret history, rather than just simply put forward historical facts,*"⁴³ demonstrating a lack of understanding regarding the impossibility of doing just so, for, beyond the inclusion of certain incontrovertible historical facts (e.g. the Enola Gay took off from North Field on the 6th of August), the act of selecting facts to be included in the exhibition is interpretation in itself. Hence Linenthal accurately concludes that the public "*operate[s] with faulty assumptions about the relationship between fact and interpretation.*"⁴⁴ Such misconception regarding the absolute nature of history is compounded by a variety of constrictions inherent to the exhibit medium itself. Text labels included in an exhibit are designed to focus on the object and hence edited for optimum conciseness and readability.⁴⁵ These short, terse labels with few citations do not allow for cohesive debate⁴⁶ as "*discursive argument... is more difficult to... follow in a conventional [museum] show unless*

its textual elements are extended to inappropriate and unacceptable lengths."⁴⁷ Furthermore, the fact that exhibits rarely take explicit, individual responsibility for authorship disassociates the conclusions represented from the work of a group of liable scholars.⁴⁸ Instead, such anonymity conveys what Richard Kurin calls "*a sense of disembodied authority – a 'word of God'-like quality*"⁴⁹ that suggests to audiences that all of what they read was sourced from an all-knowing, irrefutable truth. Hence the NASM's planned exhibit came under fire partially due to its misperceived didacticism. As curator Mike Neufield noted after the controversy, the museum had merely sought to explore a range of possible historical perspectives; this explanation did not necessarily constitute agreement, much less support, of the narratives presented.⁵⁰ Ultimately, the presentation of polyphonic historical debate within a museum is an act too radical for its untrained public audience, as noted by an anonymous NASM official after the cancellation who told Lifton and Mitchell "*the public is not yet ready to deal with history as a debatable subject.*"⁵¹ Therefore, public perception of history as definitive and total, exacerbated by the didactic authoritarian features of the exhibit format, catalyses misperception and disparagement of historical information, suggestive of the extreme limitations of presenting historical debates in a museum.

It is thus evident that the public history museum is not an ideal medium for complex historical discussion of contemporary events, as revealed through the case of the NASM's "Enola Gay" exhibit. Pre-disposed towards historical monolithism due to its relationship with the public, a museum is severely limited in its ability to explore perspectives that divert from the state-sponsored narrative due to its inherently nationalistic function. Additionally, a museum's internal hegemony creates financial vulnerability, potentially exploited by those in power to suppress historical revisionism. Finally, an exhibit's didactic features exacerbate public misperception regarding the nature of museum history, resulting in misinterpretation. Therefore, an exploration of diverse historical perspectives is currently not possible in the museum without facing public outrage, political coercion, and, ultimately, illiberal censorship.

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¹ O. Mayr, 'The "Enola Gay" Fiasco: History, Politics, and the Museum', *Technology and Culture*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1998, p. 463.

² W. Washburn, 'The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay', *The National Interests*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1995, p. 41.

³ M. Harwit, 'Academic Freedom in "The Last Act"', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 82, no. 3, 1995, p.1069.

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- ⁴ E. Yakel, 'Museums, Management, Media, and Memory: Lessons from the Enola Gay Exhibition', *Libraries & Culture*, vol. 35, no. 2, p. 283.
- ⁵ R. Lifton and G. Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*. New York, Putnam's Sons, 1995, p. 278.
- ⁶ V. Zolberg, 'Contested Remembrance: The Hiroshima Exhibit Controversy', *Theory and Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1998, p. 583.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ "Apollo 11 Moon Landing" Exhibit Opens, [website], 2016, https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_sic_2354, (accessed 20 June 2018).
- ⁹ Zolberg, *op.cit.*, p. 585.
- ¹⁰ J. Loewen, *Lies Across America*, New York, New Press, 1999, p. 13.
- ¹¹ Mayr, *op.cit.*, p. 463.
- ¹² Zolberg, *op.cit.*, p. 585.
- ¹³ Lifton and Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 237.
- ¹⁴ D. F. Cameron, 'The Museum, a Temple or the Forum', *The Journal of World History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1971, p. 16.
- ¹⁵ S. Lubar, 'Exhibiting Memories', in A. Henderson and A. Kaepler (eds), *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, p. 16.
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- ¹⁷ D. Thelen, 'History after the Enola Gay Controversy: An Introduction', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 82, no. 3, 1995, pp. 1033.
- ¹⁸ Lifton and Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 209.
- ¹⁹ Yeingst and Bunch, *op.cit.*, p. 152.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*
- ²¹ R. Kurin, *Reflections of A Culture Broker: A View from The Smithsonian*, Washington DC, Smithsonian Institute Press, 1997, p. 76.
- ²² J. Bradburne, 'Wagging the Dog: Managing Museum Priorities in a Difficult Economy', *The Journal of Museum Education*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2010, p. 144.
- ²³ J. Gadsby, 'Better Care Needed for National Air and Space Museum Aircraft', *US Government Accountability Office*, 1995, <https://www.gao.gov/archive/1996/gg96009.pdf>, (accessed 10 June 2018).
- ²⁴ Bradburne, *op.cit.*, p. 144.
- ²⁵ Mayr, *op.cit.*, p. 463.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*
- ²⁷ Zolberg, *op.cit.*, p. 581.
- ²⁸ Mayr, *op.cit.*, p. 463.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*
- ³⁰ *ibid.*
- ³¹ W. Pretzer, 'Reviewing Public History in Light of the "Enola Gay"', *Technology and Culture*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1998, p. 458.
- ³² Mayr, *op.cit.*, p. 463.
- ³³ Zolberg, *op.cit.*, p. 574.
- ³⁴ Yakel, *op.cit.*, p. 292.
- ³⁵ *ibid.*
- ³⁶ R. H. Kohn, 'History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 82, no. 3, 1995, p. 1058.
- ³⁷ Harwit, *op.cit.*, p. 1082.

³⁸ E. Linenthal, 'The A-Bomb Controversy at the National Air and Space Museum', *The Historian*, vol. 57, no. 4, 1995, p. 690.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 692.

⁴⁰ Cameron, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴³ Linenthal, *op.cit.*, p. 692.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Mayr, *op.cit.*, p. 465.

⁴⁶ Yakel, *op.cit.*, p. 288.

⁴⁷ N. Harris, 'Museums and Controversy: Some Introductory Reflections', *Journal of American History*, vol. 82, no. 3, 1995, p. 1110.

⁴⁸ Mayr, *op.cit.*, p. 465.

⁴⁹ Kurin, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

⁵⁰ T. Capaccio and U. Mohan, 'Missing the Target', *The American Journalism Review*, July/August, 1995, p. 1.

⁵¹ Lifton and Mitchell, *op.cit.*, p. 292.

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