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May 31, 2001

Gifts That Can Warp a Museum

Early this month the Smithsonian Institution announced a \$38 million gift from the Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation to create a permanent exhibition in the National Museum of American History devoted to the lives of American achievers. Ms. Reynolds, a pioneer in private education lending, has said that the 10,000-square-foot exhibition her gift sponsors, called "The Spirit of America," will "focus on current living people who are very much 21st century to inspire young people to be the best they can be." Some of the people whose stories might be told include, according to Ms. Reynolds, Martin Luther King Jr., Jonas Salk, Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart, Dorothy Hamill and Steven Case.

READERS' OPINIONS

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Achievement is unquestionably good, as is Ms. Reynolds's desire to motivate young people. Nonetheless, this is a questionable donation, representing the kind of gift-giving that can warp an institution's priorities and professionalism. The gift will force the Smithsonian to devote space and intellectual energy to a permanent exhibit. But is this the kind of exhibit that the Smithsonian's professional staff would have chosen if the gift had come with no strings attached? If not, what is the curatorial rationale for a permanent exhibit that seems to open the door for commercial and corporate influence at one of the capital's keystone institutions?

Our guess is that the Smithsonian, left to its own devices, would consider a hall of fame too trivial to warrant mounting with its own funds. At best, a celebrity hall of fame will simply echo the devotion to personal achievement that already permeates every aspect of American culture.

Nothing could better dramatize the current plight of the Smithsonian than the entangling quality of this gift. It is about the same size as this year's increase in the Smithsonian budget, a budget so constrained that Lawrence M. Small, secretary of the Smithsonian, has proposed cuts in some research programs. Mr. Small has set as one of his goals a dramatic increase in private giving. The trick is to increase private giving without giving the store away. This hall of achievers is wholly Ms. Reynolds's idea, it will bear her name, it will be paid for by her, and she says she wants "a hands-on role."

In an unusual abdication of power by the museum, Ms. Reynolds's foundation, according to its contract with the Smithsonian, will get to propose nominees for 10 of the 15 seats on the committee that will select individuals to be featured in the exhibition. The Smithsonian staff itself will nominate the remaining five. Although the Smithsonian's board of regents must give final approval to all nominees, if it rejects any of her choices she can then nominate additional choices, according to Sheila Burke, an under secretary of the Smithsonian.

The Smithsonian staff will retain the final authority over what achievers will be included in the exhibit, but Ms. Reynolds's nominees will have effective control of the selection committee

and thus considerable influence over the content of this permanent exhibition. This is one reason a group of scholars and curators at the Museum of American History complained to the Smithsonian's board that Mr. Small was jeopardizing the institution's integrity through his relationships with private donors. Another sign of discontent with Mr. Small's leadership was the resignation announcement this week from Robert Fri, the director of the National Museum of Natural History.

The Smithsonian has had problems with donations before, especially in the case of Kenneth E. Behring's \$20 million gift to the Natural History Museum, a gift that came with the skins and heads of four Asian sheep, of threatened species, that Mr. Behring had shot. But every cultural institution that receives public funding has been under pressure to obtain a greater share of its money from profit-making activities or private gifts. We should be grateful to Ms. Reynolds for one thing. Her gift is a potent reminder of the power that truly adequate funding, from public sources or unfettered private gifts, would give an institution like the Smithsonian: the power to say no to inappropriate ideas.

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