Can This Museum Be Saved?

With roughly six million visitors per year flocking to see everything from George Washington's sword to Judy Garland's ruby slippers, the National Museum of American History in Washington would seem to be a going concern. Yet in the past two and a half years, the country's only truly *national* museum of American history has gained a reputation as the sick man of the Smithsonian, the mammoth museum and research complex that is, in the words of its current leader, "the guardian of America's greatest cultural, scientific and historic treasures." An often fevered public debate about the museum, one that began to rage in the spring of 2001 and is just now beginning to cool down, has raised the same question posed by the ancient medical practice of bloodletting: Which is worse, the disease or the cure?

In the version that has attained the widest circulation to date, the villain of the story and the truly sick man of the Smithsonian is its bloody-minded chief executive, Secretary Lawrence M. Small, aided by, or indentured to, big-time donors. The facts behind the fierce controversy that has arisen around Small's stewardship of the Smithsonian in general and the National Museum of American History (NMAH) in particular are complex, occasionally murky, and, of course, subject to differing interpretations on the two sides of a divide that it has opened up inside and around the museum.

In most versions, the plot begins with Small's arrival at the Smithsonian in January 2000 after a thirty-five-year career as a financial services executive,

first at Citicorp/Citibank and then at Fannie Mae. As the first nonscholar to run the Smithsonian since its creation in 1846 (an event that followed a long debate in Congress about, among other things, the propriety of accepting the bequest from English scientist James Smithson that led to its founding and naming), Small was controversial from the start. He also brought a distinctly top-down, damn-the-torpedoes, management-by-objectives approach that was probably bound to clash with the culture of a place that is much more like a university than a corporation. While acknowledging that the organization he had inherited had already achieved an "impressive" degree of public engagement, Small quickly proclaimed that the Smithsonian could—and now would have to—do much better. To attract bigger audiences, particularly among the young, the Smithsonian's sixteen museums (seventeen counting the National Zoo) needed "modernization." To modernize in the thoroughgoing way that Small had in mind (for example, he said that many permanent exhibitions "should be completely reimagined and redone for today's audiences"), the Smithsonian would need buckets of money.


Illustrations by John McCoy

Since the Smithsonian (which is legally a "trust instrumentality of the United States," independent of the government) receives only 70 percent of its budget from the federal government, Small's vision for the institution entails a heavy reliance on private funding. According to an article last winter by *Washington Post* reporter Bob Thompson, one of Small's first significant actions as secretary was to steer one of the Smithsonian's largest existing donors, real estate baron Kenneth Behring, in the direction of NMAH. Behring's subsequent gift of $80 million, announced in September 2000, was the biggest ever by an individual to the Smithsonian. Although most of the relevant details would not become known even to museum staff for months afterwards, Behring's donation turned out to have gained him several substantial privileges—including an advisory role on two new exhibits on subjects of his choosing—beyond the most visible one: the attachment of the name "Behring Center" to the museum's official moniker.

Then in May 2001, before most of the specifics of Small's gift agreement with Behring had leaked out, the Smithsonian announced a $38 million donation to NMAH from Catherine B. Reynolds, a Virginia philanthropist who had risen from modest origins to make a fortune in the private student-loan business, and who shared Small's interest in making the museum compelling to young people. Reynolds' gift—intended to create a ten-thousand-square-foot space in the museum for an exhibit celebrating American "achievers," possibly including living individuals who could just as accurately be termed "celebrities"—quickly set off alarms both within and beyond the walls of NMAH. It was bad enough, critics charged, that all negotiations with the donor had again been handled by "the Castle" (Smithsonian headquarters, located in the gothic-revival

Smithsonian Building on the National Mall), leaving NMAH's professional staff out of the loop entirely. The larger implication of these complaints was that Small was allowing a particularly vulgar parvenu with no idea of what NMAH was about to create her own personal shrine to the rich and famous.

In the vehemence of the outcry that followed, the critics missed a couple of important nuances. Still, the aggregate facts of the Reynolds and Behring cases (especially in the context of other actions Small had already attempted around the Smithsonian) appeared damning enough to warrant strong action.

On May 23 of last year, the NMAH branch of the Smithsonian's Congress of Scholars sent a memo to the Board of Regents (the institution's governing body) charging Small with forging donor relationships that breached "established standards of museum practice and professional ethics." Groups including the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the National Council on Public History soon followed suit. Some of the most strident protests among the many that followed in the next few months came from groups such as Ralph Nader's Commercial Alert, which now attacked Small for offering General Motors naming rights to a refurbished NMAH transportation hall in exchange for $10 million to support a new exhibit there. That Small, by this point, had given his critics several megatons of ammunition (notably by actions that appeared to attack the whole research function of the Smithsonian) lent credence to the view that he was trying to drain NMAH of its institutional lifeblood and turn it into a zombie controlled by donors.

In January 2002, a group of 170 scholars and writers sent an open letter to Chief Justice William Rehnquist (the chancellor of the Smithsonian Board of Regents) citing a litany of Small's transgressions. A few days later, Bob Thompson's long piece about NMAH in the *Washington Post Magazine* portrayed an institution that had completely lost its way (albeit over a period extending back beyond Small's arrival at the Castle), and presented the Small-Behring-Reynolds triad as a kind of tacky, vaguely right-wing cabal. Two weeks after Thompson's article appeared, Catherine Reynolds withdrew all but the $1.5 million of her $38 million gift that the museum already had in hand, despite months of effort to reach a compromise (which historian Patricia Nelson Limerick, who was part of that effort, believes to have been achievable) between her vision and the views of NMAH and outside historians. It was—and is—a depressing tale, and today it is by no means over.

What, if anything, can be said in defense of Lawrence Small, the demon barber of the Castle on the Mall? At least a couple of things, it turns out—starting with the fact that NMAH actually does need "modernization and money."

Small's critics seem to fear that his vision of modernization entails dumbing history down or, at the very least, moving what is now NMAH away from its tradition of collecting, presenting, and interpreting real physical objects and

propelling it into the weightless world of virtuality. In their book *Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian* (Washington and London, 2001), NMAH scholars Steven Lubar and Kathleen M. Kendrick affirm their stance "on the side of the artifact" and against certain intellectual successors of a late-nineteenth-century Smithsonian curator who said that a modern museum should not be a "cemetery of bric-a-brac." Even so, there seems to be widespread agreement that today's NMAH, for all the richness of its collections, must think more carefully about the needs and tastes of contemporary audiences in presenting them to the public. In particular, it is said, the museum is cluttered, poorly lit, difficult to navigate, and virtually impossible for a visitor to take in as any kind of physically or thematically coherent environment. Its exhibits also neglect many subjects and themes that one would expect to find treated in a place such as NMAH, including such fundamental ones as freedom, democracy, and equal opportunity.

Given these circumstances, NMAH's need for money is real, as is the probable necessity, in the new era of gaping federal budget deficits, of seeking it from private donors. (It should be noted that the Bush administration was relatively generous to the Smithsonian in its first proposed federal budget last winter.) To be sure, there are purists such as the progressive journalists Russell Mokhiber and Robert Weissman, who have stated (apropos of Smithsonian "partnerships" with corporate sponsors) that "there should be a stark dividing line between public and private institutions in America." Yet Small is on solid historical ground in pointing out—as he has in his own defense—that the Smithsonian itself is the product of a private bequest with a stipulation of naming rights, and an institution that has long benefited from the munificence of private donors with names such as Freer, Sackler, and Hirshhorn. Given its unique origins and historical identity, the Smithsonian would seem to deserve protection not just from private exploitation but also from the rigid ideological prescriptions of some of its would-be defenders.

Of course the main argument these days is not about the necessity of raising private funds for NMAH but only about the terms on which it is done. One stubborn reality here is what is sometimes called the "new philanthropy," the tendency of today's many aggressively hands-on individual donors to proclaim, as Catherine Reynolds has, "You don't just write a check and say, 'That solves the problem.'" Another is that corporations—admittedly with the encouragement of museums increasingly desperate for their support—are now more and more likely to insist on terms for corporate sponsorships that effectively turn museums into advertisers and marketers for companies and their products. Although, under such circumstances, it is clearly an institution's responsibility to keep its donors in check, Small and his handful of reputed loyalists within NMAH maintain that they have been doing just that.

One of these dissenters from the prevailing climate of dissent within the museum is curator Steven Lubar, a polite, soft-spoken fellow who seems to arouse strong feelings in some who disagree with him (and whom *Washington Post* reporter Thompson obliquely compares to Rasputin). Speaking, for example,

of the controversial transportation show “America on the Move” (slated to open in November 2003), with which he has been involved, Lubar maintains flatly that GM has had no influence, direct or indirect, over the content of the exhibit, which is being underwritten by a variety of donors. “It’s not just GM that is supporting the transportation show,” Lubar points out. “The federal Department of Transportation, the American Public Transportation Association, and AAA are also supporting it.” The resulting exhibit, he adds, will represent a vast improvement over what passes for a transportation exhibit at NMAH today, which Lubar calls a mere “celebration of technological progress.” If GM garners some favorable publicity in the process, Lubar finds this a matter of no concern.

Time will tell whether the transportation show (along with a planned new introductory exhibit for the museum and a new show on the American military, both being underwritten by some of Kenneth Behring’s $80 million) vindicates those who have denied all along that NMAH has sold out to pushy donors. Meanwhile, for anyone who cares about the future of NMAH and of its custodianship of the nation’s past, there are bigger issues to consider. As Lubar and Kendrick’s book makes clear, NMAH and its predecessor institutions within the Smithsonian have always been, among other things, a forum in which Americans have fought over such bedrock issues as the nature of American identity and ideals. Since the passions aroused by the recent controversy at NMAH may have obscured as much as they have clarified what is at stake in this particular argument, it is worth stepping back from the fray to try to understand just that.

This means, first of all, sorting through differing explanations of what has appeared to some as an attempted barbarian takeover of the Smithsonian. In one version of this scenario, the villains are political conservatives trying to correct the left-wing historical bias that the Smithsonian has allegedly shown in the past (as in the infamous Enola Gay exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum in 1995-98) and that supposedly dominates contemporary historical scholarship. In another, Small and his allies are interested not so much in silencing errant historians as in stifling civic discourse generally. NMAH curator Barbara Clark Smith (who has been a vocal critic of Small throughout the recent imbroglio) opines, for example, that the secretary’s ultimate goal is to turn the Smithsonian into a “privatized public sphere” sustained by tax dollars that amount to corporate welfare. “To some degree,” says Smith, “when Small says ‘modernization,’ what he has in mind is making the Smithsonian more anti-intellectual, more conservative, more private, more responsive to corporate America.”

While critics such as Smith see a broadly political trend behind recent events at NMAH, others take the position that Small and a donor such as Reynolds are simply philistines who can’t tell the difference between history and entertainment. This view, it must be said, is based largely on speculation about exhibits that no one has actually seen. Yet cultural columnist Michael Kilian of the *Chicago Tribune* cited better evidence when he commented just as the Reynolds controversy was about to explode: “[Small’s] tenure has shown that

his chief interests are donations and the financial bottom line and attendance. And my point would be that these are the same values of, say, Disneyland or Six Flags over Georgia, and the Smithsonian is quite a different place." Indeed, one might add, not only is the Smithsonian a "different place" but NMAH itself has different responsibilities than, say, the National Museum of Air and Space when it comes to upholding values other than those of the box office.

These overlapping political and cultural theses have an obvious appeal, for they satisfy our natural desire (one to which even historians can fall prey) to reduce complex, ambiguous events to thematically vivid narratives focused on dastardly or heroic individuals. Yet a more realistic explanation for the events that have recently unfolded at NMAH may be that the Smithsonian—like other large institutions in America today—faces imperatives for certain kinds of change to which its organizational structure, culture, and history offer strong resistance. In hiring Small, moreover, the regents may well have succumbed to a simplistic illusion that afflicts Americans from the voting booth to the corporate boardroom these days: that the way to effect change in an organization is to bring in a take-charge, iconoclastic outsider to lead it. And while he may or may not be a capitalist apparatchik and/or a cultural troglodyte, it seems clear that Lawrence Small is a babe in the woods as a nonprofit and public manager.

To frame the problem in terms of organizational and managerial dysfunction is not to deny, however, that there are important cultural issues at stake in the way that the Smithsonian and NMAH are managed. The issue of commercialism, for example, involves more than just the question of whether a corporate sponsor such as GM exercises influence, acknowledged or not, over the content of exhibits. As corporate logos become increasingly visible at NMAH (companies including the History Channel and Ralph Lauren already command attention in prominent locations there), the danger is that the museum will come to resemble those American campuses today where ubiquitous commercial messages create an atmosphere subtly at odds with teaching and learning the disciplines of citizenship. In such an environment, will anyone notice if—as Barbara Clark Smith expresses the fear shared by many—NMAH becomes a place where there is "no room for honest work" by historians?

The good news amid such gloom and doom is that a group of prominent citizens in a position to help appears to have taken these dangers seriously. In June 2001, as Small was being pilloried in the national press for allegedly putting the nation's heritage up for sale, the Smithsonian's Board of Regents announced the appointment of a blue ribbon commission to advise it on "the most timely and relevant themes and methods of presentation for [NMAH] in the 21st century." Underwritten by Kenneth Behring, chaired by NMAH board member Richard Darman, and with a membership including such eminent historians as David Herbert Donald, Eric Foner, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (a member of this journal's editorial board), the commission took this charge as an invitation to address

the most serious accusations made by Lawrence Small's many outspoken critics.

Issued last May, the report of the Blue Ribbon Commission on the National Museum of American History starts from the encouraging premise that "because NMAH holds a very special place in American culture, there is a special obligation—and duty of care—to be attended to by those who would attempt to help shape its future." The report's sections on donor relations amount to a tacit rebuke of Small for his seeming overeagerness to please funders, while the document elsewhere warns against "succumbing to the general societal tendency to indulge excessive commercialism." The commission's recommendations for the future development of exhibit themes and content are prefaced by the statement that NMAH "must assure that its process of developing themes and topics is perceived as having legitimacy." Attempts to resolve "issues of balance" in exhibits, the report goes on to affirm, must "meet the highest standards of scholarship." And without presuming to tackle the problem, it also notes that perceived assaults on such fundamental principles have significantly undermined morale among NMAH's professional staff.

As people connected with the museum point out, how effectively the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendations are acted upon will depend greatly on who NMAH's new director turns out to be—the museum's former director, Spencer Crew, having resigned in September 2001, making him the fifth of what are now six Smithsonian directors to have quit under Small's regime. (A search to replace Crew was still under way as of this writing.) Undoubtedly the new director's greatest initial challenges will be to carve out some degree of independence from Small, and to heal the wounds from what appears to have been a long and bitter struggle among a factionalized NMAH staff. Meanwhile, now that the temperature of the public debate about the museum has dropped enough to afford an opportunity for calm reflection, a lesson from the historical trade may be in order for those of us on the outside looking in.

That lesson concerns the obstinate tendency of groups, institutions, and the actions of those who play their parts in them to be less rational and perspicuous than we would like—and the need to recognize this when interpreting events such as those that have recently transpired at NMAH. While Catherine Reynolds (who declined, through a spokesman, to be interviewed for this article) has offered conflicting explanations of why she withdrew her gift to NMAH, a museum staffer who worked on her proposed exhibit ventures a reasonable-sounding guess as to what caused her to walk away in discouragement. "The Smithsonian was a difficult place to read throughout this," says NMAH historian Peter Liebhold, noting that the Castle, NMAH management, and disgruntled museum staffers were sending what must have seemed like inconsistent and confusing messages to someone unacquainted with the internal struggles that, in Liebhold's view, got stirred into the public debate about the Reynolds gift. Moreover, Reynolds is surely not the only person involved in the fundraising controversies at NMAH to have made the mistake of misreading the environment. As the study of history teaches us, such errors and confusions—as much as the purposeful pursuit of deliberate ends—are the very

stuff of human conflict, and we pay a price in more than just understanding when we insist on having the simple, clear, emotionally satisfying version.

Now that the fever gripping NMAH these many months has broken, with the prognosis still unclear, we as interested citizens should now require from ourselves what we want for our nation's museum of American history: balance, judiciousness, and a respect for the complexity of facts along with a determined defense of what we find most worth preserving.

Further Reading: See Bob Thompson, "History for $ale," *Washington Post Magazine,* January 20, 2002. The Smithsonian relates its own history in the online exhibition "From Smithson to Smithsonian." Lawrence Small described his vision for the Smithsonian in his talk "A Smithsonian for the 21st Century," delivered in 2000 to the Cosmos Club in Washington. Sources of information on the debate about NMAH and the Smithsonian generally, other than those already cited, include the newsletter *NCC Washington Updates*, available on the Website of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of Historyand the Websites of the advocacy groups Commercial Alert and Common Dreams. For Patricia Nelson Limerick's views on the Reynolds affair, see her article "How Reporters Missed 'The Spirit of America,'" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 24, 2002. The report of the Blue Ribbon Commission on the National Museum of American History can be found here.

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