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ON THE WEB

A Big Museum Opens, to Jeers as Well as Cheers

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(Excerpted)

HANTILLY, Va., Dec. 15 — The Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum opened a vast, gleaming new building on the edge of Dulles International Airport here on Monday, filled with aircraft of every description, including the B-29 that carried the first atomic bomb dropped on Japan.....

The opening was mobbed not only by tourists and aviation buffs but also by several dozen protesters, who said the bombing of Hiroshima should have been better described. A plaque in front of the B-29, the Enola Gay, describes it as "the most sophisticated propeller-driven bomber of World War II" and notes that it dropped the bomb, but tells little more.

The Smithsonian expects to attract about three million visitors a year to its new building, named the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in honor of the aircraft leasing magnate who pledged \$65 million for its construction.

In the Space Hangar, which is dominated by the Enterprise, a prototype of the space shuttle, a group of students visiting Washington from the Saklan Valley School in Moraga, Calif., near San Francisco, clustered around the Gemini VII capsule. Frank Borman and James A. Lovell were aloft in Gemini VII for 14 days in December 1965 to demonstrate that astronauts could endure in space long enough to get to the moon and back.

Alison Tokar, 13, looked skeptically at the tiny interior and doubted that she could have lasted that long.

"I can't spend an hour in the car," she said. "And they eat like, toothpaste, right?"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/16/national/16MUSE.html>