Rhetoric and the Smithsonian Institution's Hiroshima Bomb Display

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Honors Thesis
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On December 7, 1941, Japan pulled the U.S. into World War II by bombing Pearl Harbor. In August of 1945, the U.S. ended that war by dropping atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This coming August, the world will "celebrate" the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of those bombs. Perhaps the most internationally prominent of these "celebrations" was scheduled to occur in May when the Smithsonian Institution was planning to unveil an exhibit entitled, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II." Originally it was to consist of pictures and descriptions showing the devastation of atomic war. When the first tentative script for this exhibit was tendered last May, protestors worldwide immediately attacked it. Since then, it had been revised and revised again until, as Time of February 13, 1995 reports, the exhibit was canceled. Thus, this display presents an important challenge for us as rhetorical scholars. It deals with an act of history that changed the world, and the world viewed this rhetorical exploration of it as particularly significant. Understanding it will enable us to answer a critical question, how can rhetoric be used to shape and/or define the past, molding both the present and the future. This question can be directly addressed through the concept of Rhetorical Perspectivism as defined by Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins in the August 1983 Quarterly Journal of Speech. This model fits like a glove, since it deals with perspective and perception. It is the differing perspectives between American groups and Japanese groups that has led to the controversy. This rhetoric can also be examined through the use of Political
Criminality and Blame as expressed by James Wilke. Political Criminality and Blame seeks to understand how scapegoats are created and, more importantly, how perception can be distorted.

Therefore, in order to better understand the rhetoric surrounding the Smithsonian Institution's Hiroshima Bomb Display, we need to take four steps. First, we must understand the controversy surrounding the exhibit. We can, then, define Rhetorical Perspectivism and Political Criminality and Blame. Third, we can apply these theories to the Smithsonian Exhibit. Then finally, draw some critical conclusions.

The controversy started almost immediately. The original script, which showed the devastation following the bomb, was rescripted early in the summer of 1994. The New York Times of August 28, 1994 reports that twenty four congressmen sent a letter to the Smithsonian calling the second script anti-American and a "historically narrow, revisionist view" of the Enola Gay's mission. The museum responded by developing a third script with, as the Washington Post of August 29, 1994 reports, a Pacific war show, consisting of fifty photographs that showed events in the Pacific leading to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. According to Lance Morrow in Time of September 19, 1994, this script finally put Hiroshima and Nagasaki into the historical context of Japanese aggression and its many victims and of a long and vastly destructive war. However, that exhibit still failed to please many American veterans. W.E. Cooper, a World War II B-29 combat pilot and member of the Enola Gay Committee, wrote a letter to The New York Times published September 10, 1994. He
writes that the exhibition should have been a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, the planning that brought about a quick end to the war, working people who gave up thriving businesses to work in factories, and the seven and a half million American citizens who served on active duty. He claims that the display would still be a "ban the bomb" display.

An interesting facet of this display is that, this year, it caused considerable debate about Congressional funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. This debate was partially inspired by the Republican government trying to save money. However, even before the election in November of 1994, controversy was starting to brew. An article appeared in The New York Times of September 5, 1994 which criticized Congress for trying "to throttle scholarly and artistic expression by politicizing Government support for the arts and humanities." This article was in response to the two dozen Congressmen protesting the exhibit.

As time went on, the controversy expanded. The United States postal service proposed a commemorative stamp showing a mushroom cloud and bearing the inscription "Atomic bombs hasten war's end, August 1945." Newsweek of December 12, 1994 explains that the proposal caused a diplomatic incident. Japan's Foreign Minister Yohei Kono was considering a formal diplomatic protest. "If necessary, I want to convey Japanese feelings to the U.S. side in some form," he said. Ultimately, the stamp was revised to a picture of President Harry S Truman deciding to drop the atomic bomb. The Chicago Tribune of January 16, 1995 reports
that despite the changes to the display, Congressmen, American Veterans, and Japanese were not satisfied with the display and that more changes would be made to it. The exhibit was then canceled at the beginning of February.

Still, the controversy did not end with the exhibit's cancellation. *Newsweek* of March 27, 1995 relates the stories of American prisoners of war in Japan during World War II, such as the Rape of Nanking, the Bataan Death March, and the ghastly medical experiments carried out by Unit 731 in Manchuria. Under the direction of General Shiro Ishii, medical experimenters of Unit 731 infected human guinea pigs with cholera, typhoid, anthrax, and plague. Some victims were dissected alive without anesthetic. Others were shot, burned, electrocuted, frozen, boiled, or sealed into pressure chambers that popped their eyes out of their heads. The Japanese also used captive Chinese populations for their experiments. However, this *Newsweek* article further reports that the United States government granted Ishii and the experimenters amnesty in exchange for the knowledge they had accumulated on biological warfare. The *Detroit Free Press* of April 20, 1995 even had an article that summarized the controversy surrounding this exhibit.

Now that we have taken our first step and developed an understanding of the history of the rhetoric surrounding "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," we can now move to the second stage of our analysis and develop methodologies which will enable us to better comprehend the rhetoric surrounding this artifact. First, we must explain
Rhetorical Perspectivism, and second, Political Criminality and Blame.

According to Cherwitz and Hikins, Rhetorical Perspectivism provides us with a new way to look at reality. Historically, two schools of thought have dominated. Rhetorical objectivism teaches that there is a real world out there made up of real objects and events. Rhetorical Subjectivism teaches that the world is what we make of it; there is no reality except for the meanings we create for ourselves. According to Cherwitz and Hikins, Rhetorical Perspectivism staking out the middle ground between these two poles. It is based on three postulates: first the independence of reality, second, relationality, and finally, consciousness. The independence of reality postulate argues, reality exists independent of us. For example, the words on this paper exist whether or not anyone is here to see them. The second postulate asserts relationality arguing that objects and in the universe are what they are solely because of the relationships in which they stand to other objects and events. For example, the words on this paper exist in relation to the paper, the light you are reading it by, the rules of graduating with honors an Honors diploma at North Central College, and so on. How the words relate to other physical and mental objects defines their nature. Finally, whenever a human being becomes aware of any object, consciousness inevitably occurs. Thus, if you look at this paper, you cannot help but become conscious of the words and their meanings that are on it. As a result of these postulates, you will inevitably react to an object from a
particular perspective.

In contrast, Political Criminality and Blame is based on four elements: hierarchy, guilt, victimage, and redemption. The hierarchy element argues that rhetoric seeks to divide society into groups, an "us versus them" mentality. Such division of groups has effectively been used in the past during wartime through the use of propaganda. The second element of guilt seeks to establish a societal outrage leading to broader public guilt, in other words a "how could we let this happen?" or "how can we allow this to continue to happen?" questioning. Humanitarian efforts such as those in Ethiopia and Somalia often utilize this element. Third, Wilke's methodology seeks victimage, someone or something to play the role of scapegoat. In the Iran-Contra hearings, Oliver North was thrust into this role. Finally, redemption is sought through intense information and political sacrifice. Do the initials O.J. mean anything?

We can now move to the third stage of our analysis and apply these postulates and elements to the rhetoric surrounding the Smithsonian exhibit.

Cherwitz and Hikins' first postulate asserts the independence of reality, arguing that objects and events exist independent of us. In designing this display, the museum had to decide whether to showcase one or both of two clusters of independently real events: first the pre-bomb cluster which focused on the war in the pacific and second, the post bomb cluster which concentrated on the bomb's survivors. According to all who have written about the display, it is the handling of
these two clusters that led to the controversy. Prior to the dropping of the bombs, many Japanese and American lives were lost. For example, Newsweek of March 27, 1995 reports that as a result of being used as human guinea pigs at least 12,000 American POWs died in Japanese medical experiments. And Time of September 19, 1994 explains that 48,000 Americans died in the taking of Okinawa alone. The New York Times of August 4, 1994 goes on to note that Hiroshima played a key role in the Japanese war effort since it’s factories had been converted to build military hardware, and the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries shipyard turned out giant warships. Thus an examination of pre-bomb events points out that the Japanese in general and Hiroshima in particular were not just helpless victims of World War II, but aggressors in it as well. A second cluster of events concerns post-bomb reality. According the Chicago Tribune of December 8, 1994, 210,000 people died when the cities were bombed. These deaths were atomic deaths, and the suffering of the civilian populations was indeed horrible, and inexcusable.

In designing this display, the Smithsonian Museum originally decided to include only the post bomb cluster of events. It was this decision which ignited the controversy, as we can now comprehend by turning to Cherwitz and Hikins’ second postulate of Relationality.

Here, we are concerned with how events take on definitions in their relation to other events. In its original form, the display was offensive to many Americans since the absence of the pre-bomb cluster allowed the post-bomb suffering to stand alone.
No data concerning Japanese aggression was given as a counter to the bomb-induced suffering. Lance Morrow charges in his essay in *Time* of September 19, 1994 that the exhibit was a revisionist travesty since the curators seemed to forget who started the war in the first place and who pursued it with relentless inhumanity. Brigadier General Paul Tibbets, a veteran of World War II, declared in the *Washington Post* of August 29, 1994 that the exhibit, "lacked balance and context." Thus the display was seen as supporting a relational definition of the Americans as brutish aggressors and the Japanese as helpless victims. In fact, many Americans wanted to reverse the relational definition they were perceiving by pressuring the Smithsonian to include only the pre-bomb cluster of events. One museum official responded to the controversy in the *New York Times* of August 4, 1994, American "veterans wanted the exhibit to stop when the doors of the bomb bay opened. And that's where the Japanese wanted it to begin." And, the Air Force Association was concerned that the exhibit would treat "Japan and the U.S. as if their participation in the war were morally equivalent."

Thus, independent presentations of either pre or post-bomb reality were seen as supporting different definitions of the war, turning heroes into villains, aggressors into victims. The significance of these definitions and why the exhibit was ultimately canceled becomes clear when we examine the third postulate of consciousness.

As an official display at America's leading national museum, this display would have had the power to affect the
consciousness, and thus perspectives, of many Americans. Since fifty years had passed since the end of the war, very few Americans would have had any personal memories to rely on. Or, as Richard Hallion, Historian of the Air Force, comments in The New York Times of August 28, 1994, "We are now in a position in which the World War II veteran is disappearing, where younger people do not comprehend what this war was about. That's why this exhibit has a special responsibility to be as accurate as possible." Also, Edward Linenthal, a professor of religion and American culture at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, an expert on war memorials who is a member of the museum's advisory board, states in that same New York Times, "For survivors and veterans, it's a show of the importance of the commemorative voice. They see their numbers dwindling, and they want their imprint left and their narrative of the events." Thus, the museum's definition of history may well have chained out to its viewers. Understanding this possibility, both American groups and Japanese groups pressured the museum to define history their way. As a result, the display was rescripted five times over the course of nine months. Time of February 13, 1995 reports that ultimately, the U.S. Congress got involved in this rhetorical dispute, citing it as one more reason to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. The Christian Science Monitor of February 2, 1995 reports, that in the end, the exhibit was canceled. As it stands now, only one small scrap of history will remain: part of the reconstructed fuselage of the Enola Gay, followed by a brief description of the role it played in the war.
We can also apply Wilke's elements to the rhetoric surrounding the exhibition to further analyze this rhetoric.

The first step for a rhetor is to create a dual hierarchy. The rhetoric surrounding the display divides the public by their perception of history. Rhetors sought to divide American society into two groups: the culturally elite, the historians and academics who created this "revisionist travesty", and us, the general public.

Once society has been divided into "good guys" and "bad guys," it is easy for a rhetor to instill a broader sense of societal guilt, "how could we, the general public, allow this travesty to happen?" The Washington Post of January 20, 1995 reports that several U.S. Representatives felt that the museum had done a disservice to the memory of American veterans. The newspaper further reports that Republican Massachusetts Representative Peter I. Blute had several questions about the Smithsonian and its handling of historical displays. Blute not only mentioned the revisionist view the museum was taking with the Hiroshima bomb display, but other revisionist exhibits it had unveiled in the past, such as a recent exhibit about Native Americans. Also, the Washington Times of September 2, 1994 says that our "political culture has been polluted." The rhetors establish the fact that the Smithsonian apparently has been "polluting" the past by changing it to make us the villains. Clearly, rhetors have instilled a broad sense of guilt into society, leaving the question of what can be done about it. Fortunately, Wilke's
third element answers this question: victims, or scapegoats, are created.

In Wilke's third element, victims are created to draw the wrath of society's outrage. According to Crouch and Newfield in the American Legion Magazine of February 1995, the Smithsonian has a "hidden agenda" about its displays and history. In other words, the Smithsonian was trying to alter our perception of historical events. This name calling essentially creates the needed scapegoat for Americans. The Smithsonian travesty is not really society's fault. It is not the American Congress' fault. It is not the Japanese's fault (that would be Japan bashing!).

Clearly, the rhetors have developed the idea that the Smithsonian and its curators are at fault with this display. Because society can alleviate its sense of guilt by blaming the Smithsonian, the guilty should be punished and should be the subject of Wilke's fourth element, a public trial.

This display received a very lengthy and intense public scrutiny. From the time the first script of the display was first presented until the present, critics from both sides have attacked and debated its worth. Veterans groups have criticized it for being too forgiving of the Japanese. Japanese groups have criticized it for downplaying the suffering of the atomic bomb victims. And all of this rhetoric was debated via the press. The New York Times of January 31, 1995 reports that not only was the exhibit canceled (found guilty of being a revisionist travesty), but the curators of the Smithsonian may be fired because of it (their sentence handed out). This public trial was
undoubtedly very efficient, especially when compared to the O.J. Simpson debacle. But was this trial a fair trial?

We can understand the historical and rhetorical significance of this canceled event by now drawing some critical conclusions.

First, our analysis allows us to evaluate the effectiveness of this exhibit in a rhetorically unique way. The exhibit points out the significance of history and the power of historical revisionism. According to The New York Times of August 28, 1994, revisionists have claimed that the number of lives saved by dropping the bomb were only 30,000, as opposed to the one million or more claimed by military historians. The present and future actions of nations and individuals are premised on how they see themselves. Are we good or bad, right or wrong, heroes or villains? If we can change society's views of the past, we can manipulate the future. Thus, the power of the display was assumed prior to its showing, and that future faith caused its public debate, reformulation, and ultimate cancellation.

Attempting to understand this unique form of rhetorical analysis allows us to draw a second key conclusion: rhetorical perspectivism revolutionizes academia's knowledge of the nature of reality. It stands in direct contrast both to the tenets of objectivism and subjectivism. The position taken by rhetorical perspectivism brings these two divergent fields of study into alignment and places our discipline of rhetorical communication squarely in the center of philosophical epistemology. Thus our examination of rhetorical perspectivism reveals to us the value of our academic field and the importance of our work as
rhetorical scholars, since it places us at the center of human experience and reality.

This leads us naturally to a third conclusion, specifically highlighting our ethical responsibilities. Since perspectives flow from consciousness which are produced by relational definitions derived from independent reality, we as rhetors have the power to strongly influence perspectives when we lack, or repress knowledge of the facts. This places a heavy ethical burden on rhetors who must diligently search out the facts before accepting the burden for shaping the perspectives of others.

Further, this display has caused the American public to think about history and how we want to commemorate it. This display provoked intense reactions. President Clinton initially supported the display and the curators, but has recently backed down from his original position. Further, National Public Radio of February 12, 1995 reports that a Vietnam memorial display has been postponed because of the furor surrounding the Smithsonian exhibit. What eventually may develop from this rhetoric is that the concept of Political Correctness may become one of Wilke's scapegoats and, thus, undergo the same type of public trial and scrutiny in the media.

The emotions stirred by the Hiroshima bomb display are only in the narrowest sense about historical revisionism or "good" or "bad" history. Wars, especially World War II, are defining events. They shape political boundaries, but also how nations view themselves. For the U.S., World War II was a good war. In fact, an episode of The Simpsons, describes World War II as one
of only two examples of "good" wars. The attack on Pearl Harbor roused America from its isolationist stupor. The U.S.'s victory against fascism in the war is as clear as an example of "good" triumphing over "evil" as can be found in recent history. The Japanese, however, believe that Hiroshima and Nagasaki allow them to be as much a victim of World War II as an aggressor. The bombings of the cities seemed so barbaric that they, for the Japanese, "canceled out" the atrocities that they had committed early in the war. Ian Buruma wrote in "The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan," "Hiroshima in Japan is more than a symbol of national martyrdom; Hiroshima is a symbol of absolute evil, often compared to Auschwitz." However, it must also be mentioned that the Jewish people performed no aggressive acts toward the Nazis, and, in fact, many historians comment about how passive many Jews were in accepting their fate at the Nazi prison camps. What we must conclude is that any understanding of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the execution of countless Jewish people, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, World War II, or the fighting of any war for that matter, cannot be separated from the intrinsic historical context unique to each situation.

Our goal has been to apply the concept of rhetorical perspectivism and political criminality and blame to a meaningful rhetorical exhibit. But our analysis has shown us that the exhibit is mistitled. It was called, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II." But in "reality," even though the exhibit has now been canceled, there is no last
act, or even definite end, only a world of potential realities, waiting to be shaped, by rhetoric.
Newsweek March 27, 1995.
Chicago Tribune December 8, 1994.
Newsweek December 12, 1994.