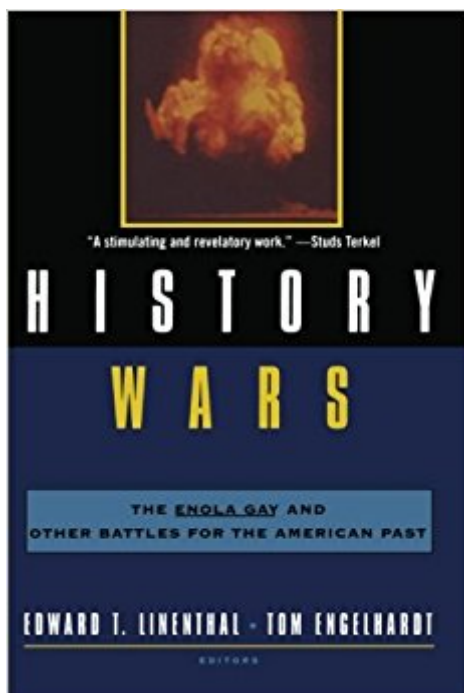


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# History Wars: The Enola Gay And Other Battles For The American Past



## Synopsis

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, Michael S. Sherry, Marilyn B. Young, and Mike Wallace.

## Book Information

Paperback: 295 pages

Publisher: Holt Paperbacks; 1st edition (August 15, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 080504387X

ISBN-13: 978-0805043877

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 0.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #96,318 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #41 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Essays #82 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Historiography #164 in Books > History > Military > United States > Vietnam War

## Customer Reviews

Linenthal (*Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*, 1995, etc.), Engelhardt, and six other historians use a bitter controversy to consider America's attitudes toward its past. The curators of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum planned an ambitious exhibit centered on the *Enola Gay*, the airplane used to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. The exhibit, marking the event's 50th anniversary, would have described the intense desire to end the war that led to the bombing, but also the way the bombing's nightmarish effects infected the world with fear of nuclear annihilation. Conservatives claimed the exhibit would be anti-nuclear and anti-war, throwing into question the decision to drop the bomb, and would transform the *Enola Gay*'s crew from heroes to terrorists. Under relentless attack, the

museum backed down and its director resigned. The Enola Gay is now displayed virtually out of context. These essays take the controversy as the starting point for ruminations on American attitudes toward war, the nuclear age, and, with exceptional insight, history itself. The writers are not uniformly supportive of the planned exhibit: Former air force chief historian Richard H. Kohn concludes, for instance, that it wasn't a balanced presentation; New York University history professor Marilyn B. Young says that it was. But there is unanimous regret among the essayists that an opportunity was lost, as Kohn writes, "to inform the American people . . . about warfare, airpower, World War II and a turning point in world history." The Enola Gay conflict, writes University of Wisconsin history professor Paul Boyer, was about "the disparity between the mythic past inscribed in popular memory and the past that is the raw material of historical scholarship." This round of history wars, conclude the writers in this excellent collection, was won by the myth-makers.

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In their illuminating explorations of contemporary American struggles with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these essays contribute to much-needed nuclear-age wisdom.

- Robert Jay Lifton
- Informative and compelling.
- Eric Foner
- A stimulating and revelatory work.
- Studs Terkel

This book is required reading in many Public History courses, and for good reason. Many students of history remain painfully ignorant of the political battles which have shaped education about US History and public memory in general, and Linnenthal does a fantastic job of bringing this shadowy conflict into the light. For anyone interested in public history, the nature of museums and memorials, or a desire for a more in-depth look at this subset of the Culture Wars of the 1990s, this book is a must-read.

As a graduate student, this book was useful in providing information about the use of public history in society. It was also a very interesting read.

Well written and makes you think about what history really is.

This is a collection of essays centered around the controversy that surrounded the Smithsonian's plans to display the Enola Gay for the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII. It highlights how

politically charged the past has become, and the fundamental controversy that has grown up between those who wish to keep rose-colored glasses on the look at the American past and those who want to look at all of the past, not just the victorious parts. This is a frustrating but highly engaging read for both historians and the general public. It might raise your hackles a little, though.

I ordered this book because I have a report to write and this topic is of high interest to me. I just finished the introduction and am dismayed as this is going to be a long paper to the extent that I rely on this book. What offends me (so far) is that the editors don't substantiate their position. They talk about the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian and how it was derided by Bob Dole, but they don't say why Bob Dole was wrong. They state their own position that WW II was a war that we won as a legitimate victory (to their credit) but they immediately go in a tirade about conservatives and their criticism for a left wing media. Grow up people. There is a left-wing bias- in schools, in the news, in the government and anywhere else if they can spread their deception to reinvent the world as it "ought to be."

A revealing analysis of the political and historical conflicts revolving around the 1995 Smithsonian Air and Space exhibit on the Enola Gay and Post-War America. Through insightful dissection of both sides of the Enola Gay exhibit and of post-war America, Linenthal and Engelhardt make an interesting modern dilemma into a more interesting read. Recommended to anyone who has an interest in the Cold War and of the effects of the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima on American and Japanese civilizations.

It's true, as one of the other reviewers points out, that this book is full of largely liberal-slanted arguments--and mostly criticisms--of the effort to change or cancel the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian in 1995. You will not find a "balanced" set of viewpoints here--they are all clearly critical of the largely conservative movement that prevented the original exhibit from going forward. This slanted viewpoint, however, is not a failing. Indeed, a book such as this was--and is--necessary, since the views of academic historians were largely drowned out during the cacophony of negative attention given to the exhibit during the 90s. Although some of the observations are dated (e.g., that conservatives have no strong interest in increasing U.S. power overseas in the aftermath of the Cold War) nearly every point they make about the dichotomy between professional historians and scholars and the general public--especially political and cultural conservatives--remain very relevant today. This is a worthwhile read if you want to see a test case for how real scholarship gets treated

in the public sphere in today's political climate.

First of all, this book isn't really about the Enola Gay, or honestly about any of the events that happen within the chapters. This book is about public ownership of common histories. When the Enola Gay bombed, for instance, the dominant culture was behind the act. Still today, many people are in favor of the act, but in our public spaces, there are of course those who see it differently. This book is about how museums display public history; and, this book is about several problems with perspective that have arisen from narrow minded portrayals of a history lived by many more than the dominant culture. It is a good book worthy of a fair reading. History can both unite and divide our country. It is important that we at least consider the two sides. If you are considering any type of museum career, this book is a very important read.

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