

# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Scholars Ask Regents to Stop the Commercialization of the Smithsonian**

Commercial Alert and a coalition of 170 scholars and activists sent letters today to the Smithsonian Institution's governing Board of Regents, asking them to protect the Smithsonian from commercialism, and to fire Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence Small for commercializing the Smithsonian.

Following is the text of the letter to Chief Justice William Rehnquist, Chancellor of the Smithsonian Board of Regents.

Dear Chancellor Rehnquist:

As you know, the Smithsonian Institution was established by Congress in 1846 as a trust instrumentality for the "increase and diffusion of knowledge." Since then, it has become perhaps our nation's most important cultural institution. About 70 percent of Smithsonian's budget is funded by tax dollars; and it is subject to the audit and reporting requirements of the General Accounting Office, much as an ordinary federal agency.

From the beginning, private money has played a critical role in the Smithsonian's finances. Traditionally, this money has been given without significant "strings" attached. The public has felt comfortable that, with this assistance, the Smithsonian has been better able to pursue its own programs, and the donor has received no more than a heartfelt letter of thanks. We respectfully suggest that it is your responsibility, as a member of the Smithsonian's governing Board of Regents, to assure that this disinterested role continues.

But in recent years, to encourage donors, the Smithsonian has allowed its name to be used for donors' commercial purposes, and let donors influence both the nature and content of exhibits. The result is an erosion of the Smithsonian's integrity and of the public's trust. Members of the public may now legitimately question whether the Smithsonian's exhibits are an even-handed portrayal of American culture, or are shaped to fit the imperatives of corporate sponsorship. This shift in Smithsonian policy is short-sighted. In the long-term, it will severely damage the Smithsonian's reputation and effectiveness. We urge you to use your office to reverse it.

Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence M. Small is permitting corporations, for a fee, to burnish their corporate identities and even to promote specific products using the Smithsonian's good name. For example, in exchange for \$7.8 million, he created a wave of positive news coverage for Fujifilm by allowing it to "sponsor" the "Fujifilm Giant Panda Conservation Habitat" and the loan of two Chinese pandas to the National Zoo. "Our partnership with Fujifilm," gushed Friends of the National Zoo Director Clinton A. Fields, "is based on a mutual

concern for animal conservation." ABC news reported that Fujifilm would "get a lot of promotional benefit" from the sponsorship deal. Among other things, the exhibit featured a stuffed panda holding a big Fujifilm sign. And if that weren't enough, the Smithsonian gave Fujifilm its 2001 "Corporate Leadership Award," thus providing the appearance that the Smithsonian's judgement is for sale.

In February, the Smithsonian boosted the Kmart Corp.'s marketing efforts by announcing that they were "partners" in a mobile exhibit featuring African-American music, called "Wade in the Water: African-American Sacred Music Traditions 1871-2001." The mobile museum is a 48-foot, double-expandable trailer, with giant red Kmart signs on each side. Kmart boasted that the exhibit fit nicely into its marketing strategy. It was "really about stepping out in a much more aggressive way," explained Kmart's chief marketing officer, Brent Willis. When asked about whether the Smithsonian was being used for Kmart PR efforts, Secretary Small answered, "Why shouldn't they get something out of it? They put up the money for it."

In May, Mr. Small accepted a \$38 million pledge from Catherine B. Reynolds, a former owner of the Servus Financial Corp., to fund, among other things, a 10,000 square foot permanent exhibit in the National Museum of American History, which was intended to be a hall of fame of American achievers. Originally, Ms. Reynolds was to have effective control over the selection of the exhibit's honorees. Although subsequent negotiations, following extensive negative press coverage, have modified the impact that Ms. Reynolds's ideas will have, it seems likely that she will retain substantial influence over the exhibit. For example, the original contract with Ms. Reynolds included a provision that the bulk of her contribution comes only with her final approval of the location and design of the exhibit.

In effect, Mr. Small is permitting Ms. Reynolds to dictate program to the Smithsonian, sacrificing the Smithsonian's independence and integrity. The opportunity costs of the Reynolds exhibit are considerable. That space could easily be put to better use. The members of the Smithsonian's Congress of Scholars in the National Museum of American History rightly questioned Mr. Small's ethics: "Will the Smithsonian Institution actually allow private funders to rent space in a public museum for the expression of private interests and personal views?" they asked.

It's a good question, and one the Smithsonian leadership has brushed aside instead of answering. In June, the Smithsonian Magazine set a new high-water mark for commercialism by placing a Ford Motor Company advertisement on its outside cover. Meanwhile, the National Museum of American History proposed to General Motors to create a new 20,000 square foot "General Motors Hall of Transportation" in exchange for \$10 million. For its part, General Motors says that it will have no influence over the new transportation exhibit. Visitors might wonder; corporate money in Washington generally does not come without a price. We will see the relative space given to the automobile, as opposed to alternatives present and future. We will see whether the exhibit tells of industry resistance to efficiency and safety standards, and whether it recounts how General Motors was found guilty of a criminal conspiracy that destroyed local trolley systems across the country.

The beat goes on. In August, the Smithsonian invited McDonald's Corp. to open

restaurants in the National Air & Space Museum. This assures the Big Mac a place next to some of our nation's most treasured relics. In addition, one may expect that the use of the Smithsonian's name by McDonald's, General Motors and other corporate donors will extend far beyond the walls of the Smithsonian.

Taken together, such steps represent the corporatizing of the public space that the Smithsonian was intended to be. If Mr. Small is permitted to continue his agenda, the Smithsonian will become much like a shopping mall, with virtually every inch devoted to the promotion of a corporation or its products. The story line conveyed to visitors will become essentially a corporate one, to the exclusion of the many other dramas in this great land.

This is not a fantasy. Under Mr. Small's tenure, Smithsonian staff have prepared a memo on "Unit Naming Opportunities" - that is, selling the naming rights to nearly every nook, cranny, rotunda, and library in the Smithsonian, including the Great Hall and the Smithsonian Castle Clock Tower.

In his defense, Secretary Small points to the need for private funding to maintain the Smithsonian. He cites the precedent of naming the Smithsonian's O. Orkin Insect Zoo center in 1992 following a \$500,000 gift from Orkin Pest Control. But a bad precedent exists to be reversed not replicated. As for funding, Small's strategy of degrading this great cultural institution into a corporate pitchman will do more harm than good. If people are proud of the Smithsonian, they will open their hearts and checkbooks, and they will make sure that the federal government follows along. If they see the Smithsonian is merely another way to sell cars and hamburgers, then they may not. In other words, the long-term financial costs to such marketing and public relations deals likely overwhelm any short-term financial gains. In addition, the details of these various agreements with donors have been kept secret, a policy that is inappropriate for an institution that operates as a public trust.

More than anything else, the Smithsonian is a repository for American history, heritage and achievements. To the extent that Secretary Small has cheapened them, he has diminished us all. This is not trivial at a time when we are, as a nation, engaged in an effort to explain and uphold our values both in our own country and across the world.

Secretary Small plainly brings good intentions, enthusiasm, and business acumen to his work at the Smithsonian. However, he is unwilling or unable to carry out the mission of the Smithsonian, or to safeguard its integrity. This great institution was established as a trust instrumentality to promote the "increase and diffusion of knowledge," not of corporate marketing opportunities; and someone who cannot tell the difference simply is not up to the challenges of steering the Smithsonian in these difficult times. If Secretary Small has a yearning to promote large corporations, there are many opportunities available to him in the private sector. The Smithsonian needs a leader who understands how to run the Smithsonian for public - not private - benefit.

Sincerely,

Jean-Christophe Agnew, Professor of American Studies and History, Yale University

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Commercial Alert's mission is to keep the commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy. Commercial Alert's website is at <[www.commercialalert.org](http://www.commercialalert.org)>.