

National Air & Space Museum Concept Document 1 (early 1993)
(From Air Force Association Enola Gay Controversy Archive)

A PROPOSAL

Hiroshima and Nagasaki: A Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum

Few events have had a more profound impact on our times than the creation of nuclear weapons and their employment against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Half a century later, the implications of the decision to drop the atomic bomb are still being debated. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan, the National Air and Space Museum has an opportunity and an obligation to help visitors understand this pivotal moment in the history of the twentieth century.

An Interested Public

Museum staff members recognize that this is an emotionally charged subject marked by strong feelings, widespread public interest and a broad range of opinion. The primary goal of this exhibition will be to encourage visitors to make a thoughtful and balanced re-examination of the atomic bombings in the light of the political and military factors leading to the decision to use the bomb, the human suffering experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long-term implications of the events of August 6 and 9, 1945. While there will undoubtedly be other commemorations in connection with the fiftieth anniversary, this exhibit can provide a crucial public service by reexamining these issues in the light of the most recent scholarship. The Museum hopes that the proposed exhibition will contribute to a more profound discussion of the atomic bombings among the general public of the United States, Japan and elsewhere.

The scholarly content of the exhibit will be ensured through the participation of lead curator Dr. Michael Neufeld, an historian with expertise in World War II, and Aeronautics Department chairman Dr. Thomas Crouch, who curated "A More Perfect Union," a Smithsonian Institution exhibition dealing with the internment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II. That exhibit questions the internment in terms of the Constitution of the United States, which is intended to guarantee basic rights to all citizens, irrespective of race or origin.

Expert consultation will be provided by the Museum's Space History Department Chairman, Dr. Gregg Herken, a leading historian of American Cold War diplomacy, by the many historians interested in this topic in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, and by other scholars inside and outside the Institution. In addition, a panel of distinguished advisers, representing a broad range of viewpoints, and including both American and Japanese experts, will assure the accuracy of the exhibit and guarantee a wide range of informed perspectives.

Interpretive Strategies of the Exhibit

The exhibition will concentrate on the missions against Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the decision to drop the bomb in the spring and summer of 1945. The necessary historical contexts will be emphasized: the Manhattan Project and its origins, the escalating spiral of attacks upon

civilian populations during World War II, and the peculiar character of the Pacific War, including the racism manifested by both sides. These issues can be brought to life for the general public through the use of newsreel and movie footage and through the display of original documents (or reproductions, if necessary), such as the 1939 Einstein letter to Roosevelt regarding the possibility of an atomic bomb. Magazines, posters and other artifacts of government propaganda and the media can also be used to give a sense of the atmosphere in the last months of the war in the United States and Japan.

This latter material provides a transition to the section on the decision to drop the bomb – clearly the most difficult part of the exhibit from both an historical and conceptual standpoint, but also the most crucial since it goes to the heart of the ethical dilemmas of the atomic bombings. Visitors will bring with them sharply different attitudes and assumptions, ranging from a belief that dropping the bomb prevented a bloody invasion of Japan to a conviction that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were war crimes – a viewpoint more likely to be held by our many Japanese and other foreign visitors. The Museum does not intend to join in this debate, which involves complex questions of an historical and ethical nature. What the exhibition can do is offer the visitor a much more nuanced picture of the decision-making in the American and Japanese governments in 1945, which, together with the aforementioned historical contexts, may lead many to reconsider or deepen their understanding of this controversial topic.

From a technical standpoint, the problem will be to bring to life a discussion carried out in closed rooms and through diplomatic channels. Succinct labels, key documents and quotations of the words of major participants can overcome many of these difficulties. A “Little Boy” atomic bomb casing, like the one dropped on Hiroshima, will be used here to indicate the reality of the bomb that was becoming available to American decision-makers. A fuller discussion of the topic however, would be left to outside reading suggested in a brochure that would be available to visitors.

A key component of the next part of the exhibition will be the forward fuselage of the B-29 Enola Gay, the aircraft that dropped the Hiroshima Bomb. The entire aircraft has been in the Museum’s possession for many decades and will be fully restored by 1995, but it is too large to fit in any of the Museum’s galleries. Therefore, the exhibition will be using only the forward fuselage, comprising the aircraft’s cockpit and bombsight, the evocative name painted on the port side of the aircraft, and the bomb-bay with a reconstruction of the special atomic-bomb sway braces and latch. In the vicinity of this massive artifact we will treat the development and manufacturing of the B-29, the firebombing of Japan, the development of the bases in the Marianas, the 509th Composite Group (Col. Tibbets’ special atomic weapons unit) and the final preparations for the missions. Beyond the fuselage itself, artifacts that can be used in this section will include an engine, propeller or other pieces of the Enola Gay (to further convey its massive scale), plus documents, pictures and memorabilia of the crews.

The final major section of the exhibit will treat the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki themselves and the ensuing surrender of Japan. The full dimensions of the destruction and human suffering in the two cities will be shown here. Pictures of the victims must be included, however upsetting that may be to some visitors. We will also include, as far as possible, bomb-damaged artifacts from the two cities and other documents and loan of items from the museums in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A “Fat Man”-type plutonium bomb-casing, such as that used on Nagasaki, will also be shown here. A video or movie in this section would include footage of the missions and their aftermath, plus interviews with survivors and crew members of the attacking and accompanying aircraft.

The exhibition would conclude, as it began, by noting the debatable character of the atomic bombings, as well as their important role as one of the starting points of the nuclear age and Cold War. The closing video will include the perspectives of a whole range of people — both historical actors, survivors, scholars and ordinary people, both Japanese and American. At the very end, visitors will be able to ponder what they have seen and record their own reactions and thoughts in comment books. They will leave the exhibition, it is hoped, better informed and with a deeper appreciation for the importance and the complexity of these watershed events in modern history.