

STATEMENT OF THE RANKING MEMBER

Committee on Rules and Administration Hearing on Smithsonian Oversight

April 11, 2007

Thank you Madame Chairman not only for your kind words, but for the history that goes behind them. We have indeed worked well together and continue to do that.

I congratulate you on holding these hearings. This is an issue of great public interest. There has been a lot of newspaper ink on it and television time devoted to it, and I think the American people expect the Congress to take a good hard look at this.

The Smithsonian has been called the nation's attic, but it is clearly much more than that. It is not a place where we store things, like we do in our attics and occasionally go up and rummage through them. It has become the world's largest museum complex—holding a vast collection of artifacts, specimens, and artwork. The challenge of hanging onto these things and preserving them in proper fashion for future generations, and at the same time making the decisions as to which ones will be displayed when, how, and in an attractive a manner as possible, is a very significant management challenge.

It is interesting that for that reason the Smithsonian, unlike some other government organizations, has morphed into a combination of a government agency and a private management organization. They reached out for the kind of chief executive that a corporation would look for and found one in Lawrence Small. I do not have the details but it is my guess that he took a fairly significant cut in compensation to come on board the Smithsonian, even at a level that is staggering for those of us who live on government salaries. I have a little sympathy for that. I took a cut too when I came to work for the Senate. When people say to me, "I wish I had all the perks that you have as a senator." My reaction is that I wish I had all the perks I had before I became a senator. It is recognition of the fact that the Smithsonian has become what it is that it's governing body decided to reach out into the management pool of talent and search for that kind of executive and make a compensation package available that would attract that kind of executive.

I have some sympathy for Mr. Small coming from the corporate world of high compensation and a high set of perks into a situation where he is viewed through the lens of the government world where we want him to be almost cloistered in terms of the kind of things he can do and the kinds of compensation that he receives. He may very well have lost track of the public perception of his assignment. He has now stepped down so that we can look at this without having to go through the lens of his own situation, but the fact that the situation arose is an indication that these hearings are overdue, and an examination of exactly where the Smithsonian is going and what we want it to be is a logical examination to take.

I commend you for the hearings. I look forward to the witnesses and I hope we will take the kind of long view that you have outlined in your opening statement. What kind of a Smithsonian do we want from here on? What kind of a legacy do we want to preserve from the tremendous contribution the Smithsonian has made in the past? What kind of structure do we want to leave in place that will see to it that our children and grandchildren continue to have the sort of marvelous opportunities that come to us now when we go to the Smithsonian and poke around the attic?