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Smithsonian chief criticized for way donations handled

By **Michael Kilian**
Washington Bureau
May 26, 2001

WASHINGTON -- Embattled Smithsonian Institution Secretary Lawrence Small came under new attack Friday, this time from museum historians and scholars who charge that Small is allowing wealthy donors to dictate the nature and content of exhibitions in return for large contributions, a practice they believe raises ethical questions.

In a letter to Chief Justice William Rehnquist and other members of the Smithsonian's Board of Regents, the Congress of Scholars of the institution's National Museum of American History asked the board to investigate.

"Secretary Small's decisions circumvent established decision-making procedures and seem certain to commit our museum to unethical relationships with private donors," the letter said. "These actions threaten to change fundamentally the nature of the museum, while ignoring the broad consultation and open public discussion called for by such changes."

The group, which represents the museum's historians and research scholars in Smithsonian affairs, added: "Small has obligated the museum to relationships with private individuals that breach established standards of museum practice and professional ethics."

Igor Sikorsky, son of the inventor of the helicopter and a member of the institution's advisory Smithsonian Council, said Friday that he has asked for a congressional probe of Small's conduct as secretary, warning that "the future and stature of the Smithsonian Institution is at stake."

A spokeswoman for the Senate Rules Committee said a hearing on the Smithsonian has been tentatively scheduled for this summer, but any decision to proceed will likely have to be made by Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), who is expected to assume chairmanship of the committee when Democrats take control of the Senate in the wake of Vermont Sen. James Jeffords' exit from the GOP.

Disagreeing with letter

Smithsonian spokeswoman Mary Combs said Small would have no comment. Melinda Machado, spokeswoman for the American History Museum, said only 20 percent of the facility's 165 curatorial staffers belong to the Congress of Scholars.

"All are concerned with the intellectual control of exhibitions, but not all agree with all the points in the [scholars'] letter," she said.

With 16 museums and a network of research centers, the taxpayer-funded Smithsonian is the largest complex of its kind in the world. Its facilities are visited by more than 70 million people a year.

A former investment company executive and the first non-academic to head the institution in its 160-year history, Small has come under fire repeatedly since taking office in January 2000.

Most recently, he withdrew a controversial plan to close a world-renowned Smithsonian wildlife conservation research center in Virginia after scientists, conservationists and members of Congress protested.

Small had argued that the closure was necessary to cut costs.

In the latest protest, scholars are focusing on strings attached to two large gifts made to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History: \$80 million from Kenneth Behring, former owner of the Seattle Seahawks, and \$38 million from entrepreneur Catherine Reynolds.

Small added the Behring Center to the museum's name and, with Behring's backing, ordered the installation of an elaborate exhibition of objects from the American presidency in time for last year's election.

According to Behring's gift contract, the money was to fund the presidency exhibit and "the overall plans for the modernization of the [museum] exhibits."

Requirements of gift

Reynolds' gift requires the creation of a 10,000-square-foot exhibition hall "that tells the life

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stories of eminent Americans, describes their personal characteristics that contributed to their achievements and highlights those achievements."

Under the pact, the individual achievers to be honored by the Smithsonian are to be determined by a 15-member committee, of which 10 members are appointed by the donor and five by the Smithsonian.

Reynolds has named home fashion expert Martha Stewart and director Steven Spielberg as examples of people she thinks would be good candidates for exhibits.

When the Behring donation was announced in September, Small said: "A gift of this magnitude is unprecedented. We are delighted to honor this great benefactor to the Smithsonian Institution by establishing the Behring Center. Mr. Behring's generous contribution will allow us to begin to complete transformation and modernization of the National Museum of American History, the only museum of its kind in the world."

"The secretary's actions create the appearance of impropriety," the Congress of Scholars' letter to the regents said. "Will the Smithsonian Institution actually allow private funders to rent space in a public museum for the expression of private interests and personal views?"

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