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Historians as Curators and Filmmakers

Museum Exhibit Standards: Do Historians Really Want Them?

VICTORIA A. HARDEN

IN THE TWENTY YEARS of the National Council on Public History's (NCPH) existence, the trials and tribulations of presenting history in a museum context have been addressed periodically in *The Public Historian* and other venues, especially when national controversies arose.¹ Members of NCPH have been active in articulating what they believed to be the rights and

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1. The literature on controversy in history museums is large. See especially bibliographic citations in "History and the Public: What Can We Handle? A Round Table about History after the *Enola Gay* Controversy," *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 1029-1144. Also see G. David Brumberg, "The Case for Reunion: Academic Historians, Public Historical Agencies, and the New York Historians-in-Residence Program," *The Public Historian* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 79-80; Thomas A. Woods, "Getting Beyond the Criticism of History Museums: A Model for Interpretation," *The Public Historian* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 77-90; Marie Tyler-McGraw et al., "Roundtable: Curating History in Museums," *The Public Historian* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 51-91; David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 7-23; "Roundtable: Responses to David Glassberg's 'Public History and the Study of Memory,'" *The Public Historian* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 30-72.

responsibilities of historians working in museums. Most recently, they participated in the discussions that occurred in the wake of the cancellation of *The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, an exhibit planned by the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution that would have featured a portion of the front fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, the airplane that dropped the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima in 1945. One result of these discussions with other professional historians and museum professionals was the formation of a National Task Force on Historians and Museums. In this paper, I want to examine different views about the goals that the Task Force was thought to be working toward, assess the disparity of aims among different professional historical groups, and ask three questions. First, was it realistic or misguided to assume that a “standards of practice” document could help protect museum curators from political interference in the exhibit process? Second, do we really want to prevent controversial exhibits from being shut down? Finally, is it possible for historians as a professional group to speak about museum issues, or do the differences in our specific jobs as university professors, government-employed historians and curators, and administrators of public or private museums make it impossible for us to reach agreement?

Formation of the Task Force

At the 22 October 1994 meeting of the Executive Council of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), as controversy raged in the press over the exhibit planned around the *Enola Gay*, council members discussed the situation but observed that neither the American Association of Museums (AAM), the American Historical Association (AHA), nor the OAH had any written statement of principles on which they could act to counter criticism of their members working in museums. To remedy this, the OAH Executive Council adopted the following resolution:

In view of recent attacks on the independence and integrity of American museums and the freedom of historical interpretation of museum curators, the OAH wishes to join with other professional associations in drafting a Statement of Rights, Responsibilities, and Professional Autonomy of American Museums and Historical Societies. Toward this end, the Executive Board authorizes the President and Executive Secretary to approach other relevant professional associations and institutions with a view to assembling a task force that would draft such a code. The draft of such a code or statement might be circulated among professional associations and other relevant institutions for discussion and revised with a view to its ultimate endorsement by associations and museums.²

2. “OAH Executive Board Passes Two Resolutions at Its October 22, 1994, Meeting,” *OAH Newsletter* 22 (November 1994): 10. The other resolution passed was also generated by the *Enola Gay* controversy: “The Organization of American Historians condemns threats by

In the November 1994 issue of the *OAH Newsletter*, one of the members of the Executive Council, Alfred Young, an emeritus professor of history at Northern Illinois University, outlined the issues he believed should be addressed by such a code and described who, in his judgment, should participate in the task force named to draft the code. He identified five issues: (1) the function of museums, (2) interpretation, (3) curatorial authorship, (4) peer review, and (5) controversy. He suggested that “first and foremost,” the task force should be comprised of “the men and women who work in historical museums: historians, curators, administrators, directors; then, the people responsible for supporting museums: trustees, enlightened funders, the NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) and foundations; of course, museum organizations, the AAM and AASLH (American Association for State and Local History); and especially representatives of the professional historical organizations responsible for the integrity of the discipline.” Young described one scenario: “A small task force might draw up a ‘draft code’ and submit it for discussion by museum staffs, constituent associations, and at regional or local conferences. The NEH might fund such ‘conversations’ on ‘The Role of History Museums in American Society.’ In light of the feedback, the task force would revise the draft. Museums and associations might then subscribe to the code the same way that colleges and universities for more than half a century have subscribed to the fundamental statements on academic freedom of the AAUP (American Association of University Professors). The process,” he argued, “is as important as the result.” Young also noted that when he “told a Smithsonian curator about the supportive actions of the OAH and the AHA late this fall (1994), the curator’s response was, ‘Where were the OAH and the AHA when we needed them?’”³

In January and April 1995, the AHA and OAH responded to the challenge posed by the Smithsonian curator by scheduling discussions about political attacks on history exhibits at their annual meetings. By the end of the OAH meeting, representatives of the OAH, AHA, AASLH, AAM, NCPH, and SHFG (Society for History in the Federal Government) “agreed that a continuing dialogue on the rights and responsibilities—both of institutions and those historians who participate in their exhibitions, educational efforts, and other programs—was necessary.” Michael Kammen, president of the OAH, summarized the particular goals articulated by those in attendance:

1. That a statement of professional standards, rights and responsibilities for museum historians would be a highly desirable

members of Congress to penalize the Smithsonian Institution because of the controversial exhibition on World War II and the dropping of the atomic bomb. The Organization of American Historians further deplors the removal of historical documents and revisions of interpretations of history for reasons outside the professional procedures and criteria by which museum exhibitions are created.”

3. Alfred Young, “S.O.S.: Storm Warning for American Museums,” *OAH Newsletter* 22 (November 1994): 1, 6-8.

goal. It might help, for example, museum directors who need to negotiate with trustees and potential sponsors. It could also help museum historians and program planners who sometimes need to prod directors to “get them to do the right thing.” . . .

2. The project of achieving this goal ought to be undertaken as a collaborative effort by the concerned professional associations.
3. Broad issues as well as particulars must be addressed: e.g., the role and function of history museums in a democratic society. . . .
4. Somehow, history museums must strike a balance between their responsibilities to scholarship and their traditional functions of preservation and commemoration.
5. Museums must attempt to balance their responsibilities to diverse publics and stakeholders.
6. The ultimate objective: a statement that might help to preserve the integrity of history museums and help to protect them from pressures that destroy or undermine that integrity.⁴

Kammen and Armita Jones, the executive director of the OAH, approached the Rockefeller Foundation for funding, and the OAH was awarded a small grant to support the work of the Task Force.⁵ Although it had been suggested that Kammen appoint members to the Task Force and chair it personally, he declined because “proceeding in that manner would not be in the spirit of collaboration.”⁶ Instead, each organization was asked to name its representative, and it was understood that the Task Force would elect its own chair. The role of the OAH was to convene the Task Force and provide staff support. The final result of the Task Force’s endeavors, “a working paper, statement, guidelines, or other document,” would be determined by the Task Force members. Furthermore, the ground rules for the Task Force stipulated that “each of the sponsoring organizations . . . understands that participation in no way commits them to acceptance of any statement, set of guidelines, or principles which the group may develop. Each organization will have its own procedures for reviewing and adopting any statements and will establish its own working relationship with its

4. E-mail, Michael Kammen to Armita Jones, 12 May 1995, copy in File “Task Force on Museums and Historians, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

5. “History of the Working Group,” from attachment to 11 September 1995 memo, Armita Jones, Executive Director, OAH, to Members of the Working Group; Michael Kammen and Armita Jones to Joan Shigekawa, Associate Director, Arts and Humanities, The Rockefeller Foundation, 29 August 1995, copy in File “Task Force on Historians and Museums, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

6. E-mail, Michael Kammen to Armita Jones, 12 May 1995, copy in File “Task Force on Museums and Historians, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

representative.” It was hoped that the sponsoring organizations would “give wide dissemination to any interim reports or final recommendations made by this group . . . so that our members can engage in the widest possible discussion of the many important issues that we expect to be addressed.”⁷

The representatives named for the participating societies were Sara Evans, Department of History, University of Minnesota, for the OAH; Edward T. Linenthal, Department of Religious Studies, University of Wisconsin, for the AHA; Robert Archibald, director of the Missouri Historical Society, for the AASLH; Ellsworth Brown, president of the Carnegie Museums and Library, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the AAM; Patricia Mooney-Melvin, Department of History, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, for the NCPH; and Victoria A. Harden, National Institutes of Health Historical Office and DeWitt Stetten, Jr., Museum of Medical Research, for the SHFG. Before the first meeting of the Task Force, two additional members were named: Lonnie Bunch of the Smithsonian Institution and Cary Carson, vice president for research of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Bunch was added because it was felt essential that the Task Force include a representative of the Smithsonian Institution, and Carson was added to represent a major nonfederal history museum that had also known its share of controversy.

SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Committee

Federal historians and curators had been affected by many of the political attacks on museum exhibits, from curators working on the *Enola Gay* exhibit to National Park Service historians interpreting the history of battle sites to visitors whose ancestors had fought on both sides of whatever conflict was commemorated. Indeed, because historians and curators employed by the federal government are responsible for a large proportion of historical exhibits across the nation—more than 450 national parks and numerous military history museums—they represent a substantial proportion of the people directly influenced by attempts to shape exhibits toward particular political ends. With respect to the *Enola Gay* situation, particularly, opinion varied widely within the community of federal historians about what might have been done and by whom to salvage the exhibit. The president of SHFG, Philip L. Cantelon, wanted the society’s representative on the task force to articulate positions that could be supported broadly by SHFG membership. To this end, he appointed a Museum Exhibit Standards Committee and asked me to chair it. Our charge was to discuss the issues and to formulate “recommendations and other ideas for the

7. “Working Group on Historians and Museums,” in 11 September 1995 memo, Arnita Jones, Executive Director, OAH, to Members of the Working Group, File “Task Force on Museums and Historians, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

committee's chair to articulate at the meeting of the national committee on this subject."⁸ In choosing members for the committee, I sought to include representatives of a variety of federal agencies and nonfederal historians who worked with federal agencies on museum exhibits.

The range of expertise finally assembled was in my view impressive: Bruce Bustard, Curator, Exhibits Branch, National Archives; Rebecca Hancock Cameron, Historian, Air Force History Office; Paula Johnson, Museum Specialist, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution; Richard Mandel, independent scholar and contractor; Betty C. Monkman, Curator, Office of the Curator, the White House; Dwight T. Pitcaithley, Chief Historian, National Park Service; J. Samuel Walker, Historian, Nuclear Regulatory Commission; Cecilia Wertheimer, Curator, Historical Resource Center, Bureau of Engraving and Printing; and I, Victoria Harden, Historian, National Institutes of Health, and Director, DeWitt Stetten, Jr., Museum of Medical Research. Collectively, this committee had expertise in exhibiting and writing about historical documents and artifacts; it contained subject area experts in museum work, archives, military history, national security issues, and history of science; and it represented archivists, curators, historians, administrators, and contractors. I believed that members of this group would represent a cross-section of the society as they deliberated about Task Force issues.

On 13 November 1995, the SHFG committee met and spent a considerable amount of time discussing issues such as authorship of exhibits, how viewers perceive documents presented as evidence in exhibits, analysis vs. description as primary historical methodology in exhibits; expectations of audiences and expectations of curators, and the intrusion of politics into exhibits. Points that the committee asked me to bring to the attention of the Task Force included: (1) the possibility of establishing a system of peer review for exhibits to indicate that there was broad intellectual support for the scholarship presented; (2) the need to communicate the process of history to the public—that is, how evidence is evaluated and how the selection of any fact or artifact to include in an article or exhibit embodied an interpretive decision; and (3) articulation of the value to citizens and their governments of exhibits produced by curators exercising intellectual independence.⁹

One item of great concern to federal historians emerged from the committee's discussion of an article from a 1992 roundtable on museum issues in *The Public Historian* in which author Alfred Young had proposed that museum curators should enjoy the same academic freedom in preparing exhibits as their colleagues in academia enjoyed in writing mono-

8. Author's notes for 13 November 1995 Meeting, File "Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995–98," SHFG Archives.

9. Minutes of Meeting, 13 November 1995, File "Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995–98," SHFG Archives.

graphs.¹⁰ It was impossible for federal employees and contractors with federal agencies to subscribe to Young's proposal because of the inherent difference in the terms of employment for scholars in academia and those in government.

Academic scholars pursued their research independently, accountable only to themselves for their published arguments. In contrast, federal historians and curators—including contractors—were required to submit historical research to a clearance process because their work represented government agencies, not their personal opinions. Historians and contractors working with the federal government accepted this restraint on their individuality when they chose to work within the government and did not view it as an impediment to the production of books and articles with scholarly integrity. Nonetheless, scholars who practiced their historical skills as employees of the federal government, and those working in state and local governments as well, could never assert a claim to academic freedom identical with that of their colleagues in universities.

First Meeting of the Task Force

On 6 December 1995, the Task Force convened at the Chicago Historical Society. Members elected Cary Carson chair, and deliberations began with presentations of the major concerns of each society represented. Although each representative of the other professional societies had doubtless given serious thought to the issues, no other came as I did, with instructions from a committee of the organization. The representatives of the AHA, the OAH, the NCPH, and the SHFG, associations whose members are largely professional historians, emphasized protection for curators and public historians from heavy-handed political intrusion into exhibits. Ed Linenthal described the concern of the AHA over censorship, congressional intrusion into historical exhibits, and the “canonization” of official history. He also emphasized that any document created by the Task Force must be of benefit to people in the museum community. Similarly, Sara Evans stated that the OAH believed that academic historians had an enormous stake in what happens to museums. She hoped the Task Force would promote greater collegiality between academic and museum historians and encourage discussions about what it means to have a public conversation on important historical issues. Patricia Mooney-Melvin of the NCPH observed that a gulf existed between the history that historians make and the history that the public thinks it wants. She reiterated Evans's position that many of the problems plaguing historians in museums to some extent resulted from

10. “A Modest Proposal: A Bill of Rights for American Museums,” *The Public Historian* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 67–72.

the failure of academic historians to reach out to a public audience. I presented the SHFG concerns as formulated in the committee meeting and distributed copies of the minutes of the meeting containing a summary of these issues.¹¹

The presentations made by representatives of associations whose members primarily worked in the museum field were somewhat different. Cary Carson of Colonial Williamsburg described the audiences the Task Force needed to address: museum historians “under siege”; the community of academic historians; users of historical societies and museums. He noted that economic constraints were causing museums to turn away from their educational mission toward a marketing mission, with resources and positions being diverted to money-making ventures and less time given to the traditional commitments of museums. He also pointed out that, in the last twenty years, museums had attempted to address issues that earlier museum historians did not often engage. He hoped that the Task Force would consider how to keep museums moving toward their function as a public forum for issues. Robert Archibald of the AASLH presented a vision of museums as “facilitators of discussions” about persistent issues of importance to the multiple constituencies that make up the community served by the museum. He believed that the notion of academic freedom in exhibits undermines the dialogue that museums should seek to cultivate. He argued that museums needed to articulate “core values” that would permit museum exhibit teams to assign priorities for perspectives on persistent issues. Finally, Ellsworth Brown of the AAM asserted that controversy, with “winners and losers,” characterizes normal human political interaction. Museums today cannot avoid messy public debate; indeed, museums are only beginning to experience the powerful forces of bullying, badgering, positioning, and public outcries. He asked, “What are the rights of the ‘owner’ of the museum, whoever that may be? If the owner is government, what is the role of government in history? Who is the government?” He also argued that there is no such thing as a purely private-sector museum, since most now get public monies. What should be the response of the Task Force to these problems? Brown did not offer a specific solution, but he argued strongly that a document on standards for historical exhibits would not solve the problem.¹²

Because of the widely varying differences among the Task Force members, the goal of producing a “standards of practice” document was put aside, and other possible actions were discussed that could be taken to address the concerns that had been raised. These included encouraging the publication of articles and exhibit reviews by Task Force members in professional newsletters, the publication of an op-ed piece explaining the

11. “Minutes of the Historians and Museums Task Force Meeting,” 6 December 1995, copy in File “Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

12. *Ibid.*

goals of the Task Force, the development of a book on good practice in preparing historical exhibits, the utilization of publications such as the *Smithsonian* children's magazine to explain how historians use evidence in interpreting history, the organization of sessions on museum interpretation at each organization's annual meeting, the sponsorship of prizes for the best work done by an academic historian working in the museum field and the best scholarly work published by someone working in museums, and, finally, task-force sponsorship of a conference to bring together historians, journalists, political leaders, and others to broaden understanding among opinion makers about the historical process. Task force members divided up the necessary research about these proposals and agreed to report back at the next meeting, scheduled for 30 March during the 1996 OAH annual meeting. Robert Archibald took on the task of drafting a mission statement for the Task Force that might serve as a working document to inform any actions the group might recommend.¹³ Task Force Chair Cary Carson prepared a short statement for the *OAH Newsletter* and sent it to the publications of each constituent society represented on the Task Force. In that article, he stated that the group hoped to develop "criteria that institutions could use to determine who does and does not have a rightful claim to participate in the exhibit planning process." He also noted that few members of the media or of the public had realized that museums occasionally prepared exhibits with the explicit purpose of encouraging "public discussion of significant enduring historical issues," and that the Task Force planned to address these issues as well.¹⁴

Archibald's draft mission statement was faxed to Task Force members in mid-January 1996. He argued:

History can no longer be a passive pursuit for history organizations. . . . Through history we come to better know ourselves, confront continuity beyond our own lifetimes, and gain assurance that human thoughts and actions have future consequences. The infinite human thoughts and actions of the past are not of equal importance to the present and the future. We must discern the instructive ones—those that reverberate through generations and in contemporary guise confront us now. To do this, we must be more than collectors, preservers and interpreters. We must forge an explicit agenda upon which to base decisions about what to collect, what to preserve and what to interpret. One agenda must address significant and enduring issues of public and private concern. . . . Historical organizations exist to provide a sense of continuity, historical context and perspective on these enduring issues and a forum for their discussion. . . . Mission statements must provide a basis for determinations of historical significance and they must define how the organization intends to benefit its

13. Ibid.

14. "OAH Takes Stand on Political Interference in History Museums," *The Federalist* 17 (Spring 1996): 1.

community. . . . What qualifies individuals to work in historical organizations? Typical qualifications include subject area expertise, technical knowledge and experience in varying combinations. Henceforth, we must also require that staff have knowledge of the contemporary community and its concerns if history organizations are to be capable of implementing a community-focused mission.¹⁵

SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Concern about Task Force's Direction

The emphasis within the draft mission statement on community-derived values caused considerable concern among members of the SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Committee. One member commented that “the pendulum has swung 180 degrees from the irrelevance we lay at the feet of our academic colleagues. Here, the significance of history is found through the pursuit of present-day issues, defined in terms of its overt utility.” Another remarked, “I don’t think we can safely jettison the concept of ‘historical objectivity’ altogether.” Yet another stated:

Historians are not in the business of constructing identity for anyone. The politics of identity is the politics of special interests, where interest groups contend for dominance in the projection of consensus. . . . Historians work best as mediators between historical realities and contemporary life. The values which the public derive from interactions with the past are important but secondary to our task. Putting them first will mean that critical areas of inquiry will be closed, the interpretative function will be severely constricted, and stakeholder agendas will be substituted for current research developments as the state-of-the-art in the profession.¹⁶

When the SHFG committee met on 4 March 1996, members supported the activities suggested by the Task Force but also continued to argue strongly that the Task Force should write a “standards” document. Because of their concern with the philosophical directions embodied in the Archibald document, committee members also asked me to make the following points at the next Task Force meeting:

It is important for the national Task Force to make the point that attempts to manipulate historical interpretation for political ends is not a good thing.

15. Robert R. Archibald, “Task Force on Historians and Museums,” draft mission statement faxed to Task Force members, 19 January 1996, copy in File “Task Force on Historians and Museums, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives. Archibald published a broader statement of his views later that year. See Robert R. Archibald, “Clio in the Community: Reflections of a Public Historian,” *AHA Perspectives* 34 (September 1996): 21–22, 26.

16. Committee member responses to Archibald, “Task Force on Historians and Museums” draft mission statement, File “Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

The Task Force should go on record endorsing an exhibit process that is grounded in rigorous peer review.

The National Council on Public History should take a leadership role in advising and, when necessary, serving as an advocate for curators of historical exhibits.

The Task Force should recognize that the central problem is a professional issue for history and should be addressed as such.

Attacks on museum exhibits should constitute a “wake up call for historians” that academic history has failed to communicate a sense of how history is done, a sense that historical interpretation is always subject to revision if new evidence becomes available, and that this is a positive process.

The Task Force should define concrete activities that will communicate the historical process to the public.

The Task Force should attempt to define specific mechanisms to incorporate teaching about historiography at all levels of the educational system.

Public historians should become more politically sensitive to the impact of particular words and phrases. They should actively counter, for example, the negative implication that “revisionist history” has come to have by talking about “many voices” or “multiple interpretations.”¹⁷

Second Task Force Meeting

The Task Force re-convened in Chicago on 30 March 1996 during the annual meeting of the OAH. The first item for discussion was the draft mission statement prepared by Robert Archibald. Chairman Cary Carson commented that Archibald had “made the case for including the community, counting the constituency in. But what has yet to be worked out . . . is how do we let the community in without letting the community take over?” Archibald replied that it was “a matter of making institution and community indistinguishable.” Ellsworth Brown reiterated his argument from the previous meeting that “there are sometimes collaborations and sometimes winners and sometimes losers, and . . . it doesn’t even bother me . . . if an exhibit closes . . . [S]eeking standards that would prevent that or that would give us . . . guidelines . . . where we can say, ‘No, we should win, because we’ve met our standards’ isn’t what I think of as working it out.” Archibald and Brown also stated that museum advisory boards, if constituted to reflect the diversity of the community served by the institution, should make all decisions about the exhibit by consensus and that curators and historians should not interrupt the process by attempting to

17. Society for History in the Federal Government, Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, Report of Committee Chair, March 1996, SHFG Archives; “Comments on the Agenda for the National Task Force Meeting on 30 March 1996,” File “Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

impose their professional authority in any way. Hearing this, Ed Linenthal stated that it appeared to him that Archibald and Brown were saying that the Task Force had no reason to exist. Archibald and Brown more or less agreed. Linenthal, however, reminded them, to nods all around the rest of the table, that the Task Force had been organized for the purpose of developing strategies to forestall the kind of political interference that had resulted in cancellation of the *Enola Gay* exhibit. To reinforce Linenthal's argument, I passed out copies of the points the SHFG committee had asked me to make. As the committee members read the list, discussion came to a halt, and Archibald stated, "We do have a problem in points of view." These apparently irreconcilable visions of how to foster history in museums illuminated the gulf dividing the philosophies of different practitioners of history in museum settings.¹⁸

Seeking common ground, Sara Evans suggested that, for the moment, the Task Force table all other proposals and concentrate on sponsoring a conference similar to the "Renaissance Weekend" that has proved so fruitful for the Democratic Party, although she emphasized that there would be no connection with either major political party for a Task Force conference. The goal of such a conference would be to establish a dialogue within the history profession among academic historians, state and local museum people, nonfederal public historians, federal historians, historic site re-enactors, federal policy makers, and others who are stakeholders in the public history process. She described a possible structure for such a meeting: Everyone would participate on panels, speaking from expertise or from experience. The aim would be that conversations among participants would be started and would continue after the conference. It was hoped that such a meeting would foster communication throughout the group and broaden participants' understanding of the historical process. Then, the participants would further disseminate the ideas, "like yeast in bread," as they described the process, throughout their respective communities of the media, politics, academia, and state, local, and federal historical institutions. The result, if the strategy was successful, would be that important decisionmakers would have a better appreciation of the historical process. This, it was hoped, would alter the climate for exhibits that addressed controversial subjects. The Task Force then brainstormed about such a meeting and adjourned with the hope of meeting on 8 May 1996 to draft a conference agenda.¹⁹

SHFG 1996 Annual Meeting

On Friday, 3 May 1996, the SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Committee reported to the SHFG membership in a plenary session about its work

18. "Museums Meeting, March 30, 1996," summary minutes, in File "Task Force on Museums and Historians, 1995-98," SHFG Archives; author's notes of meeting, File "Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995-98," SHFG Archives.

19. Ibid.

and that of the Task Force. After I, as chair, summarized the work of both groups, members of the SHFG committee provided examples of problems and solutions in the preparation of history exhibits that had arisen in their agencies. Cecilia Wertheimer of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving spoke about security issues relating to counterfeiting that had to be considered in the preparation of an exhibit about the history of printing and coining money. The restrictions imposed were nonnegotiable, so the historians worked around them. Betty Monkman of the Office of the Curator at the White House described the varying political constituencies that had to be taken into account in the development of a White House Visitors' Center. Dwight Pitcaithley, Chief Historian of the National Park Service (and 1998-99 president of the National Council on Public History), described the careful research and negotiations that were required in preparing a "multiple voices" exhibit at the Little Big Horn battlefield. He emphasized the National Park Service's belief that historians and curators should inform their audience at the outset if an exhibit will present a potentially controversial point of view and should note that a later exhibit may present a different view. The audience asked numerous questions and, at the request of the committee, many present wrote down their thoughts about what the Task Force should aim to accomplish. There was overwhelming support for the original concept of preparing a standards document.²⁰

Third Task Force Meeting

When the Task Force met in Minneapolis on 8 May 1996 during the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums, I reiterated the request of the SHFG membership that a standards document might be produced. The other members of the Task Force suggested that, since the SHFG membership desired such a document strongly, the SHFG committee draft such a document and present it for consideration to the Task Force at a later meeting. If the Task Force members endorsed the SHFG standards, historians and curators who chose to make use of them would also enjoy the imprimatur of all the Task Force's constituent professional associations. The major topic of the meeting, however, was the proposed invitational conference, which was tentatively titled "History Matters: Conversations on the Practice of History in the Public Arena." The projected date for the conference was spring 1998. It was decided that it should be comprised of approximately 150–200 people, including all types of practitioners of history, members of Congress, and journalists. Everything said would be "off the record." Sessions were to emphasize (1) how history is practiced in the public arena; (2) that all history is interpretative; and (3) that

20. Author's notes on session at SHFG annual meeting; copies of comments from SHFG members, File "Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995–98," SHFG Archives.

any exhibit may be organized to achieve various interpretative ends—e.g., the affirmation of group heritage or the illumination of multiple and possibly controversial historical voices. Cary Carson and Sara Evans agreed to prepare a draft proposal for the conference, including a preliminary list of potential panel topics. Task Force members were to take this document to their executive councils and ask each organization to support the conference in principle and with a \$500–\$1000 financial commitment. The draft proposal and the demonstrations of commitment would then be used to solicit major financial support from foundations.²¹

Since that meeting in May 1996, the Task Force has not met again. Carson and Evans did draft a proposal, and Carson and Arnita Jones consulted with a conference planner about funding sources for the proposed conference.²² The hoped-for funds were not found easily, and by January 1998, Carson suggested that the Task Force should abandon the idea of the invitational conference and revive some of the earlier suggestions such as exhibit reviews in national opinion magazines, the awarding of a juried prize for the most outstanding exhibition in the public interest, and the cultivation of private-sector funders, such as those who support public radio and television, to award one or two competitive grants in the \$200,000 to \$400,000 range annually for history museum exhibitions on “big issues.” He believed that a chill had been cast over U.S. museums by the controversies and that currently, museums were so reluctant to address controversial themes that national interest in museums as a venue for presenting historical controversy had disappeared.²³

Also by January 1998, Patricia Mooney-Melvin had resigned as the NCPH representative and was to be replaced by another NCPH member. I was about to assume the presidency of SHFG and turn over our representation on the Task Force to Rebecca Cameron, the immediate past president of SHFG and member of the SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards committee. Ellsworth Brown had also resigned as the AAM representative to the Task Force, but no replacement had been named. In an effort to regain momentum for the Task Force’s efforts, a conference telephone call was scheduled for 31 March 1998. The only members who participated, however, were Cary Carson, Ed Linenthal, Sara Evans, and myself, in

21. “Summary (One historian’s interpretation of the ‘important’ ‘facts’ of the meeting),” 8 May 1996, Museums Task Force Meeting, Marquette Hotel, Minneapolis, Minnesota, File “Task Force on Historians and Museums, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives; Chair, SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, “Report on the 8 May 1996 Task Force on Historians and Museums Meeting,” File “SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

22. Memo, Cary Carson to members of the Task Force on Historians and Museums, Subject: Symposium Prospectus, 28 July 1996, and attachment, “Draft Proposal for a Symposium on the Practice of History in the Public Interest”; Cary Carson to Victoria A. Harden, 11 April 1997, both in File “Task Force on Historians and Museums, 1995–98,” SHFG Archives.

23. E-mail, Arnita Jones to Members of OAH Task Force on Historians and Museums, 25 March 1998; *ibid.*, 11 March 1998, and attachment, Cary Carson to Arnita Jones, 13 January 1998, both in “Task Force on Historians and Museums, 1995–98” SHFG Archives.

addition to Arnita Jones of the OAH. Those participating did not reject the chair's three suggestions but came back most strongly to the original idea that a document embodying standards of practice for museum exhibits would be of most assistance to curators "in the trenches." Since, as I will discuss below, the SHFG committee had formulated such a document and posted it on the society's web page, the committee decided to assess that document as a basis for future discussion and possible endorsement. Another idea advanced during the conference call was the organization of workshops on public history for journalists and other media personnel. Also recommended was the establishment of an e-mail list that might serve as an "early warning defense system" against attacks on exhibits. Such a list could provide professional organizations an opportunity to intervene and work with museums in heading off the cancellation of controversial exhibits.

Within a month, however, the Task Force suffered another blow, when Carson submitted his resignation as chair. "I am not the patient chairman you need to spearhead a standards writing initiative or to edit an e-mail newsletter," Carson stated, but ". . . I volunteer to give you and the new chair whatever help I can in planning and holding these workshops." Arnita Jones accepted Carson's resignation "with regret" but with understanding that during the existence of the Task Force, "the subject of its concern has changed dramatically and that the new directions . . . may not be those most consistent for someone with your particular gifts and inclinations."²⁴

SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Written

In the fall of 1996, while plans for the invitational conference were being formulated, the SHFG Museum Exhibit Standards Committee proceeded to draft a statement of exhibit standards.²⁵ The committee discussed major points to be included, produced a draft, circulated comments, and finally, in a long session, negotiated every word in the final, one-page statement that

24. Author's notes of conference call; Cary Carson to Arnita Jones, 27 April 1998; Arnita Jones to Cary Carson, 12 May 1998, all in File "Task Force on Historians and Museums, 1995–98" SHFG Archives.

25. Even though the Task Force had decided against drafting a standards document, some historians continued to assume that such a document was still its focus. Steven Lubar, chairman of the Division of History of Technology at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, reviewed Mike Wallace's *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, and noted that Wallace had suggested that to avoid future fiascoes like that surrounding the *Enola Gay* exhibit, "museums should be able to refer to standards of professional rights and responsibilities that guarantee the right to mount exhibitions that meet certain standards, free from political interference." Lubar stated, "This would be useful, and a group of historical organizations is in the process of writing such standards. [emphasis added]." See Steven Lubar, "High Calling for Museums," review of Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), *Museum News* (November/December 1996): 57 ff.

was endorsed by the Society's Executive Committee on 8 January 1997 and posted on its web page.²⁶

The standards (reproduced at the end of this article) had two parts. The preamble set forth the assumptions on which the recommendations were based. The role of history in a contemporary democracy was defined as more complex and important than the rhetoric and ritual of heritage commemorations alone, although those observances were acknowledged as important. The preamble noted that museum exhibits teach history in a unique and powerful way, because they are often viewed by several generations in a family. Parents and grandparents often bring children to exhibits and impress upon them, "This is who we are." In preparing exhibits about controversial themes, curators and historians need to be sensitive to this sometimes "sacramental" characteristic that exhibits acquire and mindful of their public trust.²⁷ Because of the potentially dangerous nationalistic, religious, and ethnic gulfs that divide people in the world today, however, the preamble affirmed the belief that some history exhibits should educate citizens in the idea that different groups in a pluralistic society may understand the same historical event in quite different ways. By fostering such understanding, historical exhibits could help to bridge these gaps and promote peace rather than conflict.

The preamble also spoke to the need for curators and historians to communicate the process of history to exhibit viewers. Especially they should demonstrate that all exhibits are interpretive as signified by the fundamental choice of objects, images, and text included and may be reinterpreted if new evidence is located. Finally, the preamble articulated the belief that attempts to suppress exhibits or impose an uncritical point of view, however widely shared, are inimical to open and rational discussion. This statement was based on the assumption that our society believes in rational thought and that exhibits should strive for objectivity, even if it is widely recognized that they may never fully achieve this goal. This statement also stands in opposition to those who embrace the notion that the end of every exhibit must be to advance a particular political viewpoint.

The list of "shoulds" in the document was brief and based on the assumption that not every exhibit will be burdened with controversy, so that efforts to identify opposing viewpoints would not be necessary in every case. It recognized the important role played by communities and funders and the diversity present within most of those communities. The closing statement, that museum administrators should defend exhibits produced ac-

26. Minutes of the Executive Council Meeting, 8 January 1997, in File "Museum Exhibit Standards Committee, 1995-98" SHFG Archives; website posting at www.shfg.org/tcomm_info.html.

27. For a discussion of the concept of "sacred narratives," in museums, see Edward T. Linenthal, "Problems and Promise in Public History," *The Public Historian* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 45-47.

ording to these standards, recognized the vulnerability of historians and curators, and called for courage on the part of administrators. This was not a suggestion that administrators should lightly disregard powerful forces that may affect an institution, nor did it urge administrators to support curators without exception. The committee hoped that the document would provide a means for forging closer ties and promoting accountability among historians, curators, community advisors, funders, and administrators. In the end, however, committee members recognized that historians and curators have an obligation to exercise their professional authority in interpreting the past, and they concluded that the community, whether local, state, or national, would benefit more from viewing exhibits produced by professionals than by being denied the opportunity to think about controversial subjects because of cancellation of the exhibits that raised them. After the SHFG Executive Council approved the document, it was disseminated and discussed at a roundtable discussion, “Who’s in Charge of Museum Interpretation?” at the 1997 National Council on Public History annual meeting in Albany, New York.²⁸

Reflections and Conclusions

I would like to reflect on the deliberations of the Task Force and the SHFG Museums Exhibit Standards committee and to propose answers to the three questions I raised at the outset. To answer the first question, “Was it realistic or misguided to assume that a ‘standards of practice’ document could help protect museum curators from political interference in the exhibit process?” it is imperative that we understand the different philosophies that motivate historians working in varied employment settings. To those in academia, in university-based public history programs, and in government historical offices and museums, it seemed realistic at the outset to write such a document and to expect it to be useful. To those employed as administrators of museums, however, who deal daily with the necessity of keeping museums financially solvent, a standards document may have seemed at best irrelevant and at worst a hindrance to their efforts.

The second question, “Do we really want to prevent controversial exhibits from being shut down?” raises the issue of how the mission of museums is understood. Are museums essentially “places where citizens should engage in dialogue about enduring historical issues,” even if that means that for every dialogue, the same citizens may win and the same may lose the battle for interpretation of exhibits from their points of view? Alternatively,

28. “Who’s in Charge of Museum Interpretation?” 2 May 1997 Roundtable discussion, in *Public History and Public Memory: 19th Annual Conference of the National Council on Public History*, Albany, New York, 30 April–4 May 1997, 16.

are museums places where collections of objects are preserved and exhibited by expertly trained professional curators and historians? If historians and curators have no authority in interpreting the past and should always yield to community desires, what is the point of hiring professional historians to work on exhibits? The discussions of the Task Force indicate that historians are seriously divided over these fundamental issues.

The final question asked, “Is it possible for historians to speak about museum issues as a professional group, or do the differences in our specific jobs as professors, government-employed historians and curators, and administrators of public or private museums make it impossible for us to reach any agreement?” I believe that at present, the divisions within the profession revealed by the answers to the first two questions make the answer to this one an emphatic, “No.” Historians are not united in their views about what, if anything, they can claim with regard to professional authority, and how they can best use the museum medium in history exhibits. If, indeed, it seems important to utilize professionally trained historians in researching and curating exhibits, what is the best way to communicate how historians work to a public that becomes disturbed by controversial exhibits? Is an elite conference, comprised of policymakers, journalists, and selected historians, indeed the way to diffuse understanding of the historical process to a public audience? Is a “standards of practice” document preferable? What is the best way to counter the chill that Cary Carson described as having settled over museums? I believe that we need to hear more from the members of the professional associations represented on the Task Force about their opinions on these issues.

This account of the response of the major professional societies to the controversy produced by the *Enola Gay* exhibit is strongly influenced by my experience as a federal employee and as a member of the Society for History in the Federal Government. Perhaps other members of the Task Force will also raise issues for the community of historians to discuss that may help to identify a means for bridging the gulfs that divide us. I would like to see this article serve as an interim report that will generate discussion and inform new representatives to the Task Force when it is reconvened by the OAH. We all need to raise our sights from our day-to-day concerns and, by talking with each other, find common professional ground. Only then will we be able to state what historians believe and be able to articulate those principles clearly when our colleagues in museums or elsewhere need us.

SOCIETY FOR HISTORY IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
EXHIBIT STANDARDS

In a democracy, a knowledge of history forms the context in which citizens make informed decisions. Historical knowledge also provides personal, family, and community links to the past. Historical understanding of other societies assists individuals in identifying commonalities in the human condition and in negotiating the differences that exist in our increasingly pluralistic world.

Museum exhibits play an important role in the transmission of historical knowledge. They are viewed by citizens of diverse ages, interests, and backgrounds, often in family groups. They sometimes celebrate common events, occasionally memorialize tragedies or injustices, and contain an interpretive element, even if it is not readily apparent. The process of selecting themes, photographs, objects, documents, and other components to be included in an exhibit implies interpretive judgments about cause and effect, perspective, significance, and meaning.

Historical exhibits may encourage the informed discussion of their content and the broader issues of historical significance they raise. Attempts to suppress exhibits or to impose an uncritical point of view, however widely shared, are inimical to open and rational discussion.

In aiming to achieve exhibit goals, historians, museum curators, administrators, and members of museum boards should approach their task mindful of their public trust.

To discharge their duties appropriately, they should observe the following standards:

1. Exhibits should be founded on scholarship, marked by intellectual integrity, and subjected to rigorous peer review. Evidence considered in preparing the exhibit may include objects, written documentation, oral histories, images, works of art, music, and folklore.
2. At the outset of the exhibit process, museums should identify stakeholders in any exhibit and may wish to involve their representatives in the planning process.
3. Museums and other institutions funded with public monies should be keenly aware of the diversity within the communities and constituencies that they serve.
4. When an exhibit addresses a controversial subject, it should acknowledge the existence of competing points of view. The public should be able to see that history is a changing process of interpretation and reinterpretation formed through gathering and reviewing evidence, drawing conclusions, and presenting the conclusions in text or exhibit format.
5. Museum administrators should defend exhibits produced according to these standards.