

Los Alamos Study Group

War of the Walls At Los Alamos' Bomb Museum

9/27/96

The Los Alamos Study Group, a citizens' nuclear policy research and advocacy group, is fighting to regain the exhibit space it was given three years ago at Los Alamos National Lab's (LANL's) Bradbury Science Museum. The main issue at stake is whether LANL will be able to use taxpayer funds to promote, without noticeable rebuttal, its unabashedly pro-nuclear-weapons narrative at the Bradbury. The museum receives over 100,000 visitors annually.

In 1992 the Study Group successfully sought space in the museum after learning that California courts at both the district and appellate level had ruled in favor of Bay-Area activist groups who sought space for their exhibit in the promotional Lawrence Livermore National Lab's Visitor Center. The ruling was based on Livermore Lab's violation of activists' freedom of speech and equal protection under both the Federal and California constitutions.

When LANL's new Bradbury facility opened its doors in April 1993, the Study Group's antinuclear exhibit was there, with full and written approval by Laboratory management. The Study Group, on the basis of this approval, had invested thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours in preparing its exhibit.

The Study Group's exhibit then hung without incident for more than two years, occupying a tiny fraction of museum's total space. With the folio-sized blank book made available by the Museum for visitor comment nearby, the alternative exhibit was a popular part of the museum.

Then, last summer, half the space allotted to the Study Group was turned over to a group of LANL retirees and World War II veterans. They had mounted a letter campaign to museum Director John Rhoades demanding space to air their fervently supportive views of the atomic bombing of Japan.

The barrage included a letter from former Lab Director Harold Agnew, which said in part: "We got rid of the Smithsonian curator over the Enola Gay fiasco. Hopefully the Bradbury staff will understand."

Now, the Study Group's display area is less than one-third of its original size, and most of its original display is in storage. A draft "protocol" proposed by the Museum would make even this small dissenting space subject to a lottery, despite the fact that there have been no competing claims for anti-nuclear dissent space since the Museum opened and none are expected.

The Study Group maintains that the University of California-managed Lab has used the retiree group as a convenient cover to ease embarrassing dissent out of the museum.

In addition, the Lab renamed the space once provided to the Study Group. Formerly, it was called "Alternative Perspectives." Now the Museum has changed its name to "Public Forum." The Study Group interprets this as an attempt to adopt a "referee" role, preserving the Lab's authoritative guise and safely diverting the thrust of dissent.

"If debate between citizens was the issue, there are many 'public forums' in which it could take place. But the Museum is the only place where dissent from the Museum's own pro-nuclear exhibits can be mounted, and LANL's approach impairs that dissent," said Study Group Director Greg Mello.

The degree to which the pro-lab group is a "citizens" group is a matter of dispute. They

are an association largely composed of individuals who either work for or have retired from LANL. Their exhibit, like the rest of the Bradbury, is entirely supportive of the Lab's past and its current mission.

"If the Museum cares to add another pro-lab exhibit, why do they need to carve it out of the space formerly offered for dissent? Why not use one or more of the seven empty wall spaces now present in the Museum for this purpose? The Lab's real purpose here is, as usual, to diminish meaningful public debate, not foster it," said Greg Mello, Study Group Director.

Last week, the Museum Director refused to meet with members of the Los Alamos Study Group, the DOE, and the University unless the pro-lab group could also be present. The Study Group declined to enter a discussion with the pro-lab group. Study Group Museum Coordinator Cathie Sullivan explains: "We have no dispute with the pro-lab group; they and the Laboratory should resolve questions regarding their exhibit. It appears that the Laboratory is hiding behind the pro-lab `citizens' group in order to limit our space and ability to dissent."

Cathie went on to comment: "Since last summer the pro-lab group seems to be controlling the museum's every move on this issue. The Museum Director's job has been threatened by them. And the Lab has assigned a legal counsel who has a conflict of interest in this case--as well as a personal crusade against us. Now they come up with a `time-sharing' concept of free speech, which is needless, given the extra space available, offensive, and probably illegal. They haven't been able to dispute our facts, so their only recourse seems to be to take away our ability to communicate them."

****ENDS****