

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH SECRETARY DAVID SKORTON

SUBJECT: THE FUTURE OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

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JOHN HUGHES: (Sounds gavel.) Welcome to the National Press Club. My name is John Hughes. I'm an editor for Bloomberg's First Word, that's our breaking news desk here in Washington at Bloomberg. And, I am the President of the National Press Club. Our speaker today is Dr. David Skorton, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. He will speak to us about his vision for the world's largest museum and research complex.

But first, I want to introduce our distinguished head table. The table includes both Club members and guests of the speaker. From the audience's right, Frances Hardin, owner of Hardin Media International and a former CNN White House correspondent; John Lapiana, acting assistant secretary, communications and external affairs, at the Smithsonian Institution; Laura Lott, president and CEO of the American Alliance of Museums; Amy Henderson, Cultural Critic and Historian Emerita at the National Portrait Gallery, and co-organizer of today's luncheon. Thank you, Amy. Marty Baron, executive editor of *The Washington Post*; Dr. Richard Kurin, acting Under Secretary for Museums and Research provost at the Smithsonian Institution; Jerry Zremski, bureau chief of *The Buffalo News*, a past president of the National Press Club, and Chairman of the National Press Club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for a moment, Nick Apostolides, Deputy CEO of the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center and co-organizer of today's luncheon. Thank you, Nick. Lisa Matthews, vice president at Hager Sharp; Linda St. Thomas, chief spokesperson at the Smithsonian Institution; Ken Mellgren, chairman of the National Press Club Board of

Governors; Jason Anthony, a D.C. native son, a radio and TV producer and a member of the National Press Club's Broadcast Committee. (Applause)

I also want to welcome our live C-SPAN audience and our Public Radio audiences around the country. And, you can follow the action on Twitter. Use the hashtag NPClive. That's hashtag NPClive.

Each year, about 30 million people visit at least one of the Smithsonian Institution's museums or galleries or the zoo. The Hope Diamond and Bao Bao and all the other artifacts and animals in this vast collection are so well known to so many of us, they provide a window into the past but they also help us anticipate the future. The overseer of all of this is Dr. David Skorton, who is completing his first six months as Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Before joining the Smithsonian, Dr. Skorton, who is a cardiologist, served as President of Cornell University for nine years. Although new to the museum world, Dr. Skorton has said, "I have served in education my entire professional life."

He is an accomplished flutist and at Cornell, he once accompanied Billy Joel on stage. The Smithsonian will celebrate its 170th birthday next year. In addition to those 30 million visitors that come to the Smithsonian each year, there are thousands of employees, even more thousands of volunteers and scores of exhibits and research projects. And, of course, millions of dollars each year in donations.

In a recent interview, Dr. Skorton related a conversation with his long-time friend and long-time National Press Club member, the late Austin Kiplinger. Skorton recalled, "When I got this appointment in March of 2014, Kip contacted me to congratulate me. He said, 'Do you know what the Smithsonian is? I can describe it in four words. Everything under the sun.'"

"Part of that everything," Skorton has said, "is that the Smithsonian should be an honest broker of discussions of difficult issues." That may explain why he declined to pull items from an exhibit that came from Bill Cosby's collection. Dr. Skorton has said, "We should be one of the places in Washington and in the country where we could convene conversations on issues where we don't agree as a society and use the convening power to bring together people of varying points of view and let the public decide what they think."

Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm National Press Club welcome to the 13th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. David Skorton. (Applause)

SECRETARY SKORTON: Thank you, John, for a very generous introduction. And you can just imagine what a fabulous job I did when sitting in with Billy Joel if I'm here with you today. I want to also thank the leadership of the National Press Club for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. And I'll ask those assembled today to join me in thanking the staff of the Press Club and the servers for the fabulous event that we're having today. (Applause)

What do we value? What do we value as individuals? What do we value as communities, and what do we value as a nation? I believe the answer to these questions is increasingly important in our current time, a time not only of uncertainty, but also of shifting frames of reference and other fundamental and increasingly rapid changes that leave each of us and all of us feeling less and less secure.

Of course, there are obvious things that we value as individuals; family, safety, friends, and for many of us, faith. And our nation was founded on a set of values that all are created equal. That we possess certain rights; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And that government derives its power from the consent of the people.

More than two centuries later, according to an Atlantic survey conducted in 2012, almost two-thirds of Americans view freedom of speech and of the press as the top examples of superior American values with half also considering free enterprise, principles of equality and the American constitutional system as likewise critical to our national character.

But the question, what do we value, is much deeper and more complex. Not only what we actually value, but how we as a people identify what things are valuable to us and how we defend and support those things.

Asking and answering these questions could be more critical today than ever before. As individuals and as a country, our core values and how they are identified, shared, applied and supported, are being debated on college campuses, on the streets of our cities, here in the nation's capital and, in fact, around the world as traditional democratic and humanistic ideals seem to be under siege.

Now, given my background I'm obviously not in a position to offer formal policy solutions. I can, however, help to identify the tools to enable us as individuals and as a society to address the challenges of the day and preserve and nurture what we value. If we employ these tools, I believe we will not only be more engaged, maybe more fulfilled as individuals, but collectively will be better prepared to be more creative and flexible in solving society's most intractable problems.

As Albert Einstein observed, "We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." But what kind of thinking is demanded today? Fresh, nimble thinking, thinking alone, thinking in groups, active, engaged thinking, thinking that includes the courage to go where the observations and conclusions take us uninhibited by dogma or prior bias. Easy to say, hard to achieve.

So, how do we get there? The first step is to look at problems with what has been referred to as beginner's eyes and mind. Problems are unsolvable only if we start out believing that to be the case. Too often, we avoid thinking about important and complex issues not because they are actually unsolvable, but because the experts have already spoken and we assume that as individuals, we have little or nothing to add.

We do ourselves and our community a disservice by retreating to that position. Instead, we need to learn and teach the skills necessary to be open-minded, to have the ability to approach problems without prior bias, and therefore to see the problems clearly. Abdicating the responsibility to solve problems ourselves should not be our default posture. We need to frame the questions and arrive at the answers by having the courage to make discoveries on our own and seeing things the way they are.

You may be familiar with the Zen notion of the beginner's eye and mind as a foundation for approaching life. As Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki described it, in the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few. Of course, I'm not suggesting that we ignore expert opinion and analysis. Rather, I believe there is a liberating and enlightening power to seeing problems and issues with an attitude of openness, eagerness and lack of preconceptions just as a beginner would.

The beginner's perspective allows us to see things as new, to be surprised, to be delighted, and to discover. This openness to observe and reflect upon what actually is, that is the basis of a scientific method. Observe a phenomenon, posit an explanation for the phenomenon, a hypothesis, test the hypothesis with further observations, and then assess the accuracy and the usefulness of the original formulation. Our culture, our economy, and our individual well being will benefit from active thinkers; those who can think both independently and together as a member of a larger community.

And a second step to our goal of active effective thinking and problem solving is the realization that to solve community issues, we must learn to think as a community. The traditional scientific method has been wonderfully successful; modern life is indebted to it. However, the scientific method has proven less successful on its own in solving some of society's more complex, multifactorial and seemingly intractable problems; poverty, hunger, lack of education, social injustice, access to healthcare, and economic inequality, all problems that require close listening, emotional distance, weighing of arguments and counterarguments. And among the most critical, the direct participation of those most affected by the issues.

Communities thrive on intuition, persuasion, give and take and compromise and demand that interaction be based on respect, and the acceptance of differing opinions and priorities. And science thrives on precision, curiosity and dispassionate observation. So, we need to couple the wisdom of science with the wisdom found in other disciplines. Science is necessary, but not sufficient to solve our thorniest problems.

For community-based challenges, sometimes approaching problems as Socrates might through questions, dialogue and argument, will prove most effective. Other times, the sort of reasoning learned in law school, choosing between applying precedence or seeing an issue as *de novo*, or one of first impression, may make the most sense. Community issues are complex and problem solvers need flexible approaches from a broad range of disciplines and a wide variety of voices to tackle them.

For example, last week the Smithsonian National Museum of American History launched a new initiative called The Power of Giving: Philanthropy's Impact on American Life. The program included people from a spectrum of endeavors, from Carla Hayden, CEO of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore to noted philanthropist Warren Buffett, Bill Gates and David Rockefeller, Jr. Carla Hayden and her colleagues from Baltimore gave a powerful and compelling presentation on how community activists have been working to solve some of the city's problems; poverty, youth alienation and family support for many years. And most recently, helping the city respond to the death of Freddie Gray.

They were able to do it by understanding the need to listen broadly from the ground up and to value the arguments and counterarguments for action. One of their successes in Baltimore is Thread, a community organization that provides mentoring to struggling youth. Students are paired with at least four mentors who follow the student for ten years. Thread succeeds because its leaders use flexible, inclusive decision making processes that value input from a variety of stakeholders.

The successes of this sort of creative community-based approach to solving problems raises the question how do we learn and how do we teach others to think in this way? One way, and my pivotal point today, is to reverse our nation's seeming disinterest and disinvestment in the arts and humanities. But to do so in a way that does not sacrifice our investment in science.

This commitment must be based on an understanding that the arts and humanities complement science and that together, they make us better thinkers, better decision makers and better citizens. Noted scientist E. O. Wilson once said, "The humanities are like the soul of humanity. The thing we produced that is probably absolutely unique in the universe. The creativity of humanity is guaranteed in the humanities. It is not guaranteed in the sciences."

To understand what it means to be human and to understand the complex problems that the world now faces require us to deploy every technique of understanding at our disposal including, and especially, those at the heart of the visual and performing arts, social sciences and cultural studies. We need only to look at today's current events to recognize that our national security alone would benefit if we all shared a better understanding of different religions, languages, philosophies, and the history of our world.

Yet, rather than embrace this opportunity from the federal to the local level, we are investing less and less in education, and in the arts and humanities. At public colleges and universities, the states have cut support by more than 25 percent per full time student since the year 2000. Overall spending on public higher education has grown only 5.6 percent from 1986 to 2013 while, for example, funding for prisons rose 141 percent in the same period. I believe that investing in education pays more dividends to society in the long run, one of which would be less need for investing in prisons. And the programs in prison education show this to be true.

Not surprisingly, when cuts in education are made, it is the arts and humanities that suffer disproportionately. As society places more emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math, the so-called STEM disciplines, our schools at all levels understandably devote more resources toward them. Particularly during a stubborn recession, it is, of course, more than reasonable to focus on vocational and economic concerns. But in the long run, failing to invest in the broadest set of disciplines in education, in research, and in our community outreach will cost us dearly. We will be less creative, less competitive and less productive as individuals and as a society.

Some messages from Washington reinforce this trend toward disinvestment in the arts and humanities. In 1979, funding of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, when adjusted for inflation, peaked at \$504 million and \$519 million respectively in 2015 dollars. This past fiscal year, both endowments received only \$146 million each.

We need to move away from approaching issues in ways constrained by traditional and sometimes artificial academic boundaries. What we learn and how we learn impacts how we think and how we approach problems. And education rooted in the liberal arts is not simply exposure to a variety of subjects. Instead, a truly well rounded education should train us to approach problems freshly, creatively and flexibly borrowing from the entire spectrum of human knowledge.

It has been said that science helps us to understand what we can do. The arts and humanities, our culture, our values, help us decide what to do. Studying the arts and humanities develops critical thinking skills and habits of mind, provides historical and cultural perspective, and fosters the ability to analyze, synthesize and communicate. The source of this sort of perspective may sometimes be surprising. Poetry, for example, provides an unexpected and unconventional lens to view our world in new ways.

Author Roger Housden observed, “For all its magic, poetry uses the common currency of our daily speech. It uses words that are known to all of us, but in a sequence and order that surprises us out of our normal speech rhythms and linear thought processes. Its effect is to illuminate our lives and breathe new life, new seeing, new tasting, into the world we thought we knew.”

All of us in the arts and humanities including those at museums like the Smithsonian and other cultural institutions should also be actively and clearly demonstrating how these disciplines help us articulate and appreciate the human experience. I am cautiously optimistic that this is beginning to happen.

Drew Faust, President of Harvard University, who eloquently described the value of an education in the arts and humanities, noted “It is far better to create in students the capacities to confront the circumstances of life with a combination of realism and resilience and with habits of mind and skills of analysis that transcend the present. Students in the humanities learn how to think critically and communicate their ideas

clearly. And those transferable skills lead to rewarding lives and careers in every field of endeavor.”

And at West Point, where Brigadier General Timothy Trainer, West Point’s academic dean explained, “It’s important to develop in young people the ability to think broadly, to operate in the context of other societies and become agile and adaptive thinkers. What you're trying to do is teach them to deal with complexity, diversity and change. They're having to deal with people from other cultures. They have to think very intuitively to solve problems on the ground.”

I have heard many times from many quarters that the private sector can and should shoulder more and more of the support of the arts. I disagree with this assertion. The government must take the lead in reinvesting in the arts and humanities. We cannot count on philanthropy to do this entirely. The arts and humanities must be seen as a national priority and the government must be seen as leading both in rhetoric and with resources.

As the Secretary of the Smithsonian and before that a career-long participant in higher education, you can easily understand my interest in promoting the arts and humanities. As does our government, however, I recognize that museums in general, and the Smithsonian in particular, have equally heavy responsibilities to bear. In my new position, I am learning quickly the leading role museums and other cultural institutions can play in our communities, and the country, and how they can impact and stimulate discourse and action.

Museums have a great power, but it is softer, more ethereal power. Political scientist Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” 25 years ago to refer to the power of ideas, knowledge, values, and culture to influence rather than the power of military and financial might.

As Gail Dexter Lord and Ngaire Blankenberg wrote in their book, “Cities, Museums and Soft Power,” museums empower people when they are patrons for artists and thinkers, when they amplify civic discourse, accelerate cultural change and contribute to cultural intelligence among the great diversity of city dwellers, visitors, policymakers and leaders. Museums present beautiful, accessible and meaningful spaces in which communities and individuals can meet, exchange ideas, and solve problems.”

Here in Washington, the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum is serving as a laboratory on how museums can be a cornerstone in successful place making. Besides exhibitions designed to its location, through its programming and outreach, the museum serves a town hall function for the exchange of ideas and the promotion of dialogue on topics particularly meaningful to a community in transition. Just this past weekend, the museum organized a community forum that brought together educators, scholars, parents, students and community members to explore the impact that Washington, D. C.’s rapidly changing neighborhoods has had on public education in the metro area.

Other Smithsonian Museums like the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden are serving as vibrant cultural hubs for creative people to meet and discuss ideas. This month, the museum is partnering with the Washington Project for the Arts to showcase 20 D.C. area artists as part of a holiday art market project.

And 55 museums and other cultural organizations have partnered in Chicago to create the Chicago Cultural Alliance to promote dialogue and the creation of ideas that lead to lasting social change. Among the alliance's successes is the Young Leaders Network that brings together young adults to discuss issues and develop youth-led programming to identify solutions to some of the serious social problems affecting Chicago.

Since I arrived at the Smithsonian five months and one week ago, I have visited our museums, galleries and research centers, participated in programming and listened to our historians, anthropologists, scientists, art historians, and educators. We are ready and we are committed to using the unique power of the Smithsonian and other cultural organizations to make the case to value the arts and humanities more deeply and more vigorously in American life and education, and to use these disciplines for the greater good.

I hope that I have helped make somewhat clear the contributions that the arts and humanities make as instruments to shape and strengthen our society. In doing that, however, I do not want to overlook their intrinsic value. The arts and humanities enrich our lives with joy, beauty and insights into the human condition that I believe can be gained in no other way.

I'm an optimist by nature, but my optimism is based on my life experience. I have met many talented young people as the President of Cornell and of the University of Iowa and in my medical practice. And I meet many others from across America in the museums and galleries of the Smithsonian. Our collective responsibility is to engage them, to inspire them, to get them excited about all kinds of learning and to listen and learn from them. I have faith in them and us. Thank you. (Applause)

MR. HUGHES: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. You have said that you don't like the description of the Smithsonian Institution as "The nation's attic." Why don't you like that description?

SECRETARY SKORTON: Just to be stubborn. No, I actually thought a lot about it the first time I heard it and I thought, "What do I think about my attic?" Think about my attic as a place where I put things that I really can't quite part with but sort of don't know what to do with. And that's not what the Smithsonian does with its 138 million things. These are things that are carefully watched, conserved, utilized and thought about as new questions arise, as new problems arise. And so, I'm not smart enough to think of what a better phrase is, but I really don't like that one.

MR. HUGHES: What do you see as your role now at the Smithsonian? Do you see yourself as a visionary? As someone who has to make an awful lot of change? Or do you see yourself as coming in and wanting to protect this great legacy that the Smithsonian has built up? How do you see your role?

SECRETARY SKORTON: All of the above. Next question. (Laughter) No, let me expand a little bit on that. So, you'll understand that in nonprofits that are creative organizations, universities, many other kinds of nonprofits, and the Smithsonian, things that have shown that they've survived the test of time. Next year at the Smithsonian, we will be celebrating our 170th anniversary and the leaders like me are always going to be relatively short-timers. So the first thing in nonprofit leadership, as in medicine, is to do no harm. And the Smithsonian does an enormous amount of good and does many, many, many things right.

And so basically, my first duty, and I took this same attitude in the other nonprofits that I've had the privilege to lead, is to listen to the people, so to speak, on the ground who are actually making it rain every day, whatever your preferred metaphor, getting the laundry out, whatever metaphor you like.

I do think that there are always ways to streamline administrative processes and that sort of inside baseball that can make a good place or a great place even greater. But a couple of things that I think it's important for the figurehead and leader of an organization like the Smithsonian to do as follows. One, is to listen as closely as possible to the community. Now, what's the community of the Smithsonian? Well, since my predecessor, Wayne Clough, and his colleagues, many of whom are here today, made the decision to, as Wayne put it, democratize the collection and put many more things in digital form and allow access to the huge bulk of humanity that will never come to the mall including, by the way, people in neighborhoods in this fair city who don't come to the mall. I think it's very, very important to continue that process of broadening access to the Smithsonian.

I also believe that it's important to listen to what the young people of the country, but initially of this city, think about what we're doing. People my age are very important to the Smithsonian's audience and public, but people just coming into adult age group, I think in the long run will be more important. So, we're establishing a youth advisory council, which we hope to kick off very early in 2016. Mayor Bowser has been very generous to endorse the idea, and we're working with her and with Deputy Mayor Jennifer Niles to begin to set up a way for me to be able to learn not only from the inside experts at the Smithsonian, the curators, historians, scientists, and the very senior administrators, but to learn from our audiences, past, present and future. And so I'm looking forward to trying to use my office to get more public input and try to reflect it inside the organization.

The rest of the things I'm going to do are closely held trade secrets, and I really wouldn't share it with you. Thank you. (Laughter)

MR. HUGHES: Could you assess the financial health of the Smithsonian and do you ever foresee the day when the Smithsonian will charge admission?

SECRETARY SKORTON: I hope I never see the day and never seriously contemplate a day where we will charge admission. The Smithsonian's financial health is robust, it's robust in great part because the federal taxpayer through our elected representatives had been steadfast and generous with the institution. And during the worst economic downturn that any of us in the current working world has ever experienced, Congress has kept our appropriation pretty stable, and I'm enormously grateful for that, and not every federal agency can boast that.

We are relying more and more for growth and focus in new areas on the results of retail operation, philanthropy and other sources. And I think that that's only fair. And again in my whole career in higher education, I have focused on so-called public-private partnerships which basically means diversifying the revenue stream for an organization, trying to convince the public sources, whether it's municipal, state or federal, that the taxpayers are getting their money's worth.

And that money's worth has to be conceived in two ways. One is that actual dollars sent our way in the appropriation, which again I thank Congress for being so steadfast and stable and generous with that support. But the second is that we are nonprofits. And therefore, we benefit in many ways by being nonprofits and we have to prove to the federal taxpayer that that nonprofit status makes sense.

I've been enormously, enormously impressed with the prior leadership of the Smithsonian, Wayne Clough, and Al Horvath and the current leadership which also includes Al and Richard Kurin and others who are here, museum and center directors, that they have taken this social compact, if you will, very, very seriously.

And so it's always good to have more resources. We're going to do our best to spend the resources wisely, to streamline the administrative cost matrix of the Smithsonian. And we will always make the argument for more funds. But right now, the American people can be satisfied that these museums will be free to walk into and we want to increase, not inhibit, access to these treasures.

MR. HUGHES: I probably, like you, have visited many museums outside of Washington and some that I visited, I've been blown away by the technology that they've-- that they bring forth in the modern facilities. How do you think the Smithsonian stacks up, compares with, museums around the country? Years ago, we used to think the Smithsonian as the very top, the very best. Is it still the very best or have others caught up?

SECRETARY SKORTON: John, I thank you for that question. I'll thank you not to ask thoughtful questions that I forgot to bring up in my speech. (Laughter) It's a very, very important question, and it leads to the discussion of how do we decide how

we're doing at the Smithsonian, if I can paraphrase the underlying foundation of that question.

As my colleagues will affirm, one of the first things I did when I was appointed a year and a half ago, was to ask that very question, how are we doing? And it's a complex answer. Like all diversified creative organizations, it depends on what corner of the Smithsonian you're talking about. Overall, I would say the Smithsonian is like no other institution. And that may sound like a copout, John, like I'm trying to evade the question. But there is no other institution as large as the Smithsonian, as varied as the Smithsonian, that serves completely in the public trust.

Now, in terms of individual areas, there are many areas in both science and non-science areas where the Smithsonian is at the very, very top of the field. I'm going to do one of those things that Richard Kurin would like me not to do, I'm going to name some examples off the top of my head. And later, he can ask me, "Why did you do that?"

So this morning, I was meeting with the director of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama. I feel I'm on very secure footing and tell you there is no other organization quite like this that studies the environment writ large in a particular area. The findings generalizable to other parts of the world that have those climatic characteristics.

Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, many other science areas are at or near the very, very top of their fields, whether considered based on scientific publications, members of the senior staff who are elected to national academies, and so on.

On the non-science side, we have to go no further than the Freer & Sackler Galleries to find some of, if not the top, collections in various sub-areas of Asian art. Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Archives of American Art, both publish prestigious academic journals that are widely subscribed to by people who want to write in these fields. And they come to those areas, they line up to those areas, to get articles published because they recognize the expertise of the curators and the museum director is at the very top of their field.

Is every single part of the Smithsonian at the top of its field? No, it's not. And I've never been in an organization that can make that statement. No organization I've ever been in. So, we're going to do everything we can to maintain the excellence and the dominance, if I could use that term, in these areas that are already dominant and try to decide carefully and strategically what other areas we can focus priorities and leadership on to bring them up higher. I'm very, very proud of what we're doing at the Smithsonian.

MR. HUGHES: Could you give us the latest update on the African American Museum? On time, on schedule? How's it looking?

SECRETARY SKORTON: It is on schedule, it's looking fabulous, breathtaking, compelling, evocative. Richard is planning to open that museum with its fabulous founding director, Lonnie Bunch, in September of '16. We don't know exactly when yet, but that's our goal. We believe we're going to get there.

The Congress was very, very generous in supplying half of the funds to create this kind of museum that has never existed quite like this, ever. And the public, the philanthropic public, corporations, individuals, foundations, have likewise been enormously generous. The kinds of exhibitions, John, are like many Smithsonian exhibitions, breathtaking in their reality. And being in the presence of something that is evocative and reminds us of something that happened before, something we're proud of, something we're not proud of, is going to be, in my estimation at least as present in this museum as any museum I've ever been to, ever, anywhere, including the Smithsonian Museums.

So, yes, it's on schedule. It's definitely on budget. Everyone's pushing hard. And those of you who may have had the joy, as I did on I think it was November 16, if I'm not mistaken, to come to an outdoor preview of some of the things, got a little taste of the emotion involved in creating this museum and some of the unique aspects that you will learn about soon. Very exciting.

MR. HUGHES: What's the role of the Smithsonian in establishment of a National Hispanic Museum, and are there plans to move that project forward?

SECRETARY SKORTON: So a decision to move forward with a national museum of anything is a decision for the U.S. Congress. And as you know, the museums are established by an act of Congress. But I think the question underlying our colleague's question, John, was what is the role of the Smithsonian in telling the story of the American Latino? And we have a growing and very serious role in that endeavor. Once again, thanks to people who came before me, which as you know after five months and one week is basically everybody, I actually met one young man who started about two weeks after I did, and I take great joy in lording it over him all the time about he doesn't really understand the Smithsonian.

But, some years ago a specific decision was made to begin to increase the effort expended to tell the story of Latinos in the American past, present and likely future. And the leaders began to develop a way to do this, a way to transduce those good intentions to actions. It was done through the creation of something called the Smithsonian Latino Center. It works with many of the other museums, some of whose directors are here today, to begin to tell the story of Latinos in America. A program was initiated to hire curators with expertise in this area and they work with the Smithsonian Latino Center and with other units of the Smithsonian to produce exhibits, of which there are many.

And then finally, other activities were done to bolster the whole field such as a training program for Latinos and Latinas who would like themselves to go into museum studies. And I had the great joy just this last summer of having a sort of graduation

luncheon with the latest cohort of these people. The idea of the museum itself is above my pay grade. The idea of telling the story of Latinos in America is not, and we're doing it, and we will do more.

MR. HUGHES: This questioner notes that the National Portrait Gallery and American Art Museum share the same building. Do you favor combining these two museums into one administrative structure?

SECRETARY SKORTON: I really do not. What I do favor is doing everything that I can as a cheerleader, as a leader, as a manager, to make sure that each of these two jewels in our crown have a chance to continue to grow and develop. And you might think, "Well, how can something grow and develop that's been there for generations?" Well, it can because the country is growing and developing, the world is growing and developing. And these are two very good examples, whoever asked this question, very good examples of institutions that have a history behind them that are constantly breaking the mold and doing new things.

And like any creative organizations, they need to be supported both financially and emotionally. And I'm very happy with things the way they are.

MR. HUGHES: This questioner says people we know who have visited the Museum of the American Indian have been disappointed that in this questioner's words, it is largely a PR exercise for individual tribes rather than a historical and cultural survey. Has this criticism reached you, and what is your reaction?

SECRETARY SKORTON: This criticism has reached me. It reached me long before I was here on campus. And I've had a chance to begin to dig in and learn more about the National Museum of the American Indian. And so here's my current set of observations and conclusions, John, and whoever asked the question.

First of all, I think that the Board of the National Museum of the American Indian and the leaders and excellent professional staff of that museum are doing everything they can to reach an appropriate and optimal equilibrium between taking the view that is national and unitary in scope on the one hand; and on the other hand, extremely importantly, recognizing the importance of the contributions of individual people or nations to the development of the museum and to its continuing support and refinement.

I had a chance to meet once with the board. I'm going to go back on a regular, if infrequent basis, to that board. And I find the leadership and the board itself to be aware of this danger, to be aware of this criticism and to trying to find that balance, a very delicate balance that's easy to talk about and somewhat difficult to achieve. But I think we're doing a very good job of it. And Richard, again, and other people who work directly with him, are very aware of this and very dedicated, I guess is the verb I would say, to be responsive to this concern. So, really interesting question, thank you.

MR. HUGHES: This questioner says you are seeking to create a provost's office at the Smithsonian. Is this an indication that you plan to manage with a hands-off approach to running the institution by delegating oversight of the museums and research programs to your provost?

SECRETARY SKORTON: Well, I never want to be too hands off because I like the job, I love getting the paycheck, it's an important part of my everyday life. And so no, I'm not going to be hands off. We are thinking about a major change to the upper administration. That's being reviewed now in the halls of Congress. And we're waiting to see their wisdom about this. I will say in direct answer to the question, I was surprised coming to the institution to find that the science units were sequestered under one administrative hierarchy and the non-science units sequestered under another. And I'm not aware of any other major academic institution that works that way. I am aware that the best way to foster cross talk and collaboration among all of the units is to have them in one hierarchy.

Now, in terms of the underlying question of whether the provost sort of runs the ship while I'm out doing other things, again it's a delicate balance. I believe that these complex creative organizations, the Smithsonian has about 30 different units depending on how you count them, are managed first and foremost by the people who run those units.

Secondarily, however, there are two big universes of activity, or responsibility, in any creative nonprofit or for profit, for that matter. There are those that are related to the programmatic or content aspect, the mission related activities, and there's those that are related to how do you support and realize those mission-related activities?

And the Smithsonian has under this new proposed approach two such undersecretaries, one for finance and administration, Al Horvath; and one for museums and research, or also called provost, Richard Kurin. And that's very, very comparable to all the other creative nonprofits that I'm aware of in every college and university that I'm aware of. So nothing shocking there in the balance between how much I am down in the weeds sticking my nose in everybody's business, and out there allowing everyone to do what they want while drumming up more support is a balance that I have to try to re-strike every single day when I get up. There's some issues on which I want to be very involved, and many, many issues on which I have so much confidence in the leadership that I don't think I add much value.

MR. HUGHES: In this world of Netflix, YouTube and platforms such as the Google Art Project, does the Smithsonian need to create blockbuster exhibitions to lure the public away from their sofas and smart devices long enough to look at the real thing? How do you compete in this world?

SECRETARY SKORTON: You know, you had to grade people's questions, although I'm a professor for a long time. I would give that a real A plus. What a great, great, great question. And, you know, you can't know less about museums than I, at least

than I knew when I started and I'm pretty close to that still right now. I've been reading a lot of stuff about museums; books on museums, museum studies, textbooks, lot of newspaper articles, Google alerts and so on and so forth.

And this question phrased in various ways is one of the key questions. You may read articles called "Whence the 21st century museum," or things like that. There actually was no such thing, but something like that. And the question really balances on this dichotomy; do we depend on exhibitions where you and I, as members of the community, are face to face, so to speak with a breathtaking work of art, object, subject, historical, presence, or is it a better use of our time to digitize them, do 3D reconstructions, make it possible not just for the 30 million visits to the mall and to the other areas where we have museums, but to the billions of people throughout the planet via the internet?

And I think that the Smithsonian, because of its size and scope and the nature of being in the public trust, will dictate during my Secretaryship and as far as I can see in the future, that we'll have to have a foot in both worlds, in both worlds. The world where we will offer the opportunity to those who can get here, a fortunate sub part of the population who get here, to be in the presence of something that is different, inspiring, exciting, evocative whether it's a piece of work, performance art, a widget, whatever it may be.

And yet, we owe it to the fact that we're a national museum and not only serving the local populace, that we have to have ways to greatly expand access that will cater to those who prefer not to leave home. And I don't know about each of you, but I struggle with that myself all the time. I struggle with whether to go out to see a movie on a big screen or whether to have it on my whatever device I have.

And so, I think our culture in general is struggling, probably too dramatic, but dealing with this on a day to day basis and the Smithsonian is as well. But I believe you'll see us cover the waterfront of approaches and be asking, again, be asking the visiting public, whether they're visiting in cyberspace or visiting in person, what do you think? How does this work for you?

My prediction is that we'll get all kinds of answers depending on the demographic of the person who's giving the answers. But I think we'll find that we need to cover the waterfront.

MR. HUGHES: Want to combine a couple of questions here. One is the Smithsonian is opening an outpost in London at Mayor Boris Johnson's Olympic Park Redevelopment. Do you plan to take Smithsonian special exhibitions from Washington to London and would you like to take more exhibitions elsewhere in the world or in the country? And the second part of that is if the Smithsonian adds new museums, is there any thought to putting these new buildings in other parts of the United States instead of the Washington, Virginia area?

SECRETARY SKORTON: Great. So, I think at its most fundamental level, the question really has to do with whether our responsibility as the stewards of the nation's largest, or the world's largest museum and research complex, whether those duties are satisfied by working hard broadly and deeply, but at the places where we have our 19 museums and galleries and National Zoological Park. And so, I think the answer to that is absolutely not, it's not discharged just by doing, just, by doing some of the world's best work in those locations. That's the reason that Wayne Clough and others wanted to broaden this digitization initiative, start it and broaden it. That's the reason that the Smithsonian supports 206, I think is the number, affiliate museums in almost every state in the country. And that's why we have a traveling exhibition service and so on.

However, I will say that I was surprised when coming to this creative organization from another creative organization, that although the Smithsonian does work, and good work, cutting edge work in 145 of the world's 192 countries, the Smithsonian has no permanent presence outside of the United States. And you can just imagine the arguments and counter arguments about changing that balance, that status quo. On the one hand, don't we want to tell the story of America and the stories that we tell so well elsewhere in the world where not everyone really understands America, no more than we really understand other parts of the world. And my answer, of course, is yes.

And by the same token, if the hard earned money of the federal taxpayer, which is sorely strained during a stubborn recession, is going to be spent somewhere, don't we want to spend it predominantly, or exclusively, in the United States? So, my default position has been that we should consider broadening our reach in the way of having an overseas presence of the Smithsonian. And I think the reason that we're considering London is that the opportunity came to us, came to us.

And we're still thinking about it. No decisions have been made. A lot of it you've covered, those of you in the press have covered. And we'll be very open when there's more developments to cover. But we're dealing at a sort of a fundamental level with the question in mind and doing it somewhat unrelated to the London opportunity, but somewhat in the context of the London opportunity.

So, no plans to add other new museums owned, so to speak, and run by the Smithsonian elsewhere. But a very sincere desire to broaden our reach and to be out there where the people are whom we serve in whatever way that means.

MR. HUGHES: We are almost out of time, but before I ask the last question or two, I have some housekeeping. The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists and we fight for a free press worldwide. To learn more about the Club, go to our website, Press.org. And to donate to our nonprofit Journalism Institute, visit Press.org/institute.

I'd like to remind you about some upcoming events. Tonight, European Union ambassador to the United States, David O'Sullivan will discuss the state of EU/US

relations when the National Press Club visits the EU Delegation Building here in Washington at six p.m.

On Saturday, December 12th at 11:00 a.m., the National Press Club will hold its annual holiday party for children featuring hamburgers, pizza, corn dogs, a DJ, dancers and gingerbread cookie decorating.

And on Wednesday, December 16th at 7:30 p.m., the Club will host a program on the future of journalism cosponsored with Georgetown University's School of Continuing Studies, three former National Press Club presidents will be featured on the panel.

I'd now like to present our guest with the traditional National Press Club mug. (Applause) I'm sure you can find some display space for that in one of your facilities somewhere. I think people would come from all over to see it.

So last few questions.

SECRETARY SKORTON: You know, if you have more housekeeping, I have no need to answer more questions. If you just want to-- maybe you want to review those things and make sure everybody got them. Oh, well.

MR. HUGHES: As we've mentioned, you've been in the job a short time. So far, what are the best and worst things that you've discovered with the job?

SECRETARY SKORTON: The worst things I've discovered, much to my horror, is that I really don't know very much about museums. But that's changing a little bit every day. I found nothing else remotely troublesome about the Smithsonian. It's a fabulous place to work. And the thing that's the most gratifying to me, it wasn't entirely surprising but gratifying I would say, John, is how proud and engaged the people are, the 6,400 people who work there for money, and over 6,000 who work there for love. And the pride that people take in working with and for the Smithsonian is breathtaking. It's really, really amazing.

The other thing that I've been doing, which bears on both the questions, is I've been-- when I can get away from my schedulers-- I've been walking around the museums without my name tag on just meeting people, not just the volunteers but tourists, visitors, and I've had some fascinating experiences and some straight from the shoulder criticisms about how things are done when they figured out that I was, "the top man." And it's been gratifying in this sense, no matter how serious the criticism may be, that they view, the visitors view, the Smithsonian as their museum, as their organization, as their gallery, as their science unit. And that's really our chief goal, is for the American people to view this as their organization. And, I mean, the talking to some of them gave me, I know they're thinking about it as their organization.

MR. HUGHES: What is your single personal favorite item in all the Smithsonian? (Laughter)

SECRETARY SKORTON: Wow, this is very, very, very dangerous. And there's no way that I can not get in trouble with this, but I'm going to go ahead and tell you what I think anyway. So, my dad, who passed away 35 years ago next month, was a Russian immigrant and I grew up in Los Angeles. And he was a naturalized citizen, it was the biggest day in his life when he began naturalized. And he wanted to do anything Americans did. Whatever Americans did, that's what he wanted to do because he was an American now.

And we used to go to Chavez Ravine to watch the Dodgers play, and he loved watching Sandy Koufax. And he would say, "Pal," he'd say, "we're going to go and watch a left-hander strike out a lot of guys." And when I was visiting the National Museum of American History once, of many visits, they showed me Sandy Koufax's Mitt, his glove. And that really meant a lot to me not just because of Sandy Koufax but because of my dad.

And also showed me who's in power in the Smithsonian. So I said, "Can I touch this thing?" And he said, "Yes, you definitely can touch it." And I put gloves on it and touched it. And I said, "Can I put my hand in it?" And they said, "No, you may not." And I said, "Well--" and John Gray, the director's over there, and I said, "Let me remind you that I'm going to be Secretary of the Smithsonian." And they said, "Well, that's fabulous, congratulations. You may not put your hand in this glove." So that was it so far.
(Laughter)

MR. HUGHES: How about a round of applause for our speaker? (Applause) I would also like to thank the National Press Club staff including its Journalism Institute and Broadcast Center for organizing today's event. If you would like a copy of today's program or to learn more about the National Press Club, go to that website, Press.org. Thank you, we are adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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