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MEDIA TO SMITHSONIAN: HISTORY IS BUNK

Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.—George Orwell, 1984

In media commentary on the Smithsonian Institute's proposed display of the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, words were often turned on their heads: Because the proposed exhibit contained more than one viewpoint on the bombing, it was called "one-sided"; because it relied on contemporary documents rather than later apologetics, it was called "revisionist"; because it didn't strictly adhere to the official version of history, it was called "politically correct."

The planned exhibit showed how "elite American museums, like the universities, have fallen to the forces of political correctness and historical revisionism," Charles Krauthammer wrote in the *Washington Post* (8/19/94). The *Enola Gay* should be displayed without comment, Krauthammer proposed, in "silent reverence." Krauthammer will have his way: Backing down under pressure, the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum has announced that it will exhibit the plane without even mentioning the thousands of civilians who died from the atomic bombings.

The planned exhibit was often condemned as bad history, although evidence was rarely offered to contradict the Smithsonian's proposals. A *Houston Chronicle* editorial (1/28/95) scoffed that the Smithsonian exhibit would "gag a real historian," citing the museum's estimate that "only about 65,000 American troops would have been killed, not the 225,000—plus estimated by U.S. military leaders."

The Cincinnati Enquirer (9/15/94)

stated flatly that "500,000 American lives ...would have been lost in an invasion." The *Houston Post* (9/3/94), which accused the Smithsonian of attempting "an outrageous distortion of history," cited "estimates that an invasion of Japan would have cost a million U.S. casualties."

In fact, the actual planners of the invasion estimated that in a worst-case scenario, 46,000 U.S. troops would have died, according to declassified 1945 documents from the Joint War Planning Committee (*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 6-7/86). Much higher numbers were later put forward by officials involved with the bombing decision, but without documentary evidence; these numbers are hardly credible, since the planned U.S. invasion force was only scheduled to include some 190,000 combat troops (*New York Times*, 1/31/95).

But there are many indications that an invasion would never have been necessary—that U.S. officials knew that Japan was on the verge of surrendering. (See Gar Alperovitz, *Washington Post* op-ed, 10/16/94). "My belief [was] that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary," Gen. Dwight Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs (*Mandate for Change*, p. 312).

"The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan," declared Adm. William Leahy, who headed the Joint Chiefs of Staff (*I Was There*, p. 441). "Wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

Such opinions would be labeled "anti-American" today. There are many other

historical questions about Hiroshima that pundits have not only failed to answer seriously, but have declared unaskable. A high-water mark in this sort of know-nothingism was achieved on ABC's *This Week With David Brinkley* (8/28/94), when all four commentators present agreed that even raising such issues was reprehensible.

"The Smithsonian has some people working for it who shouldn't be," George Will pronounced. "They're tendentious and they rather dislike this country and ...lose no occasion to say so."

"And ignorant!" Brinkley interjected.

"There is this tendency on the part of certain cultural elites in this country to find absolute evil in whatever the United States does," Will continued. "It's just ghastly when an institution such as the Smithsonian casts doubt on the great leadership we were blessed with in the Second World War."

Cokie Roberts concurred that questioning history is pointless: "I think that this business of trying to rewrite history in the context of 50 years later makes very little sense."

Garrick Utley then recommended that the Smithsonian provide "no editorial comment at all, no history lesson. Just let it be there, like Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*, and each person can view it and interpret it as he or she likes."

It is discouraging that so much of the press, which is ostensibly engaged in a search for truth, found there to be no point in seeking the truth about the past. The *St. Petersburg Times* editorialized (9/19/95) that museum directors should not "set themselves up as arbiters of historical truth." If historians aren't arbiters of historical truth, what are they? "Their job is to preserve and protect our history," says the *St. Petersburg Times*—protect it, apparently, from reality. □

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