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CONTACT: Lee W. Formwalt,
Executive Director

OAH CALLS FOR REEVALUATION
OF PROPOSED SMITHSONIAN HALL
OF FAME EXHIBIT

7 June 2001

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. In a letter to the Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) has called on that body to reconsider its agreement with a private donor to establish a Hall of Fame for American Achievers at the National Museum of American History (NMAH).

The letter stated that historians have been troubled by recent reports about the role of private donors in the shaping of exhibits at the NMAH. These reports, according to OAH Executive Director Lee W. Formwalt, "suggest that the Smithsonian may be taking steps that will erode its legislative mandate, its high professional standards, and ultimately the public trust."

Speaking for the OAH Executive Board, Formwalt urged that "any Hall of Fame exhibit be provided a historical context in keeping with the mission of the NMAH." The organization also reasserted the History Exhibit Standards that it adopted in April 2000. These standards, which have been adopted by other major historical organizations as well, "highlight the

crucial role of professional historians and other expert museum staff in warranting the historical and intellectual integrity of material presented in exhibits," said Formwalt.

The letter concluded by stressing the responsibility of the NMAH to uphold these exhibit standards. "It is the responsibility of trained museum staff to ensure that the exhibit meets the highest scholarly criteria, represents competing points of view, and reflects the diversity of the community that the museum serves."

Founded in 1907, OAH is the largest professional association of scholars and teachers of the American past.

Letter to Smithsonian Board of Regents

7 June 2001

Board of Regents
Smithsonian Institution
1000 Jefferson Drive SW
Washington, DC 20560

Dear Members of the Board:

The Organization of American Historians (OAH), the largest professional association of scholars and teachers of the American past, is concerned about recent developments at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (NMAH).

Internal and external reports about the role of private donors (particularly, Kenneth E. Behring and Catherine B. Reynolds) in the shaping of exhibits at this premier public

institution are troubling. Museum staff, historians working with the NMAH, and media reports suggest that the Smithsonian may be taking steps that will erode its legislative mandate, its high professional standards, and ultimately the public trust.

We therefore reassert the History Exhibit Standards that OAH adopted in April 2000, which directly address the issues in the Smithsonian controversy. These standards have also been adopted by other major historical organizations. They highlight the crucial role of professional historians and other expert museum staff in warranting the historical and intellectual integrity of material presented in exhibits.

Although it is important to identify and include stakeholders, including private donors, in the planning process, it is the responsibility of trained museum staff to ensure that the exhibit meets the highest scholarly criteria, represents competing points of view, and reflects the diversity of the community that the museum serves. Rather than offering a final word, museum exhibits should encourage continuing discussions among visitors, scholars, the media, and the public at large.

The Organization of American Historians fully supports the staff of the National Museum of American History--many of them respected members of the profession--in their efforts to uphold these exhibit standards. The OAH also understands the difficulty in raising large amounts

of money to support Smithsonian projects. However, in light of the controversy enveloping the Smithsonian and its leader, Secretary Lawrence Small, we respectfully call on the Regents to review and reconsider the recent agreement with Catherine B. Reynolds respecting the establishment of a Hall of Fame for American Achievers. Furthermore, we urge that any Hall of Fame exhibit be provided a historical context in keeping with the mission of the NMAH.

Sincerely,

Lee W. Formwalt
Executive Director

encl: OAH History Exhibit Standards
(2000)

cc:

Edward Able, American
Association of Museums
Terry Davis, American
Association for State and Local
History
John D'Arms, American Council of
Learned Societies
Arnita Jones, American Historical
Association
Bruce Craig, National
Coordinating Council for the
Promotion of History
David Vanderstel, National
Council on Public History
John Hammer, National
Humanities Alliance
Spencer Crew, National Museum
of American History
Lawrence Small, Smithsonian
Institution
Robert W. Ney (R-OH), U.S.

House of Representatives
Steny Hoyer (D-MD), U.S. House
of Representatives
Mitch McConnell (R-KY), U.S.
Senate
Christopher M. Dodd (D-CT), U.S.
Senate

Museum Exhibit Standards
Society for History in the
Federal Government

In a democracy, a knowledge of history forms the context in which citizens make informed decisions. Historical knowledge also provides personal, family, and community links to the past. Historical understanding of other societies assists individuals in identifying commonalities in the human condition and in negotiating the differences that exist in our increasingly pluralistic world.

Museum exhibits play an important role in the transmission of historical knowledge. They are viewed by citizens of diverse ages, interests, and backgrounds, often in family groups. They sometimes celebrate common events, occasionally memorialize tragedies or injustices, and contain an interpretive element, even if it is not readily apparent. The process of selecting themes, photographs, objects, documents, and other components to be included in an exhibit implies interpretive judgments about cause and effect, perspective, significance, and meaning.

Historical exhibits may encourage the informed discussion of their content

and the broader issues of historical significance they raise. Attempts to suppress exhibits or to impose an uncritical point of view, however widely shared, are inimical to open and rational discussion.

In aiming to achieve exhibit goals, historians, museum curators, administrators, and members of museum boards should approach their task mindful of their public trust.

To discharge their duties appropriately, they should observe the following standards:

1. Exhibits should be founded on scholarship, marked by intellectual integrity, and subjected to rigorous peer review. Evidence considered in preparing the exhibit may include objects, written documentation, oral histories, images, works of art, music, and folklore.
2. At the outset of the exhibit process, museums should identify stakeholders in any exhibit and may wish to involve their representatives in the planning process.
3. Museums and other institutions funded with public monies should be keenly aware of the diversity within the communities and constituencies that they serve.
4. When an exhibit addresses a controversial subject, it should acknowledge the existence of competing points of view. The public should be able to see that history is a changing process of interpretation and reinterpretation formed through

gathering and reviewing
evidence, drawing conclusions,
and presenting the conclusions in
text or exhibit format.

5. Museum administrators should
defend exhibits produced
according to these standards.