

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - 30,000 Feet Over The Smithsonian: Authenticity And Vicarious Collective Memory



In 1984, radio personality and author Studs Terkel wrote *The Good War*. Designed as a history of World War II, Terkel selected and edited oral testimonies and narratives to combat the “disremembrance of World War Two.” He begins the book with his observations of a thirty-something woman he met in 1982. She said, “I can’t relate to World War Two. It’s in schoolbook texts, that’s all. Battles that were won, battles that were lost. Or costume dramas you see on TV. It’s just a story in the past. It’s so distant, so abstract. I don’t get myself up in a bunch about it” (Terkel 1984: 3).

The terror of forgetting is often juxtaposed to the nobility of remembering. Especially in holocaust literature, the epithet that we must never forget our memory (a rhetorical move suggestive of Paix La Chapelle, the Alamo or the Maine in United States’ history) acts a bulwark against the rising tide of revisionism (Schudson 1993: 5).

Here I am interested in the dynamics of the collective memory. I take collective memory in the sense of Annales School sociologist Maurice Halbwachs or American sociologist Barry Schwartz as a socially constructed past composed of persistence and change, continuity and newness (Schwartz 1982: Halbwachs 1992). Most importantly, it is held by a living community as a part of its constitution. However, while most collective memory scholarship has emphasized the living and socially constructed part of memory, my interest is in turning this concept on its head and look at the social past as a constraint on historical interpretation. IN this sense, memory and history are opposed. Generally, we have accepted that the factual quality of the historical (as practiced by historians) past constrains our ability to interpret the past. However, the social past, itself is prehistorical and has a predictable inertial quality that prevents us from using the past at our own will.

This paper progresses in three parts. First, I will discuss the nature of public memory as it has been studied. In the second part I will use the controversy involving the presentation of the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian as a case study. Finally, I will draw out some implications of this controversy for the study of America's past.

### *1. Memory's Revisionist Potential*

I take revisionism to be an alteration in the fabric of a memory. Sometimes revisionism is passive, as in the instance of Terkel's forgetful thirty-something. Sometimes, however, revisionism is intentional, as in the sense that George Orwell used it in his book 1984. There, memory is flexible and pliable; it takes on different texture based on a point or angle of view. It is a function of politics or interest. Recent studies of collective memory have engaged memory primarily as a conception of the past that is under construction and can be too readily changed. For example, historian Merrill Peterson writes:

But memory fades and, as everyone knows, it is subject to tricks: of vanity and conceit, of partial error, and displacement. In a literate culture, reading corrupts or displaces memory. . . . Reminiscence is like storytelling; it goes on more or less continually and changes with the telling. One reminiscence triggers another, and so the process feeds upon itself. Reminiscence, as the product of memory, is not simply imprinted but constructed by the mind. In it truth and error dwell so closely together than one seems lost without the other. Reminiscence is the opposite of inquiry. One professes through memory to recover something once present in the mind; the other professes through knowledge to validate the past (Peterson 1994: 83-84).

For Americans, notes historian Michael Kammen, the capacity for amnesia or forgetting is greater than most because our inclination is "to depoliticize the past in order to minimize memories (and causes) of conflict" (Kammen 1993; Frisch 1990). Communication studies scholars and sociologists have been as interested as historians in the political and strategic ramifications of public memory.**[i]**

Media critic Barbie Zelizer, for example, has written that:

While traditional scholarship on memory presumed that memories were at some point authentic, credible recountings of events of the past, we do not regard this as necessarily the case. In distancing themselves from personal recall, collective memories help us fabricate, rearrange, or omit details from the past as we thought we knew it. Issues of historical accuracy and authenticity are pushed aside to accommodate other issues such as those surrounding the establishment

of social identity, authority, solidarity, political affiliation (Zelizer 1995: 217). Memory in this case is pliable, allowing play between the present and the past. As a series of arguments strategically constructed and deployed, popular memory is of particular interest to communication scholars. Typically, the strategic orientation encourages scholars to construct memories in opposition to history – which is perceived as more stable, factual and less political.**[ii]**

However, while collective memories are sometime presentist, they also, contradictorily, serve a conservative function. They slow change by gripping and holding a public. For all of their divergence with history, oftentimes collective memories are the ones that hang on (Schwartz 1992). In recent years there has been no better an example of this than the controversy that set veterans against the Smithsonian and its attempts to display the B-29 Enola Gay.

## *2. The Enola Gay Controversy*

The Enola Gay's fifteen minutes of fame came on 6 August 1945 when the strategic bomber piloted by Paul Tibbets dropped its atomic payload on Hiroshima, Japan. The reasons for the notoriety of this event are debatable, as we shall see. However, for the next fifteen years the Enola Gay moved from runway to runway finally settling at Andrews Air Force Base where it was stored outside. In 1960 it was dismantled and moved to an indoor storage facility where it sat until 1984 when, under pressure from 509th Composite Alumni Association, the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM) began the long process of restoring the aircraft.

Events involved with the process of restoration and display are disputed. Veterans groups claim that the Smithsonian accepted the task in bad faith. They argued that the Smithsonian had purposely slowed the process of restoration. Their motive, veterans argued, lay with the staff's basic anti-nuclear orientation (Neufeld and Linenthal 1996: 13; Batzli 1990: 835).

On the other hand, representatives of the Smithsonian argued that the process of restoration was a slow and involved one; that it would take time and resources that they did not possess. After all, it was a large and complex plane (Harwit 1996: 90-92). They continually argued that the project was under control, and that it would certainly be completed in time for the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing.

Reflecting a new emphasis on scholarship that came with a new director, the Smithsonian decided in 1988 that it would offer an exhibit on strategic bombing. When pressure to display the Enola Gay arose, they attempted to integrate the

large aircraft into the show. By 1993, the Smithsonian's Air and Space Advisory Board had grown uneasy about the strategic bombing exhibit but agreed that the Enola Gay should be displayed as part of a more limited exhibition dealing with the atomic bomb and the genesis of the Cold War (Linenthal 1996: 23).

In early 1993, NASM completed a draft script. They sent a copy to their review board and began collecting materials for the show. Representatives went to Nagasaki and Hiroshima to acquire artifacts and videotaped messages to appear at the end of the display. However, while the NASM's plans for the show were on schedule, rumblings of discontent began to arise. In late 1993, the Air Force Association (AFA), a group of Air Force Veterans and Air Force supporters already angered by the Smithsonian's deliberately slow pace, began to complain of the exhibit's perceived political content. In March 1994, the AFA took their case public. In a seminal article published in *Air Force Magazine*, John Correll, its editor wrote:

The ultimate effect of the exhibition will depend, of course, on how the words are blended with the artifacts and audiovisual elements. And despite the balancing material added, the curators still make some curious calls. "For most Americans," the script says, "it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism." Women, children, and mutilated religious objects are strongly emphasized in the "ground zero" scenes from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The museum says this is "happenstance," not a deliberate ideological twist. The Air and Space Museum is also taking flack from the other side. A prominent historian serving on an advisory group for the exhibition, for example, objects to the "celebratory" treatment of the Enola Gay and complains that the crew showed "no remorse" for the mission (Correll 1994).

Correll's initial fusillade set the stage for controversy. In particular, the quotation from the script that juxtaposed vengeful Americans with anti-imperialist Japanese and his opposition of historians with the AFA found their way into the papers. The effect of this one article was so great that the *American Journalism Review* noted that "it was those two sentences, endlessly repeated by the media outside of their original context, that did the most damage to the museum's credibility" (Carpaccio and Mohan 1995: 19).

When arguing with the Smithsonian, the AFA had two advantages. First, it was more organized than the hapless museum which was slow and unskilled in their response to the crisis. To anyone interested, the AFA quickly and efficiently

dispatched packets of materials criticizing the Smithsonian (Flint 1995: 1). In fact, most of the material is still available through the AFA Homepage, which indexes all Enola Gay related materials, offering full-text examples of many (AFA 1998). Second, the AFA mobilized the full strength of American veterans and veterans organizations. While the Smithsonian attempted to include the input of well-known military historians, they failed to get them to publicly endorse the project. Consequently, veterans used the episode as a demonstration of Smithsonian disrespect for veterans and their sacrifices. This storyline, in retrospect, tapped into something very primal in American cultural life.

Disaster ensued. The Smithsonian invited representatives of the influential Veterans of Foreign Wars to review the script after the AFA complained. They planned to co-opt their complaints, but it had the opposite effect of unifying veterans groups in opposition. In October the Smithsonian got a new director, I. Michael Heyman, who attempted to appease veterans groups. It soon appeared that they would not be appeased and the American Legion National Commander declared that the American Legion would actively protest the exhibit and would petition Congress for hearings regarding Smithsonian management. By 30 January 1995, I Michael Heyman canceled the original exhibit and offered a radically simplified display of the Enola Gay. In May, after 81 members of the House of Representatives called for his resignation, Martin Harwit resigned from the NASM (Correll 1996: 38). Senate hearings ensued, and the controversy continued well after the cancellation of the original exhibit.

The modified exhibit, which has now closed until 2001 when it will be reopened at their new Dulles extension, was very popular (Kopecki 1998: B-9). In its first year the exhibit drew more than 1.5 million visitors. In the whole two and a half year run, it received more than 3 million visitors (Lopez 1997: 12-A). However, while it was one of the most visited sites in Washington, it received mixed reviews. *The Times Union* characterized it as a "strikingly incomplete exhibition that leaves visitors totally in the dark about how a decision was reached to use the bomb, and the aftermath of the most militarily decisive and horrific mission in the history of air war" ("Enola Gay Exhibit Crowded" 1995: G-12) Another review noted that the exhibit did "its best to skirt the enormity of what the shiny B-29 did 50 years ago. . . ." (Eisman 1995: A-6).

### *3. History and Memory in the Real World*

While the final exhibit did its best to avoid controversy, the same can not be said of historians involved in the exhibit. They were screaming mad. While they

entered the fray late, they continued the debate in print. Reviewer Linda Rothstein noted in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "writing about the exhibit-that-never-was has become a minor industry" (Rothstein 1997: 55). Since 1995, five or more books have been written with the Enola Gay incident as a theme, three of them by parties to the events.<sup>[iii]</sup> 245 Additionally, both the AFA and the American Legion have made all of their documents and letters available to the public via the internet.

In response to the academic writings, newspapers and radio talk shows were filled with critiques of the Smithsonian in particular and historians in general. Playing upon a sometimes appropriated and sometimes authentic veteran voice located firmly in personal understandings of the past, proclaimed representatives attempted to delegitimize the voices of historians. Primarily, the juxtaposed the collective memories of veterans, the need for commemoration and a fear of being forgotten with historians' political "revisionism" (Schuman and Scott 1989).

Barbara Biesecker, in a recent Lacanian reading of the Enola Gay exhibit noted that:

What I want to suggest at this point is that it is no accident that the Enola Gay exhibit has appeared "now" - a moment suspended between two eves, between the twilight of the twentieth century and the dawn of the next millennium, i.e., postmodernity. . . the most significant implication of that passage [of the old age] is the lack of a symbolic mandate and, thus, the erosion of identity and demise of desire. This is, of course, Lacan's very definition of anxiety and, I want to suggest, the rhetorical exigence to which the Enola Gay exhibit is a symbolic response (Biesecker 1998: 238).

The appraisal of the Enola Gay incident as a response to an anxiety or an emptiness seems correct. However, the emptiness is probably not the consequence of a general/cultural anomie involved in moving from one era to another. Instead, it is more likely a very particular anxiety (remember, the exhibit has been dismantled until 2001) rooted in the material experience of World War II veterans and their nostalgic spokespersons (Harden 1995: A-10). In response to the Smithsonian, one of the dominant themes veterans' voices express is a fear of forgetting. When talking about the Enola Gay, a "generation gap" opens between those that celebrate the bomb as a deliverance and those that view the bomb as the start of the Cold War (Benke 1997; Thomas 1995: 22). Ron Grossman from the *Chicago Tribune* wrote: "Veterans seem poignantly aware that, when they are

gone, their war might be misconstrued by an MTV generation.” He continues, “The [Enola Gay] episode demonstrated to veterans of World War II a crucial point: The final battle of their war may be to just survive contemporary mentalities” (Grossman 1997: C-1). Another reported a Terkelesque encounter with a college student. Talking of the U.S. Arizona memorial at Pearl Harbor he asks a student what she thinks. She notes that the memorial seems one-sided and he asks how it may be improved. She says, “How about Hiroshima?” but Hiroshima came after Pearl Harbor, I said which stopped her for a moment. A product of modern education, she’d thought that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor as punishment for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A punishment we fully deserved she explained”(Geneier 1997: A-23).

Mike Taugher from the *Albuquerque Journal* found similar outrage among mission veterans. “The support of the younger generation is very important to us,” said Frederick Bock. . . . “What’s going to happen when we’re gone?” Nelson said. He said he wonders who will tell “the true history of what happened with the bomb. They’ll just have the revisionists”(Taugher 1995: A-1).

While veterans desire to educate youth about their past, old rivalries die hard. Veterans juxtapose the courageousness of World War II veterans with the cowardice of Vietnam War protesters (Washburn 1995: 40). Veteran James S. Steiner wrote the *Los Angeles Times*: “The 1960’s then brought forth the anti-status-quo forces as a byproduct of a controversial war. This later group has taken on the aura of elitism, and indeed seems to have found abundant nutrients in academia, with the latter’s just license for extrapolated thought and inherent insulation from the pragmatism for life outside the ivory tower”(Steiner 1995: B-8). Similarly, columnist Cal Thomas vented:

Those “heroes” and “heroines” of the ‘60s never saw a cause worth fighting for or a war worth winning. They now have delivered the final insult. . . they are demeaning their parents’ sacrifice, patriotism and decisiveness, saying there was no excuse for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Thomas 1995a: A-7).

He continued in another article, “this is a view held by some Americans who see no evil, will fight for no good, and whose cowardice ought to qualify them to do nothing more than keep their mouths shut when they are confronted by some of the greatest heroes who every lived – the veterans of World War II and a courageous president who knew what it meant to lead”(Thomas 1995b: J-5).

Likewise, Mike Rosen commented that the “whole tone of the exhibit was so blatantly self-hating that it generated a revolt from mainstream Americans and veterans’ groups, resulting in its cancellation. Pacifist and anti-nuke types backing it were crestfallen”(Rosen 1995: B-7).

Commentators oppose daring, courageous, patriotic, and self-sacrificing veterans to their negative: academic historians. Academic historians of the baby-boomer type are generally lumped together under the heading of “revisionists” and are closely associated with the leftist anti-Vietnam movement (Kilian 1996: 1). In his book, *Remaking America*, John Bodnar has noted the tensions between official and vernacular expressions as constitutive elements of public memorials. Official commemorations tend to be unitary and abstract; they tend to downplay difference in pursuit of a common interpretation. Vernacular commemorations, on the other hand, are very particular (Bodnar 1992: 246). They reflect the interests of a particular community and are often in conflict with official interpretations.

The Enola Gay controversy turns Bodnar’s official/vernacular distinction on its head. The Smithsonian, traditional arbiters of national commemoration, take the vernacular role interested in maintaining difference while participants, in the form of veterans organization, become the arbiters of an official, abstract, and unitary narrative.

Veterans pair the Smithsonian’s history with baby-boomers and the politically charged anti-Vietnam war movement that initially rejected their parents’ memories of the depression and World War II as “nostalgia”(Whalen 1995: D-7; Lewis 1995: A-1; Smith 1995: B-5; Flint 1995: C-1; McClay 1995). They label most academic histories “revisionist” because they threaten the fabric of the collective memory.

Regarding historians, the charge of flexibility is probably accurate. Demonstrating the typical attitude of historians toward the past, American University history professor Anna Kasten Nelson, noted that: “The American people aren’t really sure of who they are right now. . . . It’s a post-Vietnam, post-Cold War lack of consensus.” Martin Sherwin of Tuft’s University notes that: “It’s no surprise that great debates are erupting over important historical issues. With the end of the Cold War, the country is adrift and this type of situation always produces a reassessment of the past”(qtd in Flint 1995: C-1).

While social flux is generally accepted as constitutive of the historical project, it opens academic historians to charges of political interest. This is particularly true



in the Enola Gay case. While the Smithsonian was working out their final script in 1994 and 1995, the Republican party took control of both houses of the American Congress. The controversy at the Smithsonian and its resurrection of the generation gap, anti-communism, and the anti-war counterculture proved good political copy. Several politicians used the controversy as a synecdoche for other cultural controversies. Because of his poor relations with veterans groups, Bill Clinton appointed Vice President and Vietnam vet Al Gore his front man. House Speaker Newt Gingrich pointed to the Enola Gay controversy as the first victory of a new culture war. "You are seeing a reassertion and a renewal of American civilization," he told the National Governors' Association "The Enola Gay fight was a fight, in effect, over the reassertion by most Americans that they're sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country"(qtd in Budiansky 1995: 73). Bob Dole also used the Enola Gay controversy as a foundation pier for his bridge theme during the 1996 Presidential Election. To the American Legion Convention he said: "There is no bridge to the future not built on their [the values of World War II veterans] foundation. They do not change - when we respect them, they change us and our nation instead. . . . Some historians, it is clear, want to define World War II and all of American history entirely in terms of American crimes and American repression. And what they're really saying, when you boil it all down, is that honor is a fraud and patriotism is ploy. But honor is not fraud and patriotism is not a ploy"(Dole 1996).

Dole's generation gap theme is representative of veterans' discourse. As World War II veterans thin out, they fear their sacrifices will be forgotten (Rapp 1995). Veteran, Cornelius O'Neill observed "a definite movement in the U.S. intellectual community to change American World War II history. The sad thing about these attempts at revisionism is that the revisionists will probably win, because those who experience first-hand or were witness to the events of World War II, like old soldiers, are fading away." Intellectuals, "besides the desire to reap revenue from sensationalistic writing, must possess a hatred of all things patriotic, noble, and uplifting, especially the American military"(O'Neill 1995).

The antipathy between veterans and intellectuals plays itself out in the conflict with the Smithsonian. Vets portray baby-boomer intellectuals, personified in NASM director Martin Harwit, as contemptuous of veterans (Correll 1996: 38; Thomas, H 1995). Harwit is variously described as "being deceived by the lies of the radical curators and professors, in order to smear the honor of veterans who fought and died for their country against the fascist, Imperialist Japanese war

machine,” and as participating in a “deliberate attempt to falsify and distort the record of history to fit left-wing anti-American biases”(Greybrier 1997: X-14).

In addition to the personal focus on Harwit, attacks also focus on history’s abstractness. Milton Stern writes to the editors of the *New York Times*, “we might as well put history on the shelf and publish nothing until 2045. At the centenary, when all historians will never have been there, they can fight a bloodless academic war without the intrusive oversight of those of us who were”(Stern 1995: A-12). Often, veterans make references to the “Ivy League” as a way of pointing toward the separation between veterans and academics. Rowan Scarborough says of the Smithsonian: “They never hire the authorities. . . they hire academics instead of curators. They’re not treating it like a museum. They’re treating it like an Ivy League College”(Scarborough 1996: A-1). Similarly, Blackie Sherrod writes ironically: “It may come as a surprise to you that I have not always been wise, or even smarter than the average frog. This is not an easy admission, what with all these Vaunted Experts currently permeating the media. In these twilight years, I yearn for the mantelletta of a pundit in an ivory tower, writing with great authority on topics other than red-eye gravy and Babe Ruth. . . . Apparently it requires wisdom far beyond my ken to understand all this pompous second-guessing about the atomic bomb a half-century ago. The 50th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing has lured countless gurus from their mountaintops to pass ponderous judgment in retrospect”(Sherrod 1995: A-25).

A third association involves a conspiracy. In 1994 the phrase “culture war” was used to identify the gulf between liberal values associated with the “counterculture” and more traditional and established (nostalgic) values. Attacks on the left are familiar and extend themes from the Cold War (Gailey 1995: D-3). Many veteran responses integrate this thinking in criticism of the Smithsonian. They identify the Smithsonian as a tool for the “multicultural left” that participates in “an entire academic industry dedicated to the production of distorted history largely intended to be put to work in the service of left-wing political objectives”(Billingsley 1996: A-19: “An Infamy” 1997). Other criticism are even more harsh. Nagasaki pilot Chuck Sweeney notes that the “Smithsonian exhibition of the Enola Gay as originally planned was ‘simply un-American, it might be close to treason’”(“The A-Bomb” 1995: A-16). Noting a conspiracy, Al Featherston wrote in *The Durham Herald-Sun* that “a band of revisionist historians has attempted another coup. They are trying to kidnap history – to revise the record in such a manner to convince the public that it was unnecessary and wrong to use the atomic bomb”(Featherston 1995: A-15).

Often the conspiracy takes “political correctness” as its goal (“An Institution With” 1996: C-8). Editorialist Wood West wrote that “the banal brand of revisionism that characterized the Enola Gay episode is embedded in many of America’s cultural institutions, colleges and universities. A prime target is the American past – the traditional perspectives and the mythology, if you will, of our history. . . . We are being reminded by the national press too, that the notion of a unified America during World War II denies the persistence of racial discrimination and bitter labor battles throughout the war”(West 1995: 40; Meyer 1994: 4). Columnist Thomas Sowell was more to the point:

Ultimately, however, this whole Smithsonian episode was not about military history. It was about anti-American propaganda, which has become the norm among the leftist intelligentsia, whether in the academic world, the arts, or the national government’s own cultural agencies. . . . For much of this century, the leftist intelligentsia in the West has kissed the behinds of mass murderers from Stalin and Mao, so long as they were anti-American. They have sneered at “the so-called Free World,” even as millions of people in the unfree world risked their lives in desperate attempts to get here. . . . In these campaigns, the very notion of truth is treated as a quaint prejudice of a bygone era. Those who are politically correct are never discredited, no matter how often their statements collapse in the face of facts. . . . The controversy at the Smithsonian Institution was not about an airplane exhibit. It was about the values of a society and a civilization – and about people who feel that they have a right to use taxpayers’ money to fight their own ideological wars, and a right to be tenured guerrillas with pensions (Sowell 1995: 74).

Smithsonian curators accept the familiar and negative characterization. They are enemies of the nation, and probably Communist. They want to deny America’s victory and diminish the real sacrifices of American citizens. They are in league with a host of prototypical American conspirators: university professors, agitators, war protesters, Communist sympathizers and fascists. In essence, they are all the opposite of World War II veterans, and as unified in their action.

The collapse and appropriation of the Enola Gay controversy into other lingering ideological arguments meant that it also spilled over onto other controversies. It acts as a type of synecdoche. In the shadow of the Enola Gay episode, the phrase to be “Enola Gayed” the “Enola Gay Syndrome” or to get the “Enola Gay treatment” came to be used by museum curators to explain the risks of exhibiting controversial material (Lipman 1998: A-7). Many curators reported that the Enola

Gay event made them think twice before they created exhibits (Shapiro 1996: D-1). For example, historian Barton Bernstein noted that “The Air and Space debacle has had a chilling effect. Basically museums are very political agents. . . They are in need of funding and consequently, deeply vulnerable to pressure”(qtd in Otto 1998: A-18). When Ilse Metchek, executive director of the California Fashion Association, noted that he desired to turn a Smithsonian exhibition on sweat shops into “another Enola Gay,” Edward Linenthal commented on NPR that, “a number of us who were involved in the incredibly ugly controversy over the Enola Gay exhibition were worried that the cancellation and the political pressure put on the Smithsonian to cancel would become a kind of model for how people would then choose to begin to censor and cancel museum exhibitions that they weren’t comfortable with for one reason or another. Here is an example of someone using the Enola Gay model consciously to try and cancel an exhibit that they don’t like”(qtd in Zengerle 1997: 18; Linenthal 1997).

If nothing else, the Enola Gay controversy brought attention to the workings of the Smithsonian and other state institutions, causing many exhibits to get the “Enola Gay treatment.” Interest groups brought pressure to cancel exhibits on oil prospecting in Alaska, an essay on meat carried by *Smithsonian Magazine*, on proposed changes to military history exhibits, on garment manufacturing, and brought attention to a particularly ugly episode where Boy Scouts were prohibited from using the auditorium at the National Zoo for a ceremony because they refused to admit atheists (Dear 1997: B-1; Giorello and Bacque 1997: D-1; Ramey 1997: 4; Witham 1997: A-9). Outside the Smithsonian, the event was equally influential. The Library of Congress canceled exhibits on Sigmund Freud and Slavery (“Staff Closes Library” 1995: A-15). In New Jersey, veterans protested the opening of a Vietnam education center, and in South Carolina the Enola Gay incident was used as an argument to keep the Federal Government from taking ownership of a Civil War era submarine (Berry 1998: A-3; Kropf 1996: B-1).

For their part, defenders of the Smithsonian collected at a couple of nodes. Mostly , defenders complained about the lack of public examination of the events that surrounded Hiroshima – pointing toward a national psychosis that kept Americans from participating in any type of moral debate over the issue; as though it were lost in a national amnesia from which we chose not to awaken. William Sloane noted that amnesia explains “why no president, while in office has publicly questioned dropping the bomb. That’s why it was inevitable that the proposed Smithsonian exhibit of the Enola Gay would cause such an uproar. When it comes to the bombing of Hiroshima, we Americans want no debate. For most of us the

book is closed”(Sloane 1995: 772). Similarly, Charles Biro noted in *The Chicago Tribune* that an anti flag burning amendment, “like the flap over the Enola Gay display in the Smithsonian, is a dangerous and frightening attempt to narrow the parameters of legitimate political discourse”(Biro 1997: 20).

Hiroshimic amnesia has been the subject of at least two books, Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell’s *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* and Michael J. Hogan’s *Hiroshima in History and Memory*. Both books take as their themes the cultural invisibility of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the United States and Japan. In both instances, parties have remembered events to support their own ideal visions. In either instance, selective forgetting denies the truth of events as they occurred and fails to gain the lessons that historical events offer up (Kramer 1995: B-7). In this sense, historical analysis is a mirror image of veterans’ memories: it claims a truth that transcends political utility. Demonstrating this attitude, Marjorie Smith wrote *The Dayton Dailey News* that “accepting responsibility would empower us to deal constructively with the lingering presence of nuclear bombs (Smith 1995: A-14).”

Central to the academic understanding of the truth is an avowed appreciation for complexity. Linda Wurtz writes that “we have also become fearful of acknowledging controversy in American history, e.g. mellowing the Smithsonian Enola Gay exhibit and firing House historian Christina Jeffrey. Controversy isn’t a bad thing; it simply means that there is more than one viewpoint. A critical look at historical events means considering all viewpoints”(Wurtz 1995: A-4). The ambiguity that historians point toward as a sign of complexity, however, serves to water down the memories of veterans.

#### *4. Lessons and Conclusions*

Edward Linenthal wrote in the aftermath of the exhibit that it had been “caught between memory and history”(Linenthal 1995: B-1). Linenthal notes that the past is spoken in different voices. He identifies a “commemorative voice – I was there, I know because I saw and felt what happened – and a historical one that speaks of complicated motives and of actions and consequences often hardly considered at the moment of the event itself”(Linenthal 1996: 9-10; Kohn 1995: 1041). For Linenthal, the Enola Gay controversy is an example of the commemorative voice trumping the historical voice. While this is technically true, the social dynamics are more complex than this.

The Enola Gay exhibit was born into a world of social conflict. It not only marks the World War II generation’s ebb, but also the nexus of other social movements

rooted in a general feeling of fiftieth anniversary nostalgia, the rise of a conservative mood in the United States, Japan's growing role as a trade competitor, and some lingering baggage from the Vietnam and the Cold Wars. While World War II veterans took the point for much of the initial response to the Smithsonian, they were not the only actors. Instead, one finds a coalition of military supporters and conservatives that came to the defense of elderly World War II veterans. It is not as simple as a reaction of veterans to their diminished status.

Much of the commentary about the War and memory of it appear vicariously. Through the voices of reporters, columnists, and actual veterans a unified story of the war emerges. Commentators report an empathy with veterans, living and dead, that remember the war in a particularly unitary way.

The unity of memories of the war illustrate some interesting qualities that distinguish history and memory. While collective memories are personal, although not necessarily the consequence of personal experience, history is global and critical. Its claims to independent reality and desire to offer judgment make it difficult for memory and history to interact. While memory can contribute to history, history is unlikely to do much to legitimate memory (Sherwin 1995: 1091). This is especially true when memories dominate the political scene.

If anything, the Enola Gay controversy points out that not every event is ready for history. Instead, there seems to be a progressive development. Events begin as the subject of journalism, which is a very local and partial rendering of an event. After the event, it transitions to memory where it is codified, personalized, and unified. Finally, an event becomes the subject of history which claims universality, but is distanced and abstract. The Enola Gay's past seems poised at the point where memory becomes history. While the story is unified, neither participants nor vicarious participants do not yet enjoy a critical distance. Attempts by historians to close events to add critical distance are thwarted by the closeness of the event. In the future, this is likely to change.

For argument, the interesting point is that the past is not an open field for revisionism. Instead, it constrains by memory or evidence what can legitimately be said about the past. Even if it is not the actual generation that fought, others are willing to take up the flag. In this instance, vernacular stories are more coherent and universal and, consequently, have more political weight than official ones. For argument, this is an important point – there are extra – argumentative circumstances that prevent the past from opening to any interpretation.

## NOTES

**i.** The idea that the past exists in individuals and that this past is socially powerful has placed studies of the collective memory at the center of several important studies. In general, however, the primary focus has been on the function of the past in the present. The classic study was performed by Annales School historian, Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory*. Additional studies include: Lynne Cheney's *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Public Schools*, Harold Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, or E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* for critiques regarding the inadequacy of the American public memory. Other studies of the relationship between nationalism and public memory include, John Bodnar's *Remaking America*, David Lowenthal's *The Past as a Foreign Country*, Edward Shills and Michael Young's classic "The Meaning of the Coronation," Barry Schwartz et. al. "The Recovery of Masada," and Terrance Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition*. In Communication studies, there have been several recent studies of the collective memory. For example, Stephen Brown's "Reading, Rhetoric and the Texture of Public Memory" in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, John Nerone and Ellen Wartella's "The Study of Collective Memory," from *Communication*, J. Robert Cox's memory study, "Memory and Critical Theory, and the Argument from History," in *Argumentation and Advocacy*, and Barbie Zelizer's "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies," from *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*.

**ii.** Stephen Browne. 1993. "Reading Public Memory in Daniel Webster's Plymouth Rock Oration." *Western Journal of Communication* 67 (1993): 464-477; J. Robert Cox. "Memory, Critical Theory, and the Argument From History." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 27 (1990): 1-13; George Dionisopoulos and Steven Goldzwig. "The Meaning of Vietnam: Political Rhetoric as Revisionist Cultural History." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 61-79; Bruce Gronbeck. 1995. "The Rhetorics of the Past: History, Argument, and Collective Memory." Paper Presented to the Greenspun conference on Rhetorical History: "Rhetoric, History, and Critical Interpretation: The Recovery of the Historical-Critical Praxis," UNLV; John Nerone. "Professional History and Social Memory." *Communication* 11 (1989): 89-104; John Nerone and Ellen Wartella. "the Study of Collective Memory." *Communication* 11 (1989): 85-88; Barbie Zelizer. 1992. *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*. Chicago: U. Chicago P.

**iii.** Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied* (New York: Copernicus, 1996); Michael J Hogan. *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); David

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