

## YOU CAN'T FIGHT IN HERE – THIS IS THE WAR MUSEUM

I assume that the contours of the War Museum dust-up are familiar to all, so I'll begin by observing that if you really want to ensure that a book is read, a film seen, or a recording listened to, the surest method is to ban it. I can attest to this from experience: nothing less than a school-wide ban would have obliged the entire population of fourth through eighth graders at my elementary school to read Judy Blume's coming-of-age novel *Forever*; not only that, only a ban could have compelled us to discuss, analyze, and otherwise dissect the book with a zeal that our English teachers had failed entirely to arouse in us with freely available literature. That the book turned out to be disappointingly inoffensive taught us important lessons about the character of people who ban things.

So bravo to the angry veterans or, at least, to those people who claim to speak for them: they have done more to publicize the War Museum's innocuous display on strategic bombing than the museum itself ever could have. And on the topic of 'claiming to speak for them', let me tell you what the World War II veteran in my own family had to say about it: "These guys survived Hitler – what's their problem?" (You must imagine these words spoken both indignantly and in my grandfather-in-law's Scottish burr to get the real effect.) In other words, it is simply undignified for men who once fought so hard in so real a cause to spend their remaining days in petty squabbles over piffing and only perceived offenses, and it is doubly so for anyone to do it on their behalf.

But in the hallowed spaces of patriotic memory offense can be made of almost anything. You may recollect Stephen Harper's frustration, a year or two ago, over the fact that his Remembrance Day poppy kept falling off. In a rare moment of humour the Prime Minister asked why, after ninety years, pin technology had not been perfected. Sure enough, the harmless little jest made the news and from some quarters came accusations that Harper had disparaged the memory of our veterans. So why should it surprise us that some people chose to take offense at the following?

The value and morality of the strategic bomber offensive against Germany remains bitterly contested. Bomber Command's aim was to crush civilian morale and force Germany to surrender by destroying its cities and industrial installations. Although Bomber Command and American attacks left 600,000 Germans dead and more than five million homeless, the raids resulted in only small reductions of German war production until late in the war.

I admit that the wording which replaced this is probably better, but that's not the point. Not one sentence in the original is untrue or demeaning to veterans. Debates about the efficacy and morality of the bomber offensive have been unremitting since the first bomb fell. Responsible historians and military leaders of unimpeachable patriotic credentials have weighed in on both sides of the argument. It is painful to contemplate that these few words might have caused some veterans offense, but there is a larger principle at stake here: *historians have a right to offend people*. Since when has it been the object of the historian's craft to make people feel good about themselves, let alone to make veterans feel that their military service was in all cases and in all causes not in vain? Our responsibility is to say what happened and why it happened. Whether the result reinforces or undermines nationalist sentiment is incidental, and at any rate something is staggeringly wrong when the same people who rage against the concept of inherited guilt can in the next breath say that we should be proud of our country's history.

About a month ago I noticed that the photograph of an abstract painting on the National Gallery's website was flipped. I notified them of the error, they investigated (the painting is hanging downstairs) and the image was fixed. In this case, an error was corrected, and that's one thing. But if I had said that the painting offended me and demanded that it be replaced with another one, that's another thing entirely, and make no mistake: it is the perceived offense, not a factual error, which was the cause of the recent controversy.

Canadians' very tenuous and very delicate patriotic sensibilities are moored to a generation that rapidly is passing into history, so it's not surprising that some people are feeling a little defensive. But now we find that even the most well-intentioned tributes, proffered by soldier-friendly historians working for an institution steadfast in its veneration of veterans, can willfully be misinterpreted as slander directed at their suffering and sacrifices. A historian's first duty is to the facts and not to the flag, but we are now confronted with the depressing possibility that any serious discussion of the war will have to be deferred until the generation that fought it is gone. And what's even more depressing is the fact that some people wouldn't have it any other way.

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