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EDITORIAL

Museums and Money

Thursday, May 31, 2001; Page A24

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ON THE opposite page today, Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence Small defends his institution's relationship with large private donors. That relationship has been subject to sharp criticism from within the institution in recent days. Mr. Small's vow to retain intellectual control over research and exhibits is welcome; that issue of intellectual autonomy, more than the question of naming rights, is behind the unease. The stellar status nurtured by independent scholarship is what attracts visitors over the long term and gives the Smithsonian its claim on the taxpayer support that still constitutes 70 percent of its budget.

The blizzard of record-setting gifts, especially at the National Museum of American History, has unnerved curators and scholars who think donors are dictating museums' future direction. At the American History Museum, a group of scholars last week wrote to the regents asking them to review several donor contracts for "appearance of impropriety." Complaints have focused on the hands-on participation of Kenneth Behring, who gave \$80 million, and Catherine Reynolds, who gave \$38 million for a "hall of achievers" and who will be involved, by contract, in selecting and updating its contents for the next 40 years. The Reynolds contract does diverge somewhat from standard Smithsonian practice. It stipulates that if a committee cannot agree on the exhibit's contents, the matter will be settled not by the curatorial staff but by the secretary himself. The compromise was arrived at, says Smithsonian Undersecretary Sheila Burke, "for the comfort level of the museum and the donor."

Such a setup has the advantage of accountability. It puts that much more responsibility on the secretary to weigh institutional values against donors' wishes in a situation where big gifts are urgently sought and badly needed. The squeeze is inevitable in large-scale fundraising; as Undersecretary Burke notes, "It's rare that someone just hands you money and says, 'Good luck.'" But museums also have an obligation not to be unduly pushed around by their donors, not only for the sake of professional ethics but in order to preserve themselves as institutions to which others will gravitate, and donate, in the future.

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