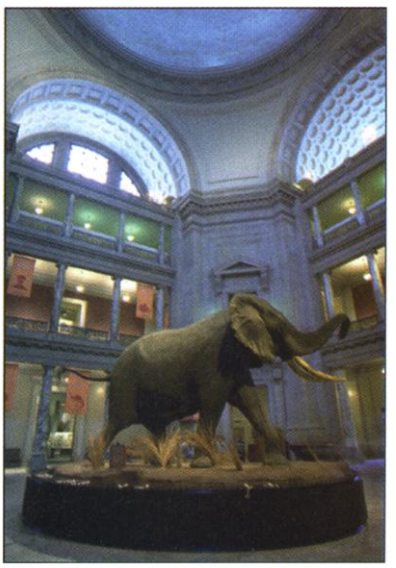
The Smithsonian Affair

Sometimes a development of intense scientific interest unfolds in puzzling fits and starts, making it difficult to follow—let alone reach a conclusion about it—until things settle down. Such an affair is the growing controversy involving budgets, management style, exhibit policy, and the welfare of science at the Smithsonian Institution. It's important because the Smithsonian is a scientific treasure; like a handful of similar institutions, it supports research essential to understanding evolution and biological diversity and to educating the public about the natural world.

As the story rolled out beginning in early April, we heard first of the pending closure of the Conservation Center at Front Royal, Virginia, which was part of proposed budget cuts, and then of possible further reductions and reorganizations. Smithsonian scientists issued statements and petitions critical of Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence M. Small. (Of course, these could be put down to a familiar form of change paranoia.) Complaints from conservation scientists then resulted in congressional interventions, reversing the Front Royal decision. (Of course, the intervenors were from Virginia, so perhaps a special interest was at work.) Then came the abrupt resignation of Robert Fri, the widely respected director of the National Museum of Natural History. Now things were getting worrisome; but Dr. Fri, adhering firmly to the high road, wasn't saying much.



National Museum of Natural History

Within the past few weeks, reports from external evaluations of the Smithsonian's scientific programs have been released, presenting a mixed picture, as we reported last week (*Science*, 13 July 2001, p. 194). Impressive strengths were noted in some areas, especially the Observatory, run jointly with Harvard; the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute; and the management of the Museum of Natural History's invaluable collections. But disappointing evaluations of some areas lent media support to Secretary Small's agenda, whatever that is.

We know little of it, because the process has been remarkably opaque; and that is one of the factors that has lowered morale among Smithsonian scientists and induced protests from outsiders who value those scientists' work. The plan foresees "Centers of Excellence"—a high-sounding label, but one that doesn't tell a tropical botanist much about a future in which he may be allied with a brachiopod paleontologist. The devil, one is likely to conclude, is in the details; which we don't have, because Small hasn't divulged them to us, to the public, or to his own employees.

What we do know is that he has a budget problem, resulting from a recent zero-growth history in scientific personnel: Total staff doubled between 1981 and 2001, but the number of curators and researchers remained constant. We can't blame Small for that, so it's only fair to judge him on actions he's already taken. Alas, there is little comfort there. The Museum of American History now has an exhibit on the history of the U.S. presidency, financed and substantially influenced by a single individual donor. Thoughtful visitors have admired the tchotchkes but found the substance shallow. Now the museum has accepted a gift of $38 million for the purpose of developing an exhibit honoring "achievers." The problem is that the gift's terms give the donor, Catherine B. Reynolds and her foundation, some participation in selecting the advisory group and in the design and construction schedule.

There is nothing new about donors wanting to be players; universities confront it all the time. Those responsible for public trusts must examine gift proposals as skeptically as equine orthodontists and say "no" when necessary. If donors to these institutions are allowed to direct how their money is spent, it is hard to argue that they are entitled to the privileges the law gives them, including that of tax exemption. Whether the terms of the Reynolds gift interest the Internal Revenue Service or not, they ought to interest us, because they speak directly to the Secretary's capacity for responsible stewardship.

Museums always have to balance the need to provide appealing public exhibits against their mission to develop and curate the collections that are so essential to science and other forms of scholarship. Despite the discouraging early signals, we hope that the Secretary can find a way to mount exhibits that teach and inspire and to nurture a science base that led one distinguished member of an evaluation committee to call the Smithsonian "arguably the greatest museum in the world."

Donald Kennedy

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