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May 26, 2001

Smithsonian Group Criticizes Official on Donor Contract

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

WASHINGTON, May 25 — A group of curators and scholars at the Museum of American History has accused Lawrence M. Small, the Smithsonian Institution's secretary, of jeopardizing the integrity of the institution and breaching standard museum practices because of agreements he has reached with multimillion-dollar donors.

The unusually blunt critique, contained in a May 24 memorandum to the Smithsonian's board, reflects mounting criticism within the Smithsonian of Mr. Small's style of management and making decisions. In the past few weeks, some employees have stuck green stickers with the words "dump small" in elevators, on bulletin boards and even on their own jacket lapels.

"We feel obliged to speak out about recent decisions by Secretary Small that we believe jeopardize the integrity and authority of this beloved institution," said the memorandum, which was signed by curators, scholars and other researchers at the American history museum. "Secretary Small's decisions circumvent established decision-making procedures and seem certain to commit our museum to unethical relationships with private donors."

The memorandum calls on the board, the Smithsonian's governing body headed by Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist, to review contracts with donors and the concessions the Smithsonian may have made as a result of their generosity.

The memorandum was sparked by the announcement two weeks ago of a \$38 million gift



David Scull for The New York Times
Lawrence M. Small, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, is being criticized by staff members.

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to the museum by the Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation, museum officials who signed the memorandum said. The Reynolds money will finance a 10,000- square-foot hall of fame that will honor American achievers.

(Sept 19, 2000)

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According to a copy of the contract between the Smithsonian and Ms. Reynolds that was made available to The New York Times, Ms. Reynolds will choose 10 of the 15 members of an advisory committee that will select the achievers to be included in the exhibition. Final approval of the achievers rests with the museum, but if the museum "finds none acceptable," the secretary alone "shall finally determine the contents of the exhibition," the contract states.

Ms. Reynolds said in an interview at the time of the announcement that among her candidates are Martha Stewart, the home-and-garden guru, and Frederick Smith, the founder of Federal Express.

The protest was generated by the National Museum of American History's branch of the Smithsonian- wide Congress of Scholars.

"A solid majority" of the members of the group, comprised of about 70 curators, scholars and other researchers at the museum, signed the protest memorandum, said Helena Wright, a curator at the museum and vice chairwoman of the congress.

Asked about the memorandum, Sheila Burke, the under secretary responsible for the Smithsonian's American art museums, said: "We obviously take seriously their concerns. I have sought to meet with them to try to allay their fears."

Mr. Small, a former executive of Citibank and former president of Fannie Mae who took over the Smithsonian in January 2000, recently came under fire for his decision to close the Smithsonian's renowned wildlife conservation center in Virginia despite White House approval of a \$40 million increase in the current budget for the Smithsonian to \$494 million.

After opposition from scientists both inside and outside the Smithsonian and key lawmakers over the planned closing, Mr. Small backed down. Seventy percent of the Smithsonian's budget comes from Congress.

Officials at the National Museum of American History who signed the memorandum also voiced concerns over the \$100 million in gifts to the Smithsonian since 1999 from Kenneth E. Behring, a California real estate developer who has been criticized for his trophy hunting of endangered species. As a result of the gifts, the National Museum of American History now has what Melinda Machado, the museum spokeswoman, calls a "subheading" both on the outside of the building and on its official correspondence: Behring Center.

Mr. Behring's personal architect, Doug Dahlin, has been hired by the museum to do a preliminary study to modernize the museum's exhibition space, a decision the protesting officials claim has the air of impropriety.

Ms. Burke emphatically denied accusations of impropriety, saying, "To suggest unethical and illegal conduct is absolutely incorrect."

The memorandum asked pointedly, "Will the Smithsonian Institution actually allow private funders to rent space in a public museum for the expression of private interests and personal views?"

The anti-Small sticker campaign has been embarrassing. Early this month, a sticker was put on the bumper of the car of Gen. John R. Dailey, the retired marine who is now director of the National Air and Space Museum, while it was parked in the museum garage.

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