

Student B:

We've talked a good deal in class about different methods for studying the distant past, but this week's reading made me aware of the difficulties that can arise in using a historian's eye to study the recent past. Recent history is also partially the study of the present because memory of the recent past exists, either in the public's mind or in the historian's (or both). How does one write the history of the recent past? Is it a good and feasible idea to do so? History Wars addresses these questions both directly, by letting 8 historians write pieces on a very recent event in US history that they had at least indirect involvement in, and indirectly, by simultaneously discussing the Smithsonian's attempt to discuss the "Enola Gay" in historical perspective (another example of recent history). Overall, the results seemed to be what one would expect from a good historical volume -- a variety of well-reasoned and interesting perspectives with no fixed conclusion.

There are arguments for and against doing recent history. On the one hand, ones sources will usually be comprehensive (if written) and often alive (if animate). In terms of 'results', a historian probably gets the most bang for his intellectual effort doing a more recent study. However, it was very clear in History Wars that recent history cannot be done in a vacuum -- both the historians of and the actors in a particular historical issue have more, stronger opinions on recent issues, so that more effort is required to tease out some sort of narrative from what are ultimately many biased perspectives. Different historians deal with the effects of people's historical memory in different ways -- in The Age of Extremes, Eric Hobsbawm openly admits that his history of the 20th century world will be told from his perspectives with his bias, leaving the reader to make a judgment on how this should affect a reading of the book. In Something New Under the Sun, J.R. McNeill seemed to use a more quantitative approach to depersonalize his narrative. And in History Wars, the historians for the most part analyze historical memory itself and what it says about contemporary America -- a kind of New Cultural History.

However one does recent history, the fundamental problems of dealing with historical memory and bias remain for both the historian and the reader. Perhaps they do not have to be 'problems', though -- in each essay, the author's involvement with the "Enola Gay" controversy and/or previous historical work clearly influences the conclusions they draw from it. Those who were deeply involved (Engelhardt, Linenthal, Sherry) see the controversy as to some extent reflecting broad (and negative) patterns in American culture that ultimately did the exhibit in, the activist historian (Wallace) suggests that historical institutions must exhibit organized resistance in the future, a historian of Vietnam sees the controversy as rooted in American fears stemming from Vietnam, and a military historian, perhaps bitter over his discipline's late invitation to the planning of the exhibit, offers the most frank criticism of the Smithsonian's actions. I found the essays' conclusions both more interesting and slightly less believable because of their correlations with their authors' backgrounds. It's always more interesting to read a study whose author was personally entrenched in the object of their study (Geertz' very personal narrative of his residence in a Balinese

town), but I personally respect objectivity as reassurance that the author's feelings affected his narrative less. Though objectivity can always be deceptive, it seems frankly impossible to write history of an event from the past decade without some personal involvement. It is also impossible (for me) to read recent history without some emotional reaction, precisely because of my internal biases, based on my own memory of various political events. I hate the reactionary forces of the culture wars as much as the next member of this class, and can't help feeling while reading each measured historical essay in *History Wars* that a fundamental truth is lurking in the background -- the historians in the "Enola Gay" controversy were tarred, feathered, and roasted alive by evil Republican bigots, resulting in a misleading and dangerous exhibit and a lost battle for academic freedom. Though I know this view is simplistic and must be qualified, I can help it little more than my equally irrational reactions to our discussions of physics or (to a lesser extent) a veteran's reaction to a discussion of the morality of dropping the atomic bombs. Reading and writing recent history is strewn with such biases, probably even when we don't notice them. What biases will future generations reading current historical works discover?

On that note, I should give my personal reaction to the controversy for our discussion. I was pained to read about the gradual destruction of a careful work of scholarship by cultural philistines and well-meaning veterans organizations. I think Kohn best articulated the possible terrible impact of the controversy -- when a scholarly organization caves to political pressure, the integrity of that organization and its academic field in general are threatened. Years of intellectual capital invested in a particular piece of work, an institution, or even a field could be severely damaged if non-scholarly institutions can have a deciding say -- witness the almost total dismissal of Soviet scholarship in some of the humanities by Western scholars. Yet I agree with Kohn that the "Enola Gay" controversy does not prove that 1984 has come -- from the public's perspective, the exhibit in its initial incarnation frankly was biased. It was biased towards a reexamination of the past, exactly what historians do. But since a reexamination of a victory must dredge up unpleasant interpretations, it will fundamentally conflict with a government-sponsored celebration of a victory and the victors. It is still perhaps possible to give historically accurate exhibits on controversial topics that are also somewhat commemorative, but do to do this "museums will have to be smarter and tougher than they have ever been before" (194), as Wallace puts it, by fighting back at critics and evaluating the possible political impact of exhibits as they are planned and consulting special interest groups appropriately. I truly feel badly for the Smithsonian historians who weathered this storm, especially having seen little controversy over their 'revisionist' exhibits on the American West and World War I. But I found the tone of many of the essays somewhat apocalyptic and unacknowledging of the shortcomings of the "Enola Gay" exhibit as planned.

Historiographically, I thought it interesting that the initial "Enola Gay" exhibit was very good history, especially if a historian's work is defined as making people uncomfortable with his conclusions. The exhibit was to challenge a mythic interpretation of an event, a good historical task, and was particularly good military history that focused not on the events of the bomb being dropped but the details of what

allowed it be dropped (the coverage of the training of Sgt. Tibbets' crew) and what happened as a result (the coverage of the destruction and suffering at Hiroshima and beyond). The backlash to the exhibit's content as not telling history 'as it happened' and as 'revisionist' and 'politically correct' can to some extent be seen as a disagreement of the public with how history is done today. Boyer notes that the exhibit was fundamentally a product of post-Annales ways of doing history, very different from the event-based history known to those who haven't taken a historiography seminar. Does it matter what the public thinks of history? I naively don't see why, aside from the taxpayer dollars that fund the Smithsonian and the influential views of officials like Lynne Cheney, the avowedly anti-'relativist' former chairwoman of the NEA. If historians have determined that the best way to study the past is to provide complex narratives and not to simplify, I hope we can go with that and not let the public's perception taint the study of history. A sobering story comes from automatic speech recognition technology, in which the dominant approach is the brute-force recognition of statistical patterns, as opposed to a more 'scientific' approach pursued by linguists and speech scientists in a few universities. The first approach has dominated because it gives quicker results, while the second is ultimately more promising but takes longer to research. As a leader in the field put it, "every time I fire a linguist, the recognition rate does up." In this case, that research is driven by public (consumer) concerns for simplicity over the real, complicated story has ultimately probably set research back by many years.

Finally, I thought most essays in *_History Wars_* were interesting examples of cultural history of the kind practiced by Geertz and Darnton -- take an event from 1990's American culture and see what can be learned from it. The multiplicity of interpretations offered, some of which certainly were not instinctive (Engenhardt's complicated analysis of American memorials to defeat), showed that the interpretation of cultures works almost up to the present and can be practiced independently of whether a given interpretation actually has anything to do with what people were thinking at the time of the historical event. This kind of cultural history diverges from Geertz' anthropology, where the authority of the interpretation of the Balinese cockfight is bolstered by the Balinese's almost passive recognition of Geertz' interpretation.