



EAST-WEST CENTER

# Memory Wars: The Politics of Remembering the Asia-Pacific War

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# Asia Pacific

I S S U E S

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**SUMMARY** Earlier this year the Smithsonian Institution announced that it would replace a planned exhibit on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with a small exhibit of just the plane that bombed Hiroshima (the *Enola Gay*) and videos of the crew. The announcement was meant to end a year of impassioned public wrangling among World War II veterans, historians, and politicians over how the war should be remembered. But the debate has continued, as has a similar one in Japan where opinion about the war is far less monolithic than generally depicted in the United States. In both countries the issues raised go far beyond the problem of what *really* happened at the end of the war. Foremost among these is the question of the role of national cultural institutions in educating the public, particularly when the subject has international dimensions. In the case of the Smithsonian exhibit, how could an intensely *international* story—the sacrifices of America's veterans and the suffering of Japan's atomic bomb victims—be represented in an intensely *national* site?

**Media coverage of the controversy has reached more people than would have seen the exhibit**

On January 31, 1995, after a year of public wrangling over a planned exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the secretary of the Smithsonian announced that it would be replaced with a scaled-down exhibit of just the plane that bombed Hiroshima (the *Enola Gay*) and videos of the crews. The July opening of the scaled-down exhibit, designed to avoid controversy, was nonetheless accompanied by prayers by atomic bomb survivors, demonstrations, and the arrests of two people for pouring human blood and ashes on the plane.

What had begun as an effort to mount a major exhibition of one of the pivotal moments in human history—the first use of atomic weapons in warfare—had ended in anticlimactic retreat. Casualties of the controversy include the director of the Air and Space Museum (who resigned) and, perhaps, the possibilities for public histories of war at significant national sites. In mid-May the U.S. Senate held hearings to investigate the Smithsonian's handling of the exhibit—hearings that included testimonies from veterans groups calling for greater Congressional oversight of future exhibits and from supporters who worried about “historical cleansing,” the deletion of unpopular material from public history.

This controversy raises issues that go beyond the problem of determining what *really* happened at the end of World War II. As important as that question is (and historians will be vigorously addressing it for some time to come) the “memory wars” that surround it expose a wider set of issues pertaining to the problem of representing the Pacific war to various publics. In particular, these issues raise important questions about the role of national cultural institutions in public education, espe-

cially when education has international dimensions.

Whereas the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are critical *international* events, particularly in regard to U.S.-Japan relations, debates about how to remember them have been almost entirely a *national* affair—represented in the United States as a polarized struggle between patriotic veterans groups and “politically correct” curators and academic historians. Use of the phrase “politically correct” suggests that the controversy was defined in largely domestic terms, where the battle lines were already drawn in the context of America's culture wars in which liberal academics, especially, stand accused of over-sympathizing with victims of dominant groups to the detriment of mainstream values and the historical record. The exhibit planners found themselves in a pre-defined zone of conflict in which the Japanese, though integral to the exhibit, were frequently characterized in absentia but rarely involved themselves.

More attention, emotion, and moral indignation have now gone into the problems of *representing* the bombing than into examining the history of the bombing itself. While exhibit planners and their critics were arguing over the historical “facts,” nearly everyone else—including most of the media and members of Congress—became focused on the



conflict of opposed versions of history. Media coverage of the controversy has now reached more people than would have seen the exhibit itself.

### The International Context

The predicament for those who plan war commemorations is that such events occur *after* the wars in question, when relations between adversaries have been redefined. Enemies often become allies. How can nations do justice to the memory of past wars without propagating the passions that motivated people to fight in the first place? The simple answer is that they can't. The more policymakers struggle with diplomatic phrases that might neutralize the language of remembrance, the deeper they sink in the quagmire of moral indignation felt especially by those who fought the wars. A more complex answer, however, is that anniversaries may be an opportunity to both reexperience *and transform* old sentiments.

The Clinton administration learned about the symbolic liabilities of war anniversaries in its attempts to avoid the language of "V-J day" and, to a lesser extent, in its cancellation of a postage stamp depicting the atomic bomb mushroom cloud over Hiroshima. Each of those incidents crystallized the problem of conducting war commemorations in a manner that is consistent with both present-day foreign policy and the patriotic sentiments of a past war.

**American perceptions of Japanese.** In the case of the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, what *are* some of those sentiments? Americans who experienced the war remember the exhilaration and relief brought about by a victory that ended both the massive casualties suffered daily by American troops in the Pacific and the prospects for a costly invasion of the Japanese mainland. That exhilaration was enhanced by the feeling of triumph over an adversary who was regarded with even more hostility than the already-defeated Nazis.

Some of these attitudes were reflected in an American public opinion poll published by *Fortune* magazine in December 1945. One of the questions

compared attitudes toward Germans and Japanese: "Do you regard the majority of Japanese (German) people as being naturally cruel and brutal, if they have the chance, or do you think it is only a small part of the population that is like that?"

	Japanese	German
A majority are naturally cruel and brutal:	55.9%	38.9%
Only a small part of the population is like that:	34.1%	53.7%
Don't know:	10.0%	7.4%

The disparity in attitudes toward Germans and Japanese is indicative of the importance of race in the antagonisms that fueled the Pacific War.<sup>1</sup> The negative views of Japanese, in comparison with Germans, are all the more striking given that the horrors of the Holocaust were already widely publicized by the fall of 1945, while the extent of Japanese atrocities in their treatment of POWs had yet to emerge.

In this context, popular sentiment was firmly behind dropping the atomic bombs on the two Japanese cities. The *Fortune* survey found the following attitudes:

Should not have used any bombs at all:	4.5%
Should have dropped first on unpopulated region:	13.8%
Should have used the bombs just as we did:	53.5%
Should have quickly used many more:	22.7%
Don't know:	5.5%

Not surprisingly, over half of the respondents said that bombing the two cities as carried out by U.S. forces was the right strategy. However, nearly one fourth of the sample went further, saying that, "We should have quickly used many more of them *before Japan had a chance to surrender.*" Even at this point, after the Japanese had surrendered unconditionally, the wish to annihilate the enemy remained strong among a significant segment of the population.

Today, American opinion toward Japan remains ambivalent. A survey of Californians in 1991,<sup>2</sup> the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, found that 81 percent said they no longer considered Japan an enemy because of World War II, that it was "all in the past." Yet nearly a quarter (22 percent, including a third of those over 50) said they continued to harbor mistrust because of Pearl Harbor and the

**How can nations do justice to the memory of past wars without reviving the passions that made people fight in the first place?**

war. A Gallup poll taken in November 1994 found that Japan ranked fifth among nations seen as “major security threats” to the United States—behind Iraq, China, Russia, and North Korea.

### **Political Correctness: Here and There**

One of the reasons commonly cited for distrust of Japan is the government’s refusal to acknowledge its role as aggressor or to take responsibility for acts of wartime brutality such as mass killings in China, forced labor of foreign workers, and sexual enslavement of Korean and other women. Japanese war amnesia has been the dominant theme of a great deal of American and Asian commentary, focusing especially on school textbooks and the question of national apology.

Journalists and others commenting on the Smithsonian exhibit frequently referred to the official suppression of these memories in Japan. An editorial in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* expressed the common view that,

The Japanese have been taught that the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki made them victims of World War II. The Japanese aggression that began the war, and the atrocities committed during it, have been ignored in Japanese schools.

That explains the protests of survivors. They have never been told that their own government was responsible for the war and ultimately for their suffering. . . .<sup>3</sup>

This characterization is belied by changes in the Japanese educational curriculum instituted in 1989. At that time the education ministry issued a new set of curriculum standards that expanded the material on twentieth century history to include forthright statements about the exploitation of neighboring Asian countries and wartime aggression. While these changes could not be expected to have influenced adult opinion today, their implementation in a highly conservative bureaucracy reflects the degree to which these subjects have become matters of public concern in Japan. A poll taken by the *Asian Wall Street Journal*<sup>4</sup> in Japan and the United States found that more Japanese (61 percent) than Americans (53 percent) felt that “Japan hasn’t done enough to take responsibility for its role in World War II.”

Assuming that ordinary Japanese are simply unaware of war history makes it unnecessary to consider just what *their* perspective on these matters might be. In this way, the assumption of “amnesia” forecloses any need for dialogue or international learning. Retired Major General Charles W. Sweeney, the only pilot to have flown on both the Hiroshima and Nagasaki missions, and the lead-off witness called in the Senate hearings held on May 11, stated:

There is an entire generation of Japanese who do not know the full extent of their country’s conduct during World War II. This explains why they do not comprehend why they must apologize. . . . In a perverse inversion, by forgetting our own history, we contribute to the Japanese amnesia, to the detriment of both our nations.

In reaching for generalizations about Japan many American commentators minimize the activities of students, historians, journalists, and others working to document and publicize Japan’s record of wartime aggression. The paralysis of the Diet on the apology issue and the much-publicized views of war-generation conservatives are one side of a long-running struggle within Japan regarding wartime actions and responsibilities. Opposed to official governmental policies is a vociferous tradition of antimilitary sentiment that is not limited to left-wing intellectuals, but extends through a broad segment of Japanese society. The government itself is deeply divided on these points and in recent years has shown a somewhat greater willingness to acknowledge wartime responsibilities.

As was the case when the Shōwa Emperor was dying (1988-89), the Japanese public has been deluged during the fiftieth anniversary period with articles, films, and exhibitions focusing on the revelations of former sex slaves, of perpetrators of the Nanjing massacre, of POW guards, and of doctors who carried out grotesque experiments on human subjects. Throughout the postwar period, many notable historians, and writers such as Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe, have produced an extensive body of work examining Japan’s wartime militarism, and criticizing government educational policy for

**More Japanese than Americans believe Japan hasn’t done enough to take responsibility for its role in WWII**

covering it up. This type of cultural criticism, challenging official histories that gloss over the victimization of others, parallels the type of liberal commentary labeled “politically correct” or “revisionist” in the United States.

As in the United States, museums, history books, and school curricula are important sites for contests over national memory. To mention a few examples:

- The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, long criticized by Americans as exclusively focused on the suffering of A-bomb survivors, opened a new facility in 1994 that doubled its exhibit space to include a more detailed account of the militarization of the city, the importation of forced Korean labor, and the city’s role as a port of embarkation for troops invading China.
- A new museum, the Osaka International Peace Center, is designed to “shed light on why the war got started, recalling Japan’s role as ‘assailant.’” The Center includes a collection of school textbooks used in postwar Japan, so scholars may better understand how children were inculcated with beliefs that made Japan’s aggressive actions a “righteous war.”<sup>5</sup>
- Thirty-five Japanese scholars formed a committee to appeal for world peace on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary. Members attended the 1995 meetings of the Organization of American Historians and circulated a proposal that said, among other things, “First, it is obvious that the Asia-Pacific War began with the invasion of China, starting with the ‘Manchurian Incident’ of September 1931, and subsequent military invasion of Southeast Asian countries. . . . We recognize that apology and compensation. . . are necessary.”

To the extent that citizens of the international community hear about activities such as these—activities showing as much sympathy for foreign victims of colonialism and war as for Japan’s own war dead—they are welcomed. But these examples of Japanese self-criticism have generally not received much attention in the international press, nor in American debates about *their* memories of the war.

For the press to acknowledge the diversity of views within Japan makes it difficult to characterize Japan as a national actor with identifiable intentions on the world stage. This is a problem for all international reporting, but is especially troublesome when writing about a nation that produces its own claims to cultural uniqueness and homogeneity. Media references to official policies and conservative pronouncements as *the* Japanese attitude are reinforced both by Western (racial) images of Japan as a monolithic society and by Japanese myths of cultural uniqueness. These types of media-promoted simplification have the effect of diminishing opportunities for constructive engagement *between* nations. So long as each national public perceives only a solid or antagonistic attitude on the part of the other, internal debates in each country will continue on parallel tracks, imagining the other’s view as needed.

As an example of what might be learned, consider the reaction of some Japanese to one of the drafts of the script for the atomic bomb exhibit. Citing the line most mentioned by American critics of the script, to the effect that the Japanese saw themselves fighting a war to “protect their unique culture against European imperialism,” while the Americans were “fighting a war of vengeance,” Japanese scholars worried that such language undercut their own efforts to counter conservative attempts to rationalize wartime aggression. Author Michio Saito wrote in the *Asahi Shimbun*, “I wonder if it is all right for an American to write such a thing. . . . It supports the ‘Greater East Asia War’ in essence.”

For the most part, American discussion of the Smithsonian exhibit ignored Japanese commentary, except to note with displeasure the negative reactions of the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the cancellation of the exhibit. Critics testifying in the Senate hearings expressed suspicions that contacts between the Smithsonian curators and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum for the purpose of borrowing objects for display compromised the exhibit, requiring curators to be sympathetic to the Japanese mentality of victimization. Tom

**A belief that Japanese are unaware of war history makes it unnecessary to consider what their perspective might be**

Crouch, lead curator for the canceled exhibit, denied this, saying that discussions with Japanese were a way of promoting a “full, honest, balanced telling of the story.”<sup>6</sup> To the critics, this was “political correctness” run amok—liberal-minded professionals over-representing victims’ stories in ways that distort (or “revise”) the record.

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### History, Commemoration, and International Education

One of the dilemmas for the descendants of Japan’s war dead is that memorials, shrines, and ceremonial tributes are surrounded with moral conflict and ambivalence. As a nation that lost in war, public history and memorial tribute are more conflicted in Japanese official sites of memory than in the United States. Talking to a Shinto priest at the Yasukuni shrine (dedicated to Japan’s most well-known, and in some cases infamous, war dead) writer Ian Buruma reports a conversation that bears an odd resemblance to the Smithsonian controversy. Discussing prospects for expanding the shrine’s small museum, the priest told him the shrine could not be an educational museum as long as survivors of the war were alive, but might become one later. When asked if historians might be brought in to engineer the change, the priest responded, “. . . as soon as you bring historians in, you run into problems. You get distortions. As a shrine, we must think of the feelings of the spirits and their families.”<sup>7</sup>

Once plans were underway to construct a larger war museum at Yasukuni, strains of conflict emerged precisely along these lines. Three historians withdrew from the project over official reluctance to include interpretive exhibits critical of wartime aggression. The chairman of the Japan Veterans Association stated in response that, “The original purpose of the museum was to pay tribute to the souls of war dead, displaying their belongings. That way, their children can live with pride.”<sup>8</sup>

These comments resonate with the sentiments of American critics of the Smithsonian’s exhibit who felt that the exhibit’s focus on Japanese victims of the atomic bombings devalued the service and sacrifice of the nation’s veterans. Children and the

things they learn to think about their country are commonly referred to in these debates. For example, the congressional resolution critical of the atomic bomb called for the Smithsonian to construct an exhibition that would honor the nation’s veterans and engender pride among children viewing the exhibit.

In one of the most quoted assessments of the problems underlying the Smithsonian exhibit, Curator Tom Crouch wrote in an internal memorandum, “Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don’t think we can do both.” Once the exhibit was canceled, many of the postmortems also pointed to these different purposes. In his statement to the press canceling the exhibit Secretary of the Smithsonian I. Michael Heyman said:

In this important anniversary year, veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and, frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke.

Despite the usefulness of distinguishing commemoration and history, these are not separate activities that can be easily insulated one from the other. In addition to their professional commitments to historical accuracy, historians and museum professionals also have their perspectives and passions. And veterans and survivors, while concerned to express their personal experiences, adamantly invoke the importance of truth and accuracy. In the Smithsonian memory battle each “side” (a term that belies important differences *among* historians and veterans) considered itself a champion of historical truth and balanced history, while suspecting the other of political motivations that variously censor or distort history.

Historians and antinuclear groups were quick to react to the influence of veterans groups that lead to the deletion of material from the planned exhibit, talking of political “censorship” and “historical cleansing.” In November 1994, representatives of

**To critics, the Smithsonian curators’ contact with Japanese was ‘political correctness’ run amok**

**'We asked only that  
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well as theirs'  
— American Legion**

national organizations involved in nuclear education, including the Physicians for Social Responsibility, wrote to the director of the Air and Space Museum expressing their concern that revisions had left the script "unbalanced and historically inaccurate." They stated that, "We merely want a *well-balanced* display that is historically accurate and leaves visitors with something to think about and discuss. Right now it essentially reflects only the viewpoint of the veterans."<sup>9</sup>

This appeal to historical balance is mirrored in comments from veterans groups who also called for *balanced* history. As they saw it, the distortions did not derive from attempts to satisfy the emotions of veterans but from politically correct attitudes trying to sympathize with the Japanese. Herman G. Harrington, testifying on behalf of the American Legion, stated:

... those who most loudly accuse us of censorship are the very ones most opposed to including our views in the discussion and the display. It remains a fact that the original exhibit proposed one interpretation of history at the exclusion of all others. We asked only that all views be included, ours as well as theirs. Who sought to censor whom?

Most parties to the Smithsonian argument would agree that history is always underwritten by moral imperatives. They would, however, draw different implications for the role of museums and public historians. Contrast the following two statements made in the Senate hearings on the exhibit: that of Edward Linenthal arguing against a "patriotic litmus test" and that of Evan S. Baker, president of the Navy League, calling for the national museum to reflect "mainstream American views."

Surely, ... the presentation of history is not to function as therapy, used to puff up the self-esteem of individuals or nations. Surely [one] would object to the very idea that there ought to be a patriotic litmus test for a public museum in the nation's capital, or that young people should not be confronted with the complexities of history.

The American people have a right to insist that, if their tax dollars are going to be used to support institutions like the Smithsonian, those institutions display American history in a way that reflects mainstream American views.

The particular difficulties for *this* exhibit in navigating between opposed calls for critical history and patriotic history stem from the fact that it was dealing with an intensely *international* subject in an intensely *national* site. The curators hoped to present voices not typically heard in the United States—those of atomic bomb survivors—in a museum regarded by many as the manifestation of American collective memory. This and the suspicions provoked by the Smithsonian curators' contacts with Japanese officials and scholars reveal how difficult it can be to incorporate international perspectives in an exhibit of major national significance. It is more than a little ironic that the atomic bombings themselves signify the disastrous consequences that may follow from failures in international dialogue.

### Conclusion

Americans suffer from their own historical "amnesia." A 1994 Gallup survey showed that 58 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 did not know that Hiroshima was the city where the first atomic bomb was dropped. Thus, an anniversary exhibit of the battles and events that led up to the closing of the Pacific war, and of the bombing that changed history, would have been an important educational opportunity for the hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Air and Space Museum.

Most American citizens, particularly those born after the war, think of the bombings in terms of a single aerial image, looking down on the mushroom cloud. Here was an important opportunity to add the missing human dimension, learning from and about those who experienced the bomb.

Yet, as a kind of American "sacred space," the Smithsonian was unable to deal with either Japanese artifacts or Japanese participants (such as the members of a survivors group who came to hold a remembrance ceremony but were told to confine themselves to an area outside the museum after closing time and without U.S. reporters present). Despite a great deal of rhetoric about "globalization" and "internationalization," national institutions have yet to come to terms with ways to handle the

flow of ideas and interpretations across national boundaries.

It is both too simplistic and too pessimistic to think that a national museum is incapable of combining its commemorative function and its educational function on such an important occasion. While a certain amount of conflict is inevitable, it need not be fatal, and might even provide a source of tension productive of new ideas. There may yet be a positive outcome to this entanglement if scholars, veterans, and interested citizens of both Japan and the United States are provoked to look beyond the narrow national debates in each country to discover a more realistic understanding of each other's perspectives or, more importantly, of each other's arguments about what is worth remembering.

**Commemoration  
and history cannot  
be easily insulated  
one from the other**

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