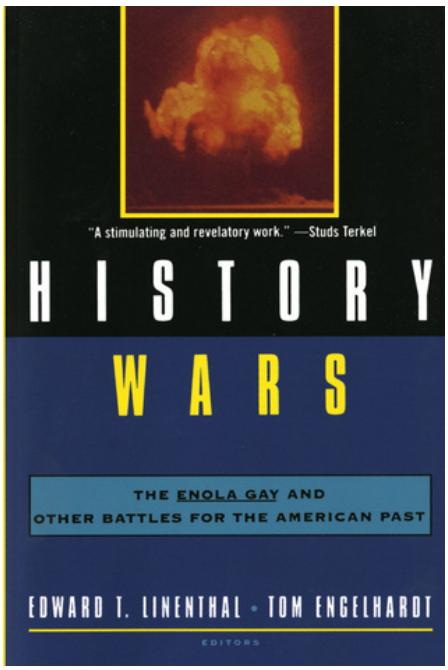

History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past

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From the "taming of the West" to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the portrayal of the past has become a battleground at the heart of American politics. What kind of history Americans should read, see, or fund is no longer merely a matter of professional interest to teachers, historians, and museum curators. Everywhere now, history is increasingly being held hostage, but to what end and why? In *History Wars*, eight prominent historians consider the angry swirl of emotions that now surrounds public memory. Included are trenchant essays by Paul Boyer, John W. Dower, Tom Engelhardt, Richard H. Kohn, Edward Linenthal, Micahel S. Sherry, Marilyn B. Young, and Mike Wallace.

History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past Details

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From Reader Review History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past for online ebook

Sarah Crawford says

This book centers around a very interesting topic, and that is how the past is viewed by the participants in a war between each other. In this case, the issue is a planned Smithsonian exhibit of the Enola Gay, the plan that dropped the first atomic bomb ever used. The book goes into details about the various scripts and arguments, the problems ranging from one approach that more or less painted the Hiroshima and its people as the victims of the war to the other extreme, basically that they-got-what-they-deserved approach.

The old saying is â€œhistory is written by the victors.â€• However, after enough time, some people begin to question the â€œacceptedâ€• victor's view of a war and its events, as in this case.

One of the main things the book goes into is the Japanese view of the war, and how many Japanese consider themselves the victims of what happened. Some of these people still believe that Japan had to make war in order to preserve its own economy and traditions, since it was surrounded by colonial powers that had carved out most of Asia for themselves.

There is also the issue of the nature of bombing in the war. From the very start of the war, civilians were considered acceptable targets. The bombs that Germany dropped on Poland in 1939 made no distinction between civilians and military personnel. As the war wound on, there was sort of an attempt on the part of the Allies to hit military targets, but this basically ended when Britain started using carpet bombing, which tends to kill lots of civilians, and this approach found its expert use in the firebombing of Japanese cities which, in one case, killed more people than the atomic bomb did.

The book also discusses whether there was any actual need for the atomic bombs, since some reports and people believed that Japan would have surrendered by the end of the year anyhow. (I, personally, don't think they would have surrendered at all, and I think any actual invasion of the Japanese home islands would have been far bloodier than anything yet seen in the war.)

The book uses the name hibakusha for the Japanese survivors of the atomic bomb, although it doesn't really go into the problems that these people have in Japan, since they are often discriminated against by the Japanese.

(Also, something not actually covered in the book, was the type of hold the Japanese government had over the Japanese. The militarists had total control of the media (radio, newspapers, etc.) Dissenters ended up jailed or dead.)

This is basically a good book, although I think it really could have been expanded and covered other examples of how two sides in various wars looked at their own pasts. It's a topic that really needs more exploration.

Eric_W says

Two narratives merged in the abortive display proposed by the Smithsonian of the Enola Gay, the bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima: the successful ending to a long and devastating war and the devastation of two Japanese cities. History is all about stories, what the tell us and what they reveal about us.

The text accompanying the display originally was characteristic of what Hoffer describes as the "new History," which portrayed the United States in a more nuanced manner and with less rah-rah, often seeing events from different points of view.

The content, which portrayed the horror wrecked upon the Japanese pissed off many, including Senator Dole, who had been seriously injured in WWII and who was then running for president. The text then was politicized, attacked by the right as un-American, promoted by the left as accurate and representing a multicultural perspective. Historians are typically ill-prepared and powerless to defend themselves against these kinds of polemical attacks. This book was an attempt by the essayists to address the issues raised by their detractors.

Linenthal had been involved in the 1993 Little Big Horn display controversy, and frankly should have know better than to get entangled in the Enola Gay disputation. While the desire to represent multiple points of view may be laudable, they should have expected a backlash. Ironically, protests against use of the bomb, was not a recent phenomenon, in fact, protests from the right, including Henry Luce, had been voiced in 1945. They argued the war could have been ended without use of the bomb, which, according to Luce, challenged the "Christian conscience."

It was the post-Vietnam War executive director and board members who were the most anxious to create an Enola Gay exhibit. The military representatives saw little purpose. After all, the mission had been a milk run and was simply a continuation of the strategic bombing policy developed by General Curtis LeMay to firebomb Japanese cities, part of the "morale" campaign that had originated in Europe. The mission of the Smithsonian, as chartered, was celebratory in nature and intended to be a "repository" for equipment and devices that represent advances in aviation. Some questioned whether the Enola Gay and the dropping of the bombs met that mission. The museum, with the help of the aviation industry and military, had become a showcase of American triump and ingenuity. The displays themselves had little historical context. So the Enola Gay exhibit would be a departure from that original intent.

By 1994 positions had hardened between those who accused the Smithsonian of being anti-American and wanting to revise history, and those at the Smithsonian who were trying to rewrite the script and avoid a public relations disaster. They were being accused of saying things even after the passages had been excised from the script. The controversy said more perhaps about 1990's United States culture than about the exhibit itself which had become a lightning rod for the American shift to the right. The Senate had passed a resolution making explicit the federal law that required the Smithsonian to commemorate "the valor and sacrificial service" of America's armed services. This, ironically, was very similar to the conservative Japanese refusal to express and remorse or apology for Japan's aggression. Both represent a veneration for the dead that permits only a celebratory response to the historical record.

The Smithsonian was unable, or unwilling, to mount any coherent counterattack and soon their opponents had enlisted members of Congress, etc., etc. and other groups, many of whom had clearly not even read the entire script, let alone the massive revisions. The only conclusion one could draw was that the Air Force was very worried that any portrayal of its use of nuclear weapons and their consequences might redound to the detriment of air power as a strategic weapon.

". . .as the fiasco of the Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution showed, American recollections of the war reveal a powerful emotional and ideological impulse to strip the historical record of all its ambiguity, all contradiction, all moral complexity, and simply wrap it in the flag."

Todd Martin says

"Historians become controversial when they do not perpetuate myths, when they do not transmit the received and conventional wisdom, when they challenge the comforting presence of a stabilized past."
? Edward Linethal, History Wars

On August 6, 1945 the U.S. detonated an atomic bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Three days later another nuclear bomb was dropped and Nagasaki was destroyed. Several hundred thousand civilians were killed outright, with many more dying from the side effects of radiation poisoning over the following months and years. A few days after the detonation of the second bomb Emperor Hirohito announced his intent to surrender, bringing an end to World War II.

In the U.S. today, many see the bombings as a morally unambiguous act. Japan was unwilling to surrender. A ground assault on the Japanese mainland would have cost the U.S. many thousands of lives. Therefore the bombing was not only justified, but the right thing to do. Nuclear weapons saved American lives by bringing a swift conclusion to the war.

But history is complicated. The moral implications of dropping the bombs was highly controversial at the time (General Dwight D. Eisenhower was one opponent for example). The ability of the Japanese to sustain the war was significantly diminished by the time the decision was being made, leading many to believe the war would soon have drawn to a close of its own. Even if the first bomb was deemed necessary to overcome Japanese resistance it's not clear how the 2nd bomb, dropped a mere 3 days later before the Japanese leadership could grasp the implications of the devastation on Hiroshima, could be unambiguously justified. And of course there are few non-psychopaths who would advocate for the use of nuclear weapons against a civilian population in the present day.

In 1994 the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. set out to explore the nuances of the issues surrounding the use of nuclear weapons as part of a 50 year anniversary display that would feature a restored Enola Gay (the airplane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima) as its centerpiece. The museum planned a nuanced exhibit that would examine the event from multiple perspectives, including that from ground zero. The proposed display quickly became the center of controversy as veterans groups and conservative lawmakers accused the museum of liberal historical revisionism and of fostering anti-American sentiment. The museum historians, on the other hand, viewed the response by these groups as an unprecedented attack on both historians and history itself by anti-intellectual McCarthyites bent on perpetuating an exceptionalist mythology. The controversy resulted in the resignation of Martin Harwin (the museum's director) and the abandonment of all but the Enola Gay from the display, which was eventually featured without any messy historical context.

History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past is an examination of the controversy surrounding the Smithsonian exhibit and provides a useful case study of the intersection between politics, patriotism, myth and history. It also serves as an illustration that history is always told from a certain perspective. The heroism of U.S. soldiers and airmen during WWII is one facet of the story, as is the barbaric behavior of the Japanese during the war. But no less valid is the reality depicted by a schoolgirls lunchbox, blackened by the searing heat of a nuclear blast (the girl's body was never found). Rather than a simplistic tale of a U.S. victory, the Smithsonian attempted to create a display that captured multiple facets of a complex issue. They were castigated for their efforts.

History Wars consists of essays on this topic from a variety of historians. The essays are uniformly well written, some exceptionally so, yet despite the fact that they each offer a somewhat different take on the subject matter, I found them to largely echo the same themes and felt that they became repetitive and redundant.

Facts are inconvenient things, and the reality of ground zero raises important, if uncomfortable, questions regarding an event that the public commonly perceives as the “Good War”. We hide or ignore these uncomfortable facts of history at our own peril. Regardless of ones views regarding the use of nuclear weapons against a civilian population, I think most would agree that history is too important to be left to the demagogues.

“Those who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future.”
? George Orwell, 1984

DoctorM says

An account of the abortive Smithsonian effort to present an exhibition featuring the B-29 'Enola Gay' for the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. The exhibition itself became part of the 'culture wars' of the 1990s--- torpedoed by a combination of conservative politicians and veterans' groups. The accusation was that the proposed exhibition, by featuring photos of the human devastation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and discussing the debates over whether the bombings were necessary to end the war were somehow 'un-American'. "History Wars" is a collection of essays on what happened to scupper the exhibition--- all well-written, though the book could have used a few more pieces to give itself context. The Smithsonian became the target of populist anger over 'anti-American' or 'revisionist' views--- presentations that questioned national myths and tried to use museums for doing actual history rather than being commemorative temples. The book touches on that, and I wish that could've been given more attention. Nonetheless, a reminder that history and commemoration are different things, and of the political power to be found in the control of history.

John says

This is so interesting, and intensely frustrating at the same time. Basically all the chapters are different historians discussing the Enola Gay exhibit controversy at the Smithsonian in the 90s. 16 year old me must have not been paying much attention, because I don't remember this at all, but apparently it was a really big story, with congressional hearings and everything. Long story short, Congress decided that the job of the Air and Space Museum is to promote patriotism and happy thoughts about freedom and pie and flags and sweet jet planes, and not be an educational institution that encourages people to think about different viewpoints and take a critical view of history.
The only bad thing about this book, in my view, is that almost all the authors seem to agree with each other, so once you've read two or three essays in this book, you've basically read them all. There's an interesting section on remembering the war in Japan, that part was good. There are variations between the essays, it's not like they're carbon copies or anything, but they do get a little repetitive.

Bas Kreuger says

A bit repetative after a while, but certainly very interesting for historical professionals who work in museums or make exhibits. How to exhibit war? What effects can certain object have? How difficult can discussions be where actual particants in a conflict voice their opinion? And what value must those voices have?
All subjects treated in this book and a must read for directors or curators in war or war related museums.

Mike Hankins says

This essay collection provides a variety of perspectives regarding the 1995 incident when the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) proposed an exhibit about the Enola Gay aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The exhibit came under fire and plans for the exhibit were eventually scrapped. The essays here cover a wide range of material. Some essays are general narratives of the event, some delve deep into the historical literature about atomic weapons and the decision to drop the bomb in the first place. In that sense, this book can serve as a useful primer to the voluminous literature on the subject, exploring not only the US reasoning for the bombing, but the context of firebombing and the Japanese decision to surrender. Other essays cover broader subjects, such as Michael Sherry's contribution, which traces the rise of the "patriotic orthodoxy" (a rigid cultural conservatism rooted in a patriotic reading of the past) in the last half of the twentieth century. His essay and other trace and explore the "culture wars" that seemed to become so heated in the 90s and still remain divisive today. The book consistently explores issues of collective memory, particularly of WW2 as "the good war," and Vietnam as creating a "syndrome" that America has not been able to overcome.

In terms of public history, the book has much to offer. The questions looming behind all of the contributions have to do with the role of museums in society, particularly military museums. Almost every essay in this collection makes reference to a quote from one of the museum's planners, who expressed that the exhibit could either ask tough historical questions, or celebrate veterans to make them "feel good," but the exhibit cannot do both. This tension between museums as celebration (or commemoration) and education (or sources for introducing scholarship and/or questioning cultural narratives) is a tension that plagues military museums, perhaps more so than other types of museums. The role of the museum in creating, reinforcing, or challenging these narratives is a constant theme throughout the contributions here, and these issues seem more volatile in a military context, since, as many of the writers point out, veterans and their families often adhere to these narratives to give meaning to their sacrifice. When museums challenge these narratives, the very identity of the people who made such heavy sacrifices is at stake. In many ways, the identity of the nation is at stake, and many of these authors also point out that America has tended to define itself through its wars.

Mike Wallace's essay considers several practical options for museums in dealing with these issues, mostly having to do with clearly defined goals and missions, interaction with scholars, and predicting sources of dissent. He also considers the creation of a sort of board charged with evaluating controversial exhibits that can act as a self-regulatory committee and a defense if good exhibits become under attack. Ultimately, the book is a wonderful exploration of the myriad of issues at play in military museums and how they can cause intense controversy. Although the book provides no hard answers, it certainly raises many important questions that go far beyond the Enola Gay controversy itself, exploring issues of society, history, and how Americans view themselves.

Kristi Thielen says

In 1993, the National Air and Space Museum announced it would mount an exhibit of the Enola Gay, the plane which dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Museum Director Martin Harwit and staff envisioned an exhibit which would reflect on the decision to use the bomb on Japan and how it opened the world to the atomic age.

It wasn't long before all hell broke loose.WW2 veteran organizations, branches of the military and politicians grew increasingly disapproving about the exhibit focus, which they felt was insufficiently supportive of the narrative they embraced and perpetuated. Harwit was fired, museum staffers shaken and demoralized and the exhibit eventually mounted was a cursory one.

This volume is a collection of essays detailing this particular episode of scholarly historians being overruled in their efforts to re-examine historical events by a public hostile to scholarship and veterans who feel that they "own" the history they lived and have the sole right to interpret it.

But the writers also take a critical look at American culture at large and the American resistance to anything but the most simplistic view of the past.

People read less today - and read less history than perhaps any other field of study. It is discouraging to think that our view of history can and perhaps will be increasingly controlled by the people with the least objective intellectual currency: politicians.

Craig Werner says

It's a bit hard to judge this useful collection of essays as a result of the changes that have taken place in the world since it was published pre-9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Focusing on the furor over the proposed Smithsonian (NASM) exhibition organized around the Enola Gay (the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima), the essays delve into the reasons the exhibit failed to take place in anything resembling the historically serious form the curators intended. The central concern is the pressure to provide a celebratory narrative--the bomb ended the "Good War" and saved countless (American) lives--rather than a more troubling story acknowledging (critics would say foregrounding) the destruction on the ground and the tensions of the arms race that followed. Most of the essayists are sympathetic to the curators and correctly attribute the furor to a lobbying effort launched by a small group of veterans tied to the aeronautics industry and the hysteria surrounding the "culture wars" that helped bring New Gingrich to power as leader of the new Republican majority in the House in 1994. All of that's interesting and useful, capable of sparking discussions related to the teaching of history, the role of public museums, etc. The strange part of reading the book now is the almost universal assumption among the essayists that the "post-Vietnam" and "post-Cold War" contexts make renewed American military engagements unlikely. Didn't work out like that.

As in almost any anthology, the quality of the essays varies quite a bit. The best are those by John Dower on the Japanese narratives surrounding WW II; Paul Boyer on the dynamics of the struggle over public memory; and Marilyn Young on the lingering presence of Vietnam, often unstated, in the controversy. Richard Kohn represents the conservative perspective well; and Mike Wallace (not the newsman) counters from the left.

Useful, but dated.

Brandy says

Read this for a grad class.
I really struggled with picking a number of stars to give this one. This is a very very important book. However, it could be about half as long - since it's a compilation of essays, it gets quite repetitive after a

while.
Anyway. The fact that this happened frustrates the hell out of me, and I will force the first chapter or two of this book on anyone who gives me half a chance.

Sarah says

I skimmed this in college when it was assigned for a seminar I took, and I thought the subject was interesting enough to save it for a more thorough read later. It's about 8 years later and it doesn't make for very good non-class reading. It also feels very dated since it was written before 9/11, and the commemoration of that event is a more prevalent discussion topic these days.

Mariel says

History Wars is a collection of essays centered around the failed 1995 Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's exhibit of the Enola Gay, which intended to examine intersection the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War beginning with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The exhibit floundered when pressure from conservative politicians and veterans groups denounced it and Congress threatened to cut the museums funding.

Some of the contributing authors were closely involved in the exhibit, but for many of the essays the exhibit serves as a starting point for a larger discussion of history and memory. The overarching question remains: who owns American History? Despite the relative success of Lynne Cheney and Newt Gingrich in the 1990s for adding more "heroes" in American History, American atrocities overseas, past and present, retain a great deal of influence on how Americans see their own history.

The authors ask deep questions about how our understanding of history impacts our identity as Americans. Published in 1996 it cannot address the current war and its impact on American identity or history, but the questions remain the same. If the first Gulf War was fought to "cure" the "Vietnam Syndrome," then what is the effect of the current war on the culture of despair brought about by failure in Vietnam (or as Tom Engelhardt argues, the dropping of atomic bombs)?

These essays ask critical questions about the importance of history, its politicization, and its intersection with memory. Since each essay is self-contained, I would highly recommend this book, whole or excerpted, for any history/social studies teacher looking to engage her/his students on why history matters. It would probably need a fair amount of supplementary discussion and some guidance depending on the age group, but the essays are readable and could yield extraordinary results.

Candace says

I finally finished this, now that the semester is over.

I already knew about the controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibit from a class in undergrad, but the professor of that class suggested that, if I were interested, I could read this book. As I find the conflict between history and memory profoundly fascinating, I did (eventually) pick this up. The editors did make a concerted effort to collect articles that saw the conflict from both sides, but I think this following quote summarizes the

primary conflict very well: "More disturbingly, no one, right or left, took issue with the assumption underlying such initiatives--that the federal government had the right to mandate historical interpretations" (181).

Some of the articles were more interesting to me than others, and a couple were somewhat repetitive, summarizing the lead-up to the exhibit and its controversy, but Marilyn B. Young's piece was certainly my favorite. I also quite enjoyed this quote, which certainly plays into the academia's freedom to interpret events or individuals: "It is one of the less visible ironies of the democratic system that the academy's freedom of expression rests securely on its being ignored" (206).

John Kaufmann says

Possibly a 3.5 I read this some ten or twelve years ago (well before Goodreads), and I remember liking it. Nominally it is about the display of the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian's Nation Air and Space Museum to mark the 50th anniversary of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. But at a deeper level it is about the struggle over the meaning of the bomb, whether it should or should not have been dropped, whether it should be 'celebrated' or 'criticized.' Do we relate what was thought at the time, or do we look at it from our perspective 50 years later. And these questions ultimately relate to who how history should be portrayed generally, and who gets to define it. Probably should be about 3.5 stars.

Kelly says

A collection of essays by various historians responding to the 1994 controversy surrounding a planned exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum that was to be centered around the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The exhibit planned to place the plane as a transitional piece between two eras, the end of WWII, and the beginning of the Cold War. It also wanted to, most contentiously, offer the visitors a look into scholarly debate on the decision to drop the bomb, whether it was necessary, "morally unambiguous," (as some people later claimed), or whether it was dropped for reasons that had more to do with the diplomatic, the political, or merely the vengeful or racist. As this exhibit coincided with the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, there were very heated debates between the "commemorative" impulse (talking about the sacrifice and heroism of American soldiers) and the historical exploration of truths stated above. The exhibit also got caught up in several other outside factors: its opening into the 1994 Contract for America atmosphere, full of Limbaughs and Gingriches and the beginnings of Bob Dole's presidential run, its placement in a national, state run museum and its potential "influence," on the "16 year old kid who walks out thinking bad about America," its insistence on remembering the victims of the bombing and emphasis on the effects of nuclear power, the Air and Space museum's economic function as a part of the aerospace industry and the lobbying pressures brought to bear because of it, the Vietnam generation's outlook on life vs. people who came before, the changing field of museums and historiography, and on and on and on.

The essays each deal with an aspect of the controversy, some of them more cynical than others. For some, it seems as much as they can do to merely make sense of the conflict, and try to figure out how a bunch of historians got caught in the utterly chaotic clusterfuck that surrounded this whole thing, and why it became a clusterfuck to begin with. It is truly a fascinating story that shows us what happens when a government in a supposedly free society tries to control history, who really "owns" history, what the benefit is of telling "the truth," and what that "truth" is for many people, the influence of present conflicts on our interpretation of the past, the difference between history-as-experience and history-as-reconstructed later by historians with the

leisure of hindsight, and the awesome, all encompassing power of memory.

The one caution I would give is that the historians writing this book are clearly writing to defend themselves against charges leveled at them over the course of years of planning. They mostly did not defend themselves at the time, having no idea how to work the press or political machinery, and this is their belated response. It is very, (somewhat sadly amusingly) historian of them to wait a year to respond, and write long, considered essays that quote from various sources, and then respond in book form rather than in the press (though maybe this book got play in the press when it was published, I don't know). But anyway, just be aware, a lot of the people writing in this book had just gone through a year of being personally attacked and villified and in some cases threatened, and they've got an agenda, just like any of the attackers did.

Though that said, I will say I had to watch my own biases. Every time some vote grubbing Republican pandered to their right wing base I wanted to throw up- but that didn't mean that some of what they said wasn't true, and I found myself making a list of my own biases so I could step back from statements that drove me up a wall and try to sort out the real valid point of view from all the crap surrounding it that made me see red. So maybe responding a year later and in book form, not such a bad idea for some debates.
