

BOOK REVIEWS

Ryan Blankenship, a graduate student in American history, here reviews a new volume on the hotly debated script of the scuttled Enola Gay exhibit for the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum.

JUDGEMENT AT THE SMITHSONIAN.

Edited by Philip Noble. (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1995). Pp. 269, \$12.95.

The attempts to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the event that allegedly ended the "Good War"—generated no small amount of cultural conflict. The much-debated Smithsonian exhibit was scheduled to feature the Enola Gay, coupled with a script providing a contextual analysis of the decision to drop it. But it was scrapped in January 1995 by the Institute due to pressure from Congress, the military, and various veterans' groups. Museum curators were chastised by claims that their attempts to analyze the bomb outside of the popular and patriotic "Hiroshima narrative" were grossly "pro-Japanese" and "anti-American." For Congress and the American Legion, merely examining the bomb and its possible negative aspects were out of the question.

The "Hiroshima narrative" contends that the bomb was necessary, wise and just largely because it saved "over a million American lives," and Japanese lives as well, by eliminating the need for a mainland invasion. Conversely, much of post-war scholarship has criticized the Truman administration for hastily using the bomb when other options were available. Many contend that casualty estimates were inflated, an invasion was not necessary for a Japanese surrender, and that the bomb was strategically used to intimidate the Russians and curb the Soviet sphere of influence in the post-war world.

Judgement at the Smithsonian, edited by Philip Noble, is a clear attempt to revive the debate concerning "the generally untold story behind the Bombs of August."¹ The book includes the original and controversial Smithsonian script, "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War," which was ultimately shelved in favor of the insubstantial exhibit

currently on display. The script is sandwiched between two essays sympathetic to the Smithsonian cause: a gratuitous assault by Noble and a more judicious analysis by Stanford history professor Barton J. Bernstein.

The "Crossroads" text is divided into five units. Unit Five, "The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" briefly summarizes the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. The third unit, "Delivering the Bomb" is a lethargic narrative describing the technical preparations of the B-29 crews and their training—a sharp contrast to the style and content of the apparent polemics contained in Units One, Two and Four.

Unit One, "A Fight to the Finish," describes the source of the Japanese-American conflict, citing both military and cultural reasons. More important, it personifies the contemporary debate over political correctness and patriotic correctness, largely because 70 percent of the Smithsonian's operating budget comes from federal funding. Many of the anti-exhibit groups were infuriated over one passage in particular:

For most Americans, this war was fundamentally different than the one waged against Germany and Italy—it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism.²

This passage, quoted crudely out of context by many public officials, became contentious copy for pundits obviously unacquainted with the entire "Crossroads" text. The approach taken by some members of the opinion elite smacked of McCarthy-era commentary. John Leo's October 10 article in *U.S. News and World Report* (which was read verbatim in Congress), using only the above passage, charged that "the same dark vision of America as arrogant, oppressive, racist, and destructive increasingly runs through the Smithsonian complex."³

Other uninformed journalists followed suit. Jeff Jacoby of the *Boston Globe* was simply perplexed: "Western imperialism? It was not the Westerners who ... invaded Manchuria, Malaya and the Philippines, devastated Nanking, mass-raped Korea's young women, bombed Pearl Harbor and conducted the Bataan death march."⁴ Jacoby and others failed to do their homework. In the "Cross-

2 Noble, 3.

3 *Congressional Record*, October 6, 1994.

4 Noble, xxxv.

roads" text, the paragraphs above the "infamous passage" anticipates Jacoby's criticism:

Japanese expansionism was marked by naked aggression and extreme brutality. The slaughter of tens of thousands of Chinese in Nanking in 1937 shocked the world. Atrocities by Japanese troops included brutal mistreatment of civilians, forced laborers and prisoners of war, and biological experiments on human victims.

In December of 1941, Japan attacked U.S. bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and launched other surprise assaults against Allied territories in the Pacific. Thus began a wider conflict marked by extreme bitterness. For most Americans...

Congressional attitudes and arguments paralleled those of Jacoby and Leo, underscoring their shared ignorance—and perhaps their version of the truth. Nancy Kassebaum (R-Kansas) remarked on the Senate floor, "The United States Code states that 'the Smithsonian Institution shall commemorate and display contributions made by the military forces of the nation toward creating, developing and maintaining a free, peaceful and independent society and culture'... the current script for the important exhibit is seriously flawed and should be rewritten."⁵ Perhaps it is the futile search to find something heroic in an atomic bombing that made any analytical exhibit unworthy in the eyes of Congress.

Particularly problematic is Unit 2, "The Decision to Drop the Bomb." One would be hard pressed to argue against any measure that saved the lives of "a million American soldiers." This figure, which has been used to justify the bomb, originally came from Henry Stimson, Truman's secretary of war, in a Harper's article in 1947. A decade ago, Barton Bernstein published an article challenging this number with the use of secret military documents from the Joint War Plans Committee. Bernstein's scholarship revealed that "in June of 1945, while the Okinawa battle was winding down, U.S. military planners estimated that, at most, 46,000 might die in the various possible invasions of Japan."⁶

In opposition, William M. Detweiler, National Commander of the American Legion, wrote to President Clinton arguing the exhibit's position indicates that the "hundreds of thousands of American boys whose lives were spared ... were purchased at the price of treachery and revenge."⁸ One of those lives spared was

5 Noble, 3.

6 Congressional Record.

7 Noble, xxiv.

8 Noble, xlii.

that of literary critic Paul Fussell, whose essay, "Thank God for the Atomic Bomb—A Soldier's View" argued that only the combatants themselves could be the true moral judges of the bomb.

Unit Four, "Ground Zero," emphasizes the lives that were not spared. The issue of "pro-Japanese" and "anti-American" content in the exhibit's material was raised again because many of the pictures and much of the text underscored the sufferings of Japanese bomb victims. Especially graphic depictions included photos of children's lunchboxes and ashes of vaporized bodies. Many complained that there were hardly any pictures of American dead, wounded or POWs who suffered in Japanese war camps. The reason, though, is that there were virtually no American casualties in the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bombings. While there are many complaints about a lack of balance in the exhibit, one fact remains clear: Unit 3 is devoted entirely to the crews who dropped the bomb from above. Unit 4 is devoted entirely to those who suffered on the ground.

Noble's essay fails to emphasize this point, but does a good job synthesizing the pro and con arguments surrounding the bomb. Not unlike Bernstein, he notes that distinguished Americans such as John Foster Dulles, McGeorge Bundy, Dwight Eisenhower, former President Herbert Hoover and Douglas McArthur all opposed the bomb. Noble's essay aptly makes an important point: There is more to the bomb than its diplomatic and military aspects. There is also the waging of a "cultural war" in the America of the 1990s that did not exist at the war's end. However, Noble's essay becomes less compelling when he plays devil's advocate by putting Truman on trial for war crimes, constructing an unfitting morality play convicting Truman as an arch-criminal. Furthermore, he equates the atomic bombings with the Holocaust, which only serves to trivialize the latter.

Bernstein's scholarly critique is much more tactful and controlled. He carefully synthesizes the historiography of each issue surrounding the bomb. He attacks historian Gar Alperovitz's thesis on "atomic diplomacy," suggesting that any curbing of Soviet power was a "bonus" rather than a primary reason for the bomb. He also notes that although prominent Americans (Eisenhower, Hoover, etc.) opposed the bomb, virtually all of them refrained from public criticism.

5 Noble, 3.

6 Congressional Record.

7 Noble, xxiv.

8 Noble, xlii.

Most criticism came in the form of post-war memoirs. While Bernstein agrees with the "Crossroads" text and laments its shelving, he, unlike Nobile, ends on a positive note:

The very clash over the canceled NASM (National Air and Space Museum) exhibit may, ironically, spark a heightened interest in the issues of A-bomb history. Perhaps more Americans will become curious about the A-bomb event...[and] why it is being challenged in the mid-1990s.⁹

In 1945, had a bombing celebration taken place, the Enola Gay undoubtedly would have been ushered down Madison Avenue if possible. In the wake of the Vietnam debacle, there has been a clear change of emphasis. Bernstein believes that the decision to drop the bomb was, more or less, not a decision at all. With \$2 billion spent on a project Truman inherited from the Roosevelt years, and a desire to end the war at all costs, it seemed almost inevitable.

Any change in the interpretation of history will not change history itself, only its perception by different generations. A lasting resolution to the debate over use of the bomb, like many other historical controversies—the slaughter of Native Americans and the nature of slavery leap to mind—may have to wait until those whose lives were directly touched by the event are no longer around to contest its morality.