

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

It's not only the political scientists that are up to no good these days. History Wars reveals the challenges historians face when they try to rewrite, not merely recite, history. Nationalistic narratives are even more difficult to revise. The Enola Gay exhibit, proposed in 1994, carried huge implications. It had the potential to take history beyond the realm of quantitative squabbles and bring to question the morality of American actions in the Second World War. Little wonder that the exhibit was cancelled.

Perhaps a quote from John Dower's essay best captures the spirit of the book. "Serious historians do not define their task as one of celebration... Their primary task is to use the perspective of time, together with access to previously unavailable materials, to rethink the past"(76). In the process, historians "embrace ambiguity. They believe that one can learn from controversy" (79). The major point I got from the book was that studying history at universities and presenting history to public audiences are two different matters. Politics inevitably impacts the latter more.

Interestingly, the authors all agree that the Enola Gay controversy should be viewed in its own historical context. For example, Mike Wallace argues that "the battle of the Enola Gay was only one of several engagements that broke out that summer, all along the History Front of a wider Culture War" (174). The way I see it, the "battle" was a matter of presenting "patriotic" versus "substantive" history. (Though I am not saying that the two are always incompatible). Until this point in the course, debates had been both theoretical and quantitative, but remained confined to the academic arena. This week's reading introduces a new type of conflict, between academic and civil discourses. Both sides are happy to respond to the others' insults. For example, Wallace dismisses Gingrich's calls to end the evil, unpatriotic revisionism as "faux-populist hogwash" (187). When I mentioned this issue to a Japanese historian, he noted that the two sides "aren't on the same page, even if they engage each other in debate."

For fifty years, Americans had come to accept the Second World War as a "Good War." As a result, most Americans embraced the "thank God for the atom bomb thesis" that Dower targets as a part of the flawed "heroic narrative." Two points I found most compelling were those I had until now overlooked: 1) Why Nagasaki? 2) Figures for American deaths were imagined" (79)_

Questions like these greatly alter the picture. Further, Vietnam historian Marilyn

Young underscores the peculiarity of WW2 memory when she notes that "anti-war protestors never questioned the goodness of their country," even at the height of the Vietnam War. WW2 remained the "symbol of national virtue" for even the most liberally minded activists (203). Thus the fate of the Enola Gay exhibit offers a valuable lesson in the political and

cultural currents of the time, while also proving how widespread the acceptance of the heroic narrative had become.

Hands down, *History Wars* was the most entertaining reading of the semester. This owes a lot to the Republicans. My favorite quote came from Newt Gingrich who warned that without ideological inoculation, we would “get drowned in European socialist ideas, and get drowned in oriental ideas of mandarin hierarchy (!)” More seriously, the conservative stance on the exhibit suggests that while history is written by the victors, the projection of historical images rests on those currently holding political power. “Unpatriotic, revisionist” academics face clear obstacles in this respect. However, Wallace notes that “If the shutdown galvanizes the public historical community into ongoing concerted action, perhaps the Battle of the Enola Gay, which now seems a setback, may prove in the end to have been a victory” (198). His assessment can be taken a step further to inspire budding historians like ourselves to re-examine mainstream notions in our own fields of study. Who knows? We may find ourselves setting the past straight in the future.

Though I enjoyed the arguments, I had a few grievances with the structure of the book itself. The points became redundant by the third and fourth chapter. Also, I would have liked the book to have two parts: the first half revealing the bigotry of American politicians, which it does well; the second half paying equal attention to the Japanese. John Dower is one of the few to present Japan’s “historical amnesia” problem. Japan too has war memorials that dodge controversial issues, making no mention of the Nanjing Massacre, the enslavement of Korean “comfort women” and Pearl Harbor (67). One interesting point centers on the content of textbooks. Both the US and Japan are guilty of whitewashing the past for nationalistic purposes. In fact, the call for junior-high school textbook revisions considerably impacted Japan-Korea relations in 2001. So bad were these tensions that South Korea recalled its ambassador briefly.