

Student A:

Maybe I was just in an unusually melancholy mood when I read *History Wars* this week, but it had a strong emotional impact on me. The main reason was that it reminded me of the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and of the “terror bombing” of civilians more generally. But there was also something depressing and frightening in the idea of people obstinately continuing to believe in the moral unambiguousness of a particular action despite all evidence to the contrary. It suggests that lessons aren’t learned and that crimes committed in the name of right will continue to be committed -- which of course they will be, as recent events from Sept. 11 to the Iraq war point out all too clearly. Less significantly, from a professional standpoint, the *Enola Gay* controversy made me less sanguine about the usefulness of history outside of the academy. This is a book written by the vanquished.

My emotional reaction to the text made me simultaneously more disappointed that the full exhibit of the *Enola Gay* was never mounted and more sympathetic to its critics than I would have been otherwise. On the one hand, the bombing is just the kind of national tragedy/crime that demands close examination in a public forum. The more definitional it is and the more people are conflicted about it, the more important it is to bring it to the surface and to understand the ways in which it has affected national policy. The AFA’s lobbying on behalf of the military-industrial complex, the veterans’ willful blindness, the politicians’ self-promotion, the media’s scandal-mongering all served to undermine what could have been a lasting site of debate, reflection, and self-scrutiny.

On the other hand, the fact that the exhibit ultimately collapsed because of squabbling over the exact number of expected casualties in an invasion of Japan points, paradoxically, to what was really at stake: the emotions of the exhibit visitors. In the end, historical accuracy was not important; emotional “accuracy” was. The exhibit’s critics wanted the exhibit to provoke a certain kind of emotion, while the exhibit’s designers wanted it to provoke another. Nothing in the “facts,” it seems to me, could have reconciled the two groups as long as they remained loyal to their different emotional commitments. This is why artifacts such as the schoolgirl’s lunchbox and the *Enola Gay* itself were the focus of so much controversy: they were the emotional centers of the exhibit. This is also why military historian Richard H. Kohn’s suggestion that the exhibit could have “recounted the effect of the bombs on the ground without attempting to arouse emotion” (169) seemed to me not only incredibly insensitive but also factually incorrect. An “unemotional” exhibit was impossible, and any attempt to create one would have been inhuman. This conclusion made me rethink some of the other readings we have done this semester in terms of their emotional impact.

Closely tied to the question of emotion is the question of memory. As Paul Boyer points out, the *Enola Gay* controversy can be seen as “angry struggle over who would finally determine the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: historians or ‘the people’” (131). This seems like a major oversimplification, and in fact Boyer quickly qualifies the statement by suggesting that the resistance to the exhibit might have been “pseudopopulist” rather than populist. But there does seem to be an element of truth in it: the debate was both about the meaning of the bombings and about the professional prerogatives of historians. There may be a (logical, not historical) parallel here with the trend toward giving medical patients and insurance agencies more say in treatment decisions. Just as physicians’ right to control the uses to which their expertise is put has been questioned from below by individuals and from above by corporations, so historians’ right to tell stories about the past has been questioned from below by people such as Paul Tibbets and from above by institutions such as the military-industrial complex and the national government. Historians have probably never had as much independent authority as physicians have had, but both are experts who claim expertise about deeply personal aspects of people’s lives, i.e., their bodies and their memories.

This week’s reading continues, in a different vein, the discussion of war we started last week. Like Keegan’s *The Face of War*, it raises the question of the relationship between technology and the position -- physical, psychological, moral -- of the individual soldier. In his chapter on “Three Narratives of Humanity,” John Dower offers the horrifying image of Tibbets and his men infiltrating

Hiroshima on the ground to “one by one, one incinerate, irradiate, and mutilate tens upon tens of thousands of the men, women, and children living there” (93) -- in other words, to carry out face-to-face what they and their superiors could have known, should have known, and probably did know they were doing from the secure and anonymous distance of the *Enola Gay*. As Keegan notes, technologies that allow people to strike from a distance have been undermining the idea of honorable combat for at least 500 years. Nuclear weapons, especially now that they are mounted on ICBMs, are thus the ultimate dehumanization of war. This is not an original statement, I know, but what is interesting about it to me is the idea that technology and morality are directly linked -- that distancing technologies allow people to commit crimes that would have been impossible both psychologically (Tibbets and his men would presumably have found it emotionally and morally impossible to kill tens of thousands of civilians with their own hands) and technologically (i.e., Tibbets and his men never *could* have carried out their on-the-ground massacre, even if they had been capable of it). What Tibbets tried to hold onto, it seems to me, is that old, cherished image of the noble warrior who challenges his equal in man-to-man combat; but it was an image that could only be maintained by willful disregard for reality.

The New York Times has an article today on the new air & space museum the Smithsonian has set up at Dulles airport outside of DC, where the *Enola Gay* is now on display. The article mentions the plane twice, but only to note that it "dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima" and "was briefly shown in the 90's at the downtown building [of the NASM]."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/16/travel/16dulles.html>