Smithsonian Institution: Bracing for Bad News

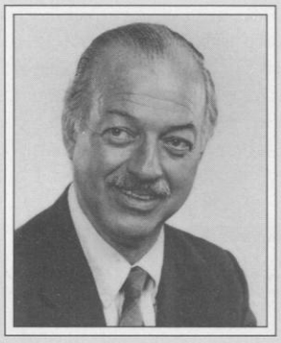
The sword of Damocles hangs over the Smithsonian Institution right now, as staffers wait to hear just how slim the 1993 congressional appropriation will be—and how their leaders will spend it. Everyone is bracing for drastic retrenchment. This grim prospect comes as the sequel to an equally grim 1992 for the nation's largest museum and promoter of science education. Income from trust funds, sales in the museum shops, and other private sources—the mainstay of staff-initiated research at the Smithsonian—has dropped off during the recession. Already, anthropologists have cut back on field trips and curators are scrimping on supplies.

The next round of cuts could affect many other parts of the 146-year-old enterprise, especially less visible research projects. These cover the waterfront, ranging from cosmology at the Harvard-Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Massachusetts to biodiversity studies at the Tropical Research Institute in Panama. "Everybody's hurting," concedes Thomas Lovejoy, assistant secretary for external affairs, adding, "I am deeply concerned about preserving the scholarly heart of the institution."

After expecting a funding shortfall of $18 million in April, Smithsonian Secretary Robert McCormick Adams, former provost of the University of Chicago, is now talking about a potential gap of $30 million or more. That is assuming the total appropriation will be 2% less than it was in 1992, as the chairman of the Senate appropriations committee, Senator Harry Reid (D–NV), indicated it may be. Even a flat budget would cause the Smithsonian to lose ground, because it has significant "uncontrollable costs." For example, a large chunk of the increase expected in 1993—about $14 million—is for salary, health insurance, or pension increases required by Congress. These expenses continue to rise, regardless of whether income does.

"Congress hasn't really wanted to support research at the Smithsonian."

–Robert McCormick Adams



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If the Smithsonian has to take a hit of this size, the effect could be devastating. Some major initiatives may have to be shelved, at least temporarily. For example, Adams has been hoping to open two new museums, accelerate the cataloging and burial of Indian remains, rejuvenate exhibits in older museums, renovate the National Zoo, and expand research on the popular topic of global environmental change.

Adams said in an interview that he dreads taking quick and severe action of the kind that's needed now because "you cut where you can cut," without taking account of the "differing strengths and importance of various programs." But he insists he will protect the top priorities, which he lists as "the encouragement of cultural diversity, activities on behalf of biological diversity, efforts to make a distinctive contribution in the field of education (particularly science education)," adding that "obviously, we've got to keep the most essential parts of our infrastructure from falling down around our ears." His list includes the Museum of the American Indian (for which the Smithsonian seeks $4.3 million and 58 new staffers), global change research (the fastest growing science area, with $10.6 million requested), and the large but unglamorous repair budget ($24 million).

Adams, Lovejoy, and Assistant Secretary for the Sciences Robert Hoffmann say they are committed to protecting the scholarly core of the institution. But some of the scholars themselves have begun to have doubts. They worry that the recent handling of discretionary research funds indicates trouble for the future. The institution has come to rely on money from sales of its magazine, and mail-order and museum shop purchases to finance the Scholarly Studies and Research Opportunities Funds. These bring visiting scholars to the Smithsonian or finance peer-reviewed projects by the house staff. But when this income dropped, the scholars suddenly found they had lost one-third of the most prized research money. And certain special fields lost out doubly because the administration has reinterpreted trusts left by former Secretary Charles Doolittle Walcott and his wife so that income from them is pooled, rather than being targeted on paleobiology and paleobotany as originally intended. Because "we couldn't dismiss lots of people," the special research funds had to take the main cutback, Hoffmann explained recently, adding, "I regret that very much."

Adding insult to injury, Adams decided in March to commandeer $284,000 of these precious dollars to bail the institution out of a political mess he inherited. A Fish and Wildlife Service zoologist named Robert Mitchell—on detail to the Smithsonian in 1988—got entangled in an investigation of a Chinese sheep hunt and incurred a massive legal bill (*Science*, 27 April 1990, p. 437). Because Mitchell had been working on a Smithsonian project, the institution picked up the tab. But this spring, a key committee chairman in Congress, Representative William Clay (D–MO), objected vociferously to this use of public funds. Adams decided to placate Clay by reimbursing the U.S. Treasury, using the institution's private funds. This further reduced the money available for research. (Adams says he has now decided to turn off the legal subsidy, and probably could have done it earlier had he known he had the option to do so.)

Some projects have been hit harder than others. Paleobotanist Francis Hueber, for example, says, "Our spending money for supplies this year is $740," adding that, "I've already spent all of mine on diamond saw replacements." Donald Ortner, chairman of anthropology, says, "We've taken a one-third cut in funding for short-term, small research projects…where there's an opportunity to do something quickly." Rick Potts, an anthropologist who reconstructs ancient hominid ecosystems, says funds for field work have been shrinking steadily—although not his own work, which is well financed this year from other accounts. Liz Zimmer, chief of a brand-new molecular systematics lab, says her group is well supported (*Science*, 22 February 1991, p. 872). But, she adds, "we may not grow as fast as we originally planned."

The underlying problem, says Adams, is that "Congress hasn't really wanted to support research at the Smithsonian," but assumed "that we would do that on the nonappropriated side of the budget." But now that those private sources of income are shrinking, Adams concedes, "I don't have any place" to go "to replace those funds." One senses he would like to shed some staff—for 80% of the budget goes into personnel-related expenses—but he won't try solving the money problem that way because, "You can't do it the way GM does." This leaves the familiar Washington option: Cut everything a little and avoid new commitments.

–Eliot Marshall

With reporting by Elizabeth Culotta.