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*RON KLEY*

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AT THE THIRD ANNUAL  
WASHBURN HUMANITIES CENTER CONFERENCE  
LIVERMORE, MAINE

In planning some opening remarks for this conference, I found myself searching for some idea that might provide a point of departure for our intellectual excursion. The idea came to me in a series of newspaper and magazine articles having to do with a recent historical controversy over the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the world's first atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima in August 1945.

At war's end, the *Enola Gay* escaped the scrap yards where most of our military aircraft and other "swords" of war were beaten into such peacetime "plowshares" as folding chairs, barbecue grills, and beer cans. Instead, storage space was found for her in what has been affectionately called "the nation's attic": the collections of the Smithsonian Institution. In anticipation of a special exhibition to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two, Smithsonian officials decided to polish up the aluminum skin of the *Enola Gay* and to place the bomber on

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exhibition. At that point the old girl ran into more flak than she had ever encountered in the skies over Japan.

The exhibit plan had scarcely reached a first-draft stage when protests erupted. Many Japanese and others were infuriated when they learned of the plan to exhibit the *Enola Gay*. Such a display, they felt, would “celebrate” a cataclysmic event that had devastated an entire city, incinerating tens of thousands of noncombatants and dooming at least as many more to a lingering death from radiation poisoning. Some Americans responded by insisting that the Japanese “deserved” the punishment meted out by our atomic bombs — as retribution for the “Day of Infamy” at Pearl Harbor, and for a long list of wartime atrocities of which the “Rape of Nanking” and the “Bataan Death March” were only two of the better-known examples.

Still others insisted that, by forcing Japan’s prompt and unconditional surrender and avoiding the need for an invasion of the Japanese home islands, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had saved far more lives (both American and Japanese) than were obliterated. Meanwhile, from across the Atlantic came German complaints that, by focusing attention of the horrors of Hiroshima, the Smithsonian would diminish the magnitude of tragedies perpetrated by the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden. And finally, as if this witches brew of discord did not already have enough ingredients to keep the pot simmering, scholars weighed in with evidence indicating that the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki may not have been necessary at all in order to secure Japan’s surrender, and that the bombings may have been prompted more by racial and political motives than by military criteria.

I was surprised — not by the fact that such controversy had arisen, but by the degree to which the various participants retreated into highly polarized “either/or” points of view. Nowhere, it seemed, were there voices suggesting that *all* these viewpoints had some validity, or that *each* might be represented within the framework of a museum interpretation. Regrettably,

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the controversy surrounding the *Enola Gay* led to a major contraction and dilution of the Smithsonian's exhibit plans. What might have been a powerful opportunity to reexamine familiar facts from unfamiliar perspectives has been largely lost — at least for now.

If anything is to be learned, or re-learned, from the *Enola Gay* fiasco, it is the fact that truth is plural, not singular, and that perspectives depend very much upon the cultural platform from which we view, organize, and evaluate the available information. A person's perspective of the *Enola Gay* on the morning of its "rendezvous with destiny" would be very different depending upon whether that person had been standing within sight and sound of "ground zero," or peering through the plane's bomb-sight as enemy territory passed below, or crouched in a trench on some Pacific island anticipating an invasion order that might be a death sentence.

**A**s we think of those different perspectives, it is important to understand that each of them is valid, that the validity of one does not necessarily diminish the validity of another, and that true understanding of any event or situation can't be achieved until we have examined each of the multiple and often conflicting truths that surround it. Let's keep that plurality in mind as we explore the history of those people and ideas that moved into, out from, and within our New England region in the nineteenth century.

Did those who emigrated from New England to pursue the promise of new frontiers include the most intelligent and energetic elements of our population, and did their departure represent a drain of our most precious resource? Yes. Did that same departure create new opportunities for those who stayed behind? Yes. Did this outward migration result in a dispersion of "Yankee" traits and values to other corners of the nation and the world? Yes. Did that infusion, in some cases, debase or destroy other cultures and other environments? Yes again.

And what of the in-migration of peoples "from away?" Did they contribute to economic growth, to cultural diversity, and to

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the genetic vitality of New England? Yes. Were they causes or catalysts of religious discord, of social unrest, of political conflict and economic upheaval? Yes. Were they agents of change, or victims of change? Yes. As we move on to discover some multiple, divergent, and possibly contradictory truths about New England's history, let's keep these words of Walt Whitman in mind:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well, then, I contradict myself,

For I am many; I contain multitudes.

That's true for each of us gathered here today – and so it was with those people of the past whose ideas and accomplishments we examine here. Let's not forget this essential characteristic of individual human beings and of humanity as a whole.

Ron Kley

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