

The Smithsonian's Interim Revision

This is an analysis of the October 3, 1994, revision — explained to us as an interim product — of the National Air and Space Museum exhibition script, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II." This interim revision, as we understand it, is intended only as a quick check and will be followed promptly by publication of the next regular revision for broader distribution.¹

Summary of Assessment: Definite improvement, but problems still evident.

- On the positive side, the Smithsonian has added balancing material (especially in the early parts of the script), has eliminated the "political manifesto" that was in the last section, and has reduced the number of emotional graphic images in the "Ground Zero: Hiroshima and Nagasaki" section.

- Unfortunately, the built-in structural bias of the exhibit plan remains. It leads the visitor, step by step, to the "Ground Zero" section where the curators pull their planned emotional trigger. Our suggestion to diversify this section has not been accepted. Furthermore, the script still shows a pervasive ideological bias. Much of the blatant anti-American speculation has been removed, but the curators continue to play "hindsight" games in regard to US motives and actions while accepting Japanese statements and actions uncritically.

Main Unit Titles. The exhibition script is now organized into six sections with main unit titles as follows:

000	War in the Pacific
100	A Fight to the Finish
200	The Decision to Drop the Bomb
300	<i>Enola Gay</i> : The B-29 and the Atomic Missions
400	Hiroshima and Nagasaki
500	Japan Surrenders

Section 000 is a recent add-on. Eventually, this part of the exhibition will cover 4,000 square feet of floor space, but the plan for it thus far consists of only nine pages in the script. A notation says the photos and wall labels shown now are a "partial representation" of the product intended. (An early subtitle for this unit, "An American Perspective," has been deleted.)

With the exception of this unfinished add-on segment up front, the revisions consist of line-in, line-out changes. Many of these are commendable, but they do not correct the structural bias problem. AFA's

¹ Review copies will go, we understand, to service historians and member groups of the Military Coalition. We believe copies should go also to at least four other groups: The Committee for the Preservation and Proper Display of the *Enola Gay* (W. Burr Bennett), the 9th Bomb Group Association (Ben Nicks), the 20th Air Force Association (James Pattillo), and Bombardiers, Inc. (Ned Humphreys).

proposal to subdivide and reallocate the floor space in the "Ground Zero" section was an attempt to relieve this problem with a minimum amount of disruption to the exhibit plan. The museum did not adopt this suggestion.

The curators are still cutting corners on historical context (a point made in our September 19 analysis of the previous script). The leaders of twelve Asian-American groups have offered to provide material from archives in China and elsewhere to document Japan's fifteen-year war of aggression. Smithsonian officials would do well to avail themselves of this offer, because additions and improvements are certainly required. The carnage at Nanking in 1937, for example, needs more than three lines of text and a single photo. Tell museum visitors with an emphasis that cannot be missed that the wanton slaughter of civilians at Nanking exceeded the death toll of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined, and that this atrocity was a planned action to intimidate the Chinese and make subjugation by the Japanese invaders easier.

Ideological Bias. Here are instances in which one-sided speculation continues or where the script obscures points that we take to be unpalatable to the curators.

1. *The script says that the "Magic" and "Ultra" intelligence systems yielded "A Confusing Picture of Japanese Intentions."* (200 30) Magic intercepts showed that the Japanese rejected unconditional surrender and were holding out for terms that might have included — incredibly — their keeping the territories they had captured. The Ultra intercepts revealed a massive buildup in the areas where an American invasion would have occurred. There might have been some confusion around the edges, but the main points of Japanese intent were abundantly clear.

2. *A previous line of speculation continues in "Hindsight: Was an Invasion Inevitable Without the Bomb?"* (200 53) The script notes, correctly, the assessment in 1946 in the US Strategic Bombing Survey that Japan would have "in all probability" surrendered by December 31, 1945, even if the atomic bomb had not been used. That conclusion was not universally shared. Presented here in isolation, it may lead the unwary museum visitor to conclude that all the US had to do was sit tight and wait. By the summer of 1945, US casualties were running at 900 a day in the Pacific. At that rate, had the war continued through August, September, October, November, and December, it would have meant 137,000 additional US casualties and a greater number, most likely, for the Japanese. Previously, AFA suggested "Nine Hundred a Day" as a prominent display element in section 200. This element could be built around the Purple Heart medal, a vast number of which were ordered in 1945 in anticipation of casualties from the invasion of Japan. Fifty years and numerous conflicts later, the armed forces are still drawing on the supply of unused Purple Hearts.

3. *"The Verge of Surrender" Issue.* It is a major point with some revisionist historians that Japan was on the verge of surrender. The script seems determined to state the truth of this as inconspicuously as possible.

□ (Reference 200 60.) Japanese rejection of the warning in the Potsdam Proclamation is buried in the last paragraph of this element, called "An Ultimatum to Japan." The text continues to pick at the unconditional surrender issue. Once the Japanese rejected the warning, the text says, *"nothing further stood in the way of using the atomic bomb."* Surely the curators do not believe that the United States would have regarded a favorable response from Japan at this point as "standing in the way" of using the bomb?

The same underlying attitude is seen in "An Expectation of Military Use" (200 13) which characterizes the motivation of General Groves, who has fared badly from the beginning in planning documents for this exhibit. The October script says that "The United States' huge investment in the atomic bomb — \$2 billion, or roughly \$20 billion in 1990s dollars — also drove Major General Groves to demonstrate that the money had not been wasted." Are we to understand from this that General Groves (and perhaps others) wanted to use the bomb to justify the expense?

□ (Reference 500 11.) The title chosen for this element is "Enduring the Unendurable," emphasizing the bitterness of surrender to the Japanese. As shown by the text, however, the important point is that "Prime Minister Suzuki told his American interrogators after the war that the *atomic bomb had enabled his military colleagues to surrender honorably.*" Given the fierce debate, in which this exhibit plan has been a part, this point needs a spotlight on it. Moreover, Suzuki's is not the only testimony available : "**The peace party did not prevail until the bombing of Hiroshima created a situation that could be dramatized.**" — *Emperor Hirohito*, September 27, 1945.(Edward Behr. *Hirohito*. Villard Books, 1989, p. xvii.)

4. *The "Unconditional Surrender" Issue.* The curators simply will not let go of the notion that the policy of demanding Japan's unconditional surrender was (a) unreasonable, (b) prolonged the war needlessly, and foiled Japan's earnest desire to make peace. Consider the relentless pursuit of this point.

□ The script says the Allies forced "complete and unconditional surrender" on Germany having "won total victory in a just cause." (100 1.) Nothing comparable is said about the war in the Pacific — and a very different conclusion is implied.

□ Japan's position is described sympathetically in "Japan Looks for a Way Out of the War" (200 24). The peacemakers were at work, but the allied demand for unconditional surrender was "regarded as intolerable." The emperor's "closest adviser" tried to negotiate conditions through Moscow. (200 25) The only reason the emperor did not take action for peace sooner was the hope "that one final victory would force the Allies to offer better peace terms." (200 26)

□ The script leaves the impression that the policy of unconditional surrender was adopted to placate Soviet dictator Stalin or to appeal to popular opinion in the United States. President Truman stuck with the demand for Japan's unconditional surrender because he "foresaw much resistance to modifying the Allied policy." (200 27-28). Truman did not accept Japan's appeal for conditions, not because of conviction but because Secretary of State Byrnes told him that doing so "would lead to 'the crucifixion of the President' by an angry public demanding unconditional surrender." (500 6)

□ Among those arguing for a conciliatory policy was Undersecretary of State (and former Ambassador) Joseph Grew, who "understood the mentality of the Japanese leadership and wanted to end the war early. . . ." (200 29)

□ The combination of the atomic attacks and the Soviet declaration of war "destroyed the hopes of the Japanese elite for a compromise peace." (500 1)

□ The previous script (August 31) said that "*The failure of the American note of August 10 to clearly identify the Emperor's position provoked another dangerous deadlock in the Japanese ruling elite.*" (500 10). As we said in our analysis, "do the curators mean to suggest by that wording that the United States was to blame for Japan's reluctance to surrender, even after the atomic bomb had been dropped?" The latest revision eliminates "failure" but mostly pushes the words around (500 9): "*The American note of August 10 did not clearly guarantee the Emperor's position. This provoked another dangerous deadlock in the Japanese ruling elite.*"

□ It should come as no surprise that the text item the curators have chosen to end the program (500 21) mulls "the possibility (we'll never know for sure) that if we had offered to let the Emperor remain in some capacity (as some of Truman's advisors suggested to him, such as former president Hoover), that the Japanese might have surrendered sooner, with a saving of lives on both sides and without the dropping of the atomic bomb."

The Ground Zero Section. Only a few minor changes have been made to the text for Section 400, "Ground Zero." The overall structure and floor plan are the same as before. We are encouraged,

however, to see that the Smithsonian has made significant, further reductions to the emotion-packed visual elements in this section.

"Ground Zero" Visual Images in four drafts of exhibit script

Jan	May	Aug	Oct	
75	64	51	29*	Total Photos
49	37	27	20	Human Suffering photos
25	23	15	8	Photos featuring women, children, religious objects
26	24	18	16	Total artifacts
13	12	8	5	Artifacts related to women, children, religion

* Cues in the text indicate 29 photos. Total count of picture photocopies in section 400 of the revised script, however, is 36.

The "Ground Zero" section occupies the same place and volume as before in the exhibit floor plan. Depending on the presentation, 45 visual images (29 photos, 16 artifacts) are ample to pack the emotional punch. We note also that this section still includes a video of *hibakusha* ("explosion affected persons") giving "testimony" of their experiences (400 19). These individuals also receive extensive coverage in words and pictures in the exhibit. In September, AFA proposed that the exhibition feature with equal attention others for whom the suffering continued — disabled American veterans. There is no indication that the museum plans to accept this proposal. Our September commentary also proposed the subdivision and reallocation of section 400 as follows to relieve the problem of structural bias. We repeat that suggestion now.

1. Imperial Japan: Defiant and Still Dangerous.
2. A Warning Declined.
3. Ground Zero: Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
4. The Surrender.
5. The Invasion That Didn't Occur.

Social Perspectives on Strategy. We repeat a criticism made in our last report: The curators emphasize the sociological rather than the military aspects of warfare. The Office of Air Force History had commented on this also, pointing to the tendency to depict Army Air Corps bombing as leading mainly to civilian death and destruction with little explanation of the strategic objectives. The new script does state that "by the summer of 1945, Japan's productive capacity had been lowered as follows: power generation by 50 percent, oil by 85 percent, and overall industrial production by 60 percent" (300-29). This, however, comes much later and in a different section from the litany of death and destruction (100 28 - 36) describing "A Torch to the Enemy," "Tokyo in Flames," "Massive Destruction," and more. We suggest a regrouping and rebalancing of this material to present the bombing campaign as a military action with a strategic purpose. A similar thought underlines our proposal (above) to rebalance section 400. Museum visitors need to be reminded, as they view scenes of the atomic devastation, that this was a military action with a purpose — and that it worked.

The Japanese Attitude Toward Surrender. The code of *bushido* ("the way of the warrior") was not just something Prime Minister Tojo invented in 1941 (000 7) and the determination to keep fighting in 1945 was not the isolated position of a few "military hard-liners who would not accept surrender" (500 4). The curators may wish to acquire the photo from June 4, 1945, of Japanese troops on Okinawa supposedly surrendering to Lieutenant Glen Slaughter. (KEITH WHEELER. *The Road to Tokyo*. Time-Life Books, 1979, page 187. "Moments after this picture was taken, a Marine sergeant knocked Slaughter aside and threw

away the live grenade that a Japanese was about to hand the lieutenant. The prisoner was attempting to take the whole group with him. . . ") The point is worth making graphically and emphatically for several reasons. It illustrates why, "to many on the Allied side, the suicidal resistance of the Japanese military called for drastic measures" (100 3) and why "many Americans were wary of taking prisoners" (100 14). It also demonstrates why Japanese civilians, children, and old people mobilized to defend the home islands with primitive weapons and suicide devices had to be taken seriously.

Strange Entries: As stated, it is not our purpose to police the script, line by line, but some specific items demand comment.

"**The Long Road to Tokyo**" element (100 32) can be described only as bizarre. It says: "In 1941, as Japanese aggression in Asia brought war with the United States ever closer, *the Army Air Corps began to formulate plans for bombing Japan in the event of a Japanese attack. Then came Pearl Harbor.*" Can we assume that the curators refer to a contingency plan — not an action they believe the Army Air Corps was about to begin — and that any suggestion of a connection to "*Then came Pearl Harbor*" is unintentional?

Indianapolis Survivors. We are puzzled also by the decision that one of the two text labels about the loss of the cruiser *Indianapolis* should be that "in their extreme delirium, men who [had] held each other up now [drew] knives and several [were] brutally stabbed." (300 65) Of all the details that might have been selected, why this one? It took considerable editing to set up this element. To make the complete seven-line quotation usable, the curators had to resort six times to the use of bracket insertions.

The speculation is one-sided. Much is made of the scholarly requirement for the curators to doubt, probe, and dig for the deeper truth of history. Our observation is that this doubting, probing and digging has all been on one side. Deeper consultation of the historical evidence would support a more critical treatment than seen in this exhibit thus far in regard to (1) Japan's dramatized quest for peace in 1945, (2) the Emperor's role in wartime policy and planning, (3) why Japan did not move to end the war sooner, when it became evident that the cause was lost, and (4) popular Japanese support, before the war turned sour, for military aggression to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. If the historical speculation in this exhibit must persist, it should be applied to Japanese actions and motives as well as to those of the United States.