

Smithsonian, Indian Leaders Call a Truce

An agreement will result in the reburial of part of the Smithsonian's collection of Native Indian remains

AS WALTER ECHO-HAWK SEES it, there are 18,500 "dead bodies" in the nation's attic—that is, in the specimen drawers of the Smithsonian Institution of Washington, D.C. Echo-Hawk, a lawyer at the Native American Rights Fund in Boulder, Colorado, claims that many of the bones in the museum's anthropological collection should never have been taken from the ground and that amends should now be made for this "massive grave desecration."

With rhetoric of this kind—and stronger—Echo-Hawk and Suzan Harjo of the National Congress of American Indians have waged a campaign over the past few years to get the Smithsonian to divest itself of its hoard of American Indian skeletons and artifacts, the largest in the world. They seem about to succeed. Last week they sealed a decisive agreement with the museum on a plan for "repatriation" of bones and funerary objects.

A pact formally endorsed by Secretary of the Smithsonian Robert McC. Adams on 12 September calls for the museum to release an undetermined fraction of the collection for disposal by modern Indian tribes, if they file claims. Museum official Margaret Gaynor says the plan goes something like this: "We notify the tribes of what we have, and if the preponderance of evidence indicates that it is theirs and they want it, back it goes." Claims need not be based on strict genealogy; "cultural affiliation" will do. A committee named by the Smithsonian will monitor the program and serve as arbiter.

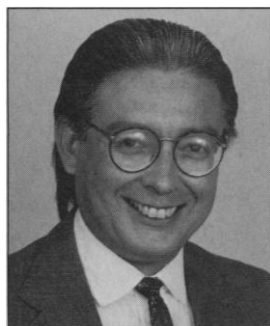
It is too early to estimate how much of the American Indian collection will be disbanded, but surely some of it will. No anthropologists are thrilled at the prospect, and some are deeply disappointed that the Smithsonian has yielded to what they see as political expedience. An outspoken few, like Clement



Entombing the past. The media were on hand at an artifact "reburial" at Wounded Knee in August (above). Mike Haney of the Seminole Nation begins the reburial ceremony (right).



USD Photo/Dan Genzler



Walter Echo-Hawk

Meighan of the University of California at Los Angeles, founder of the American Committee for the Preservation of Archaeological Collections (ACPAC), compare it to book burning. But many others view it as a sensible and humane gesture, hoping it will end the criticism they have had to endure for almost a decade—criticism that accused museums of continuing the Indian massacres of the 19th century through disrespect for the dead in the 20th.

The Smithsonian is a latecomer to the reburial trend. But its decision to accede to Native American requests is significant because it marks a turning point in federal policy and a great symbolic victory for the activists. The Smithsonian was for years the most visible holdout against the movement, insisting that items in its collection would be returned only to next of kin and only if claimants

came forward with rigorous proof of a blood relationship. Now, according to a policy that was nailed down in legal prose on 12 September, that position has been abandoned, and any tribe may reclaim items, if it has a good case.

The hard opponents of reburial, such as

Meighan, view the Smithsonian decision as a cop-out. He sees it as the latest in a series of concessions to a driving publicity campaign. "Every politician thinks it's their bounden duty to pass legislation controlling archaeological research," he says, because each gets credit for favoring minorities without any apparent cost. But Meighan argues that there is a cost: bones and artifacts are archaeologists' books. To bury them is to destroy irreplaceable research material. If something must be returned, he suggests,

museums should draw the line at 1776, when the United States became a nation, and repatriate only items younger than that.

But it is unlikely that any Native American representative would go along with such a policy, and indeed, all have taken care to avoid defining any cutoff time for their demands. They want to keep their options open, making all skeletons and funeral objects in North America candidates for reburial.

Museums and research associations likewise have kept the terms of the debate vague. Although they have not said why, they may have kept the discussion murky to avoid falling victim to the "ratchet effect," in which negotiators could go from museum to museum, asking each to top the concessions of the previous one. Museum curators have not stampeded, but a number of them have moved toward reburying Indian remains, and some began long before the Smithsonian took its big step.

For example, the state of California's Department of Parks and Recreation, which inherited about 800 skeletons from early excavations, agreed to reburial in 1983. However, the decision has been held in abeyance by a lawsuit filed by archaeologists, who claim the state has not properly analyzed the environmental impact of digging all the necessary holes.

Then there was a rush of new settlements this year. Stanford University agreed in June to divest itself of 550 American Indian skeletons. James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., chairman of the anthropology department, says, "Part of what propelled us was that the Native Americans who made the case for repatriation were not coming to us as anonymous faces; they were our own graduate students and members of the staff." However, Bert Gerow, an emeritus professor who claims to have acquired much of the collection, argues that the material is not Stanford's to give away. Stanford's lawyers have the claim under review.

This year the University of Minnesota

also moved toward reburial of its Indian remains, as did the University of South Dakota and the University of Nebraska.

Museums have been spurred to action by critics who say these institutions got their American Indian skeletons without consent, essentially from grave robbers. The reburialists have lobbied to get the Smithsonian's top brass to see this point of view and to overrule its anthropology department, which was reluctant to let go of any research material. The lobbying achieved little success until August, when Native American leaders at a meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, persuaded Adams to take a step in their direction. He agreed in principle that any tribe with a solid claim should be able to take back not only the bones of immediate kin, but also those of ancestors and associated "burial goods."

As with all such agreements, the heart is in the details, not all of which are published. The framework is to be set forth in a bill being drafted in the House as *Science* goes to press. Representative Ben Nighthorse Campbell (D-CO), himself a Native American, was planning a news conference on 12 September with Secretary Adams and Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI) to declare that harmony is at hand, revealing a new plan of action. It calls for a \$1-million inventory of the Smithsonian's vaults, the release of objects claimed by tribes, and the construction of a new museum.

The plan began to take shape this year when the Heye Foundation of New York City decided to turn over to the Smithsonian its Museum of the American Indian, which it could no longer afford to maintain. As part of the agreement, a small outpost will be left in New York to continue exhibits. But most of this valuable collection, according to a deal that Inouye helped bring about, will move to Washington to be housed in a National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall. Campbell and Inouye have sponsored bills to authorize the transfer, and an Inouye aide says the package, with funding, may be on the President's desk for approval within a month.

Before any of this could go forward, however, the Native American groups insisted that old business must be settled. Other bills in Congress requiring the Smithsonian to yield its skeletons were already pending. The solution became clear after a bit of negotiation in August. Campbell amended his bill (H.R. 2668) to include the reburial program, creating a package everyone could endorse, and the Smithsonian endorsed it.

The Native American leaders are pleased. "Of course we're satisfied," says Harjo: "we negotiated it." Echo-Hawk agrees: "We are

Old Bones Solve New Problems

"Most people aren't aware of the information that can come from a normal skeleton," says Douglas Owsley, a forensic anthropologist at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History. He does original research using the extensive collection of Indian, settler, and slave skeletons at the museum and sometimes ventures into modern detective work.

Owsley says that the kind of information contained in the Smithsonian's bones is invaluable for tracking big trends in human populations. For example, he has just completed a study of child rearing with Noreen Turoff, a researcher at the Smithsonian and the Carnegie Institution. By measuring concentrations of nitrogen in bone, they were able, they believe, to settle one issue in a long-running debate about the age at which agricultural and hunter-gatherer societies weaned children. There is a theory that the population of agricultural societies may have increased because mothers were able to conceive more frequently after weaning children at an earlier age, perhaps using foods such as corn mush. Based on their survey, however, Owsley and Turoff concluded that there was no big difference in weaning age.

Turoff, meanwhile, has moved into what she finds a competitive new field—the extraction of large proteins from prehistoric bones. Earlier this year she found albumen present in a mastodon bone, and now she is "chasing the carrot" of reconstructing DNA from ancient human bones. She has identified immunoglobulins in early Indian skeletons, although not the associated antigens. "Stay tuned," she says: "about four laboratories are working on this and it may be done in a year."

But the Smithsonian's Indian collection is not only used for historical research. It has served as a unique resource for the police.

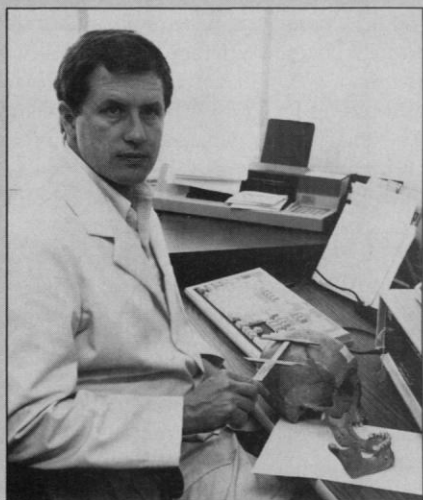
One recent morning, Owsley invited a reporter to see how the experience he has accumulated with the Smithsonian's collections is applied to modern forensic studies. He was working with detectives from Pinellas County, Florida, who were trying to identify a murder victim they found in the Gulf of Mexico last October.

The remains of "John Doe" were laid out neatly in five trays. Owsley reached for the pelvis. "The pubic synthesis area is well developed and shows no signs of osteoporosis," he began. Owsley concluded: "This guy is in his late 30s or early 40s."

Next, he took up the skull. He pointed out that the marks of the cranial suture had all but faded from the inner surface and internal depressions that indicate aging were evident—all consistent with middle age. Then he turned to what proved the most distinctive clue: the teeth. He found them "beautiful," pointing to scratches where John Doe had brushed them vigorously. But the odd thing, "reminiscent of some prehistoric skulls," he said, was a curious notch in the incisors, top and bottom. John Doe may have had the awkward habit of grinding his incisors across one another, or he may have kept a toothpick constantly dangling from his front teeth. Summing up a

few other details, Owsley declared that John Doe must have been 35 to 45 years old, a smoker, well fed, even overweight, and was basically a "big jock type of guy." With a grin, officer Gary Herbein said, "The person you've just described could have been any one of 250 drug dealers in Pinellas County."

When asked about the impact on his research of the campaign to rebury the skeletons, Owsley groans: "It's disappointing to me how easy it is to trivialize" this research. "I'm involved in projects I never would have dreamed possible 11 years ago when I got my Ph.D." No one can predict what kinds of analysis will be possible in the future, Owsley says, and he thinks it would be tragic to throw away precious research material of the kind stored in the halls of the Smithsonian. ■ E.M.



Archaeological detective. Douglas Owsley, associate curator of anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution.

all delighted with the result and I think Secretary Adams should be commended for taking this step."

Researchers do not speak with the same enthusiasm, or with a united voice. Indeed, while the Native American leaders have been expert tacticians in the campaign for reburial, researchers have been far more passive, essentially reacting to events rather than developing a plan of their own. When the demands for reburial first appeared, anthropologists offered a few limited concessions. Some hoped the trouble would go away if the publicity faded. Even now, many resent the fact, as Smithsonian anthropologist Douglas Owsley says, that the media give the controversy so much play. But in fact the rhetoric on both sides left little room for compromise, and there were few attempts until recently to develop a generally accepted or "correct" way for big institutions to respond.

"Right now our position is that we don't have one," says Randolph Fillmore, a staffer at the American Association of Anthropologists. The AAA has created a commission chaired by Nancy Lurie of the Milwaukee Public Museum to look into the subject. It will report back next year and members will vote on a policy in November 1990. But by then, presumably, the law will be passed and the federal precedent will be established.

An executive group of The Society for American Archaeology articulated a policy against reburial in 1983, and, according to anthropologist Larry Zimmerman of the University of South Dakota, the group "lobbied continually against legislation in Congress" that would have required reburial. But in 1985, the SAA began moving to a more lenient stance, speaking of the need to respect the feelings of indigenous people and offering to negotiate with aggrieved persons if they represented next of kin or could demonstrate genetic affiliation with remains in collections. According to the immediate past president of the SAA, Dena Dincauze of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, "we hope issues will be settled locally, on a case-by-case basis, with no overarching principles" established.

On the other hand, the council of the American Association of Museums has followed a more accommodating line since January of 1988. It urges museums to consider releasing human remains and grave goods if they appeared to have been acquired in an unethical way. It even suggests that museums consider releasing early (pre-Columbian) human remains on request, "unless there are compelling and overriding reasons to retain" them.

The group that may have gone furthest toward accommodation is the World Ar-

chaeological Congress (WAC), which split from the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Scientists several years ago, calling it dominated by white American and European interests. At an intercongress meeting in August organized by Larry Zimmerman, members of the WAC met with leaders of indigenous peoples to hammer out six principles reflecting the idea that the "dead have some say in this," as Zimmerman puts it. About 220 people gathered in Vermillion, South Dakota, producing a "Vermillion Accord." It speaks of the need to respect the wishes of the dead and of local communities "wherever possible, reasonable, and lawful." It also speaks of the need to respect the scientific research value of human remains—"the first time I have seen indigenous people recognize that there are legitimate scientific and research needs," says Zimmerman.

But the accord that Zimmerman regards as a great advance is seen by others as a futile attempt at appeasement. The WAC is just "a political action group in favor of reburial," according to Clement Meighan, a vocal anti-burialist. Meighan is founder of the 450-member ACPAC, which is prepared to go to

court if necessary to stop the dismantling of collections.

"The museums are under pressure from politicians, but they don't really want to give anything away," Meighan says. "Every concession made so far has been met with another demand." The activists have gotten their way, Meighan claims, by intimidating curators and cajoling political leaders in what appears to be a promiscuity crusade.

Meighan and others who confront the reburial campaign directly fear that once it gets rolling, there will be no logical stopping point. Soon, he predicts, universities will have to clip all photos of aborigines out of its library books, because some people believe the camera captures one's soul. The activists refuse to place an age limit on the material that they claim should be reburied. Thus, Meighan predicts that America's anthropological collections could be emptied unless the campaign meets resistance.

No doubt this forecast is overdrawn for effect, but it indicates the passions that reburial has aroused. It also suggests, as Dincauze says, that there may never be a consensus on a subject so charged with emotion. ■ ELIOT MARSHALL

White House, Congress Push Computer Plan

When the White House last week released a major plan to promote high-performance computing research and the construction of a national high-speed computer network, it gave an important boost to legislation with similar goals now being considered by Congress. The likely upshot: a big budget increase could be in store to preserve U.S. leadership in state-of-the-art computing.

The federal government currently spends about \$500 million annually for research and development in high-performance computing. The new interagency plan, outlined in a report, "The Federal High Performance Computing Program,"* would supplement this budget over 5 years by \$1.9 billion, beginning with \$150 million the first year and gradually increasing to \$600 million the fifth year. The plan, however, does not specify budgets for individual agencies.

Nearly a fifth of the budget increase would be spent to beef up an existing national computer network. The agencies are proposing to create a network that can transmit data at 3 billion bits per second, 60 times faster than the 45-million bit network that the National Science Foundation expects to phase in by the end of fiscal year 1990. The expanded network would facili-

tate transmission of the huge of amounts of data generated by increased supercomputer use in government and university labs.

Under the interagency plan, hardware and software R&D would receive equal funding. The proposal also promotes new applications of high-performance computing in research areas including the human genome, superconductivity, and the design of drugs and semiconductors.

The interagency proposal won praise from Senator Albert Gore (D-TN), who last spring introduced legislation with similar provisions. The reason for the likeness is that the Gore bill and the interagency plan are both based on a federal report released 2 years ago that recommended expanding R&D in high-performance computing.

It's too soon, however, for computer researchers to start lining up for funding. Gore predicts that his bill will pass the Senate by the end of the year, but the House is just beginning deliberations on the legislation. In addition, the interagency plan does not have the official backing of the White House budget office. "This report is designed for agency-level planning purposes" alone, the document says. But federal agencies plan to use the report to lobby for new funding starting in fiscal year 1991, a process that began the day after the plan was announced. ■ MARJORIE SUN

*The report was released by the Office of Science and Technology Policy, 8 September 1989.