

Letter From the Desk of David Challinor
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While I was writing this month's letter on 12 October, the six billionth human arrived on this planet. This event is surely a more significant milestone than Y2K, which is only a few months away. Our global population has grown by a billion in only the past twelve years, and predictions are an increase of another billion within the next decade. It is almost impossible to imagine what a billion represents; e.g., at some time in the 1970's, a billion minutes had passed since the death of Christ; or, a stack of a billion dollar bills would be as high as the Washington Monument. However, the inevitable sense of doom generated by these figures is tempered by current projections that population growth rates are falling and that the total number of people on the earth should level off at around 10 billion by the middle of the next century -- that is during the lifetime of those presently under 10 years of age. Demographically the inhabitants of Europe and North America will become increasingly aged, but this trend will likely be offset by an increase in young immigrants such as we are now witnessing. The increase in number and variety of our population has had, and will continue to have, a profound effect on our institutions, but the resulting metamorphoses occur relatively slowly; those involved in implementing the changes are often unaware of how radical they are. This month's letter will consider the forces of altered demographics that have changed, and continue to change, the policies and priorities of the Smithsonian Institution (SI), as a representative organization, since my arrival there in June 1966.

In the mid-1960's, the Smithsonian was an awakening giant that stretched, looked about and realized that the comfortable world in which it had been dozing had burst into vibrant curiosity and intellectual ferment. The image of the SI as the nation's attic had been shrugged off and, reflecting the pride of the nation's innovations in science and technology, it opened the new Museum of History and Technology in 1964. On display were not only the holy icons of our culture, such as the Star Spangled Banner and the First Ladies' gowns, but also the locomotives, reapers, computers, etc. that were evidence of our nation's technical prowess.

Across the Mall, behind the Castle, the nucleus of the proposed exhibits for a new National Air and Space Museum (NASM) was displayed in a Quonset hut. A new museum had been authorized by Congress in 1964, but the SI was advised that funds to build it would not be available until the Vietnam war wound down. In 1971 the SI requested from Congress the \$40 million authorized to build this museum, and with a strong appeal from Michael Collins, astronaut and newly appointed director of the museum, Congress voted the appropriation to construct the building. It was dedicated and opened to the public as a bicentennial event on 1 July 1976. The relative ease with which Congress funded these two popular museums can be attributed in part to the interests of a growing and changing constituency. In the 1960's and the following decades, citizen groups realized the effectiveness of lobbying for their specific projects. If the group was large enough (often helped by population growth) and well organized, it could attain almost undreamed of goals. NASA's space program, for example, was strongly admired and supported by the citizens and their representatives in Congress; thus it was generously funded. We had beaten the Soviets to the moon and the artifacts exhibited at NASM

were graphic evidence of our country's success. Overt lobbying to build the museum was unnecessary because once the concept of the museum was formulated, it was carried forward by its own momentum. NASM soon became the most heavily visited museum in the world, in part due to the increase in the number of potential visitors, but also due to the imaginative and spectacular exhibits and the popular IMAX films. NASM, early recognizing the explosive growth of non-English-speaking visitors, was the first Smithsonian museum, for example, to install multilingual signage.

Not all efforts to promote the nation's technical prowess succeeded. An example of a failed effort was that of the National Armed Forces Museum. Congress established the National Armed Forces Museum Advisory Board (NAFMAB) as part of the Smithsonian during the Eisenhower administration. Military bases were solicited for appropriate hardware to be exhibited, but lack of proper organization and popular support for the concept of a military museum in the 1960's doomed the effort. Army arsenals saw the potential museum as an opportunity to clear valuable storage space for higher priority machines, and the Smithsonian was flooded with tanks, half-tracks, atomic cannons, etc. None of these machines worked, so the Institution stacked them outdoors at Silver Hill, its newly acquired storage facility in Maryland. There they lay in the mud for at least a decade until NASM began preparing the site to house its rapidly expanding collection of restored planes. Eventually the Smithsonian convinced Congress to dissolve NAFMAB, thereby allowing the hardware to be sold for scrap. The demise of the Armed Forces Museum is a good example of the need for a powerful lobbying group and an enthusiastic constituency, both without and within the Institution itself in order to create a new museum. All were lacking in this case.

NAFMAB's converse at the Smithsonian was the Folk Life Festival. Originally conceived as a way to educate the public about the use of many of the cultural artifacts in the Museum of History and Technology, it rapidly acquired a life and identity of its own. The Smithsonian's Secretary thought that people would be interested in how, for example, a butter churn worked. In one of the early festivals, there were actually six cows on the mall being milked regularly, thereby showing a whole generation of urban children the source of the milk they drank. I remember clearly the energetic woman who milked the cows demonstrating for the children how the cream rose to the top of the pail, and the children's delight in helping to churn the butter. There was much more public support than we anticipated for this type of exhibit and the summer Folk Life Festival on the Mall is now well established within the SI. In contrast to the appeal of NASM's technological bias and future orientation, the success of the Folk Life Festival may be attributed to a yearning for the simple life of the past. Whatever the reasons, the existence of all SI activities and museums depends on their continued popularity and the support of their constituencies. Again, the number of supporters available is related to the total size of the population. The larger and more varied the population, the greater the number and effectiveness of the nation's interest groups.

The change in the nation's demographics was reflected in the composition of the members of the Regents -- the Institution's governing body. When I arrived at the Smithsonian, all the Regents were male and fitted closely the common WASP image. Although I recall no overt pressure to change the group's composition, some of the Regents realized the necessity to alter its makeup. New citizen members (there are nine) are nominated by the Regents and confirmed by a joint resolution of Congress. The old makeup of the Regents was altered within a few years with the appointment of a Jew, then a female, followed shortly by a black male. These three new members were distinguished in their fields and made important contributions during their respective tenures. Another crucial change was made about this time in the Smithsonian's governance: no Regent could serve more than two consecutive six-year terms. Prior to this amendment, there were Regents who stood for a third term while in their 80's! These transitions were not easily accomplished but through diplomacy and gentle prodding, the very character of the Smithsonian was altered to reflect more accurately the nation's demographics, and we are all the richer for it today.

Such a reconstruction, however, does not occur without cost. When the Smithsonian was perceived as the nation's attic, it received little publicity. Its relative anonymity allowed the Secretary freedom to experiment with and encourage all sorts of radical ideas. Charles G. Abbot, prior to becoming Secretary, was a primary backer of Robert Goddard's research in rocketry. Spencer Baird's exploration of the Burgess shale in western Canada was unencumbered by concerns about whether his discoveries of new invertebrate fossils might make the Institution subject to pressure from citizens opposed to the theory of evolution. Today, in contrast, almost any exhibit produced by a Smithsonian museum is at risk of potential opposition from groups that disagree with the subject matter. The Institution must tread cautiously whenever it plans a new exhibition for fear of generating something too controversial. Given the nature of today's society, there can never be unanimity, but some controversy is healthy for the intellectual life of our cultural institutions, and it will be a sad day when contention is constrained.

Increased Congressional concern with the character and governance of the SI does curtail the flexibility of action once enjoyed by the Secretary. This oversight has put increasing pressure on the Institution's trust fund, the part of its operating budget that is not funded by appropriations from Congress. For example, salary ceilings set by Congress for federal officials were far too low to compete with those offered by private museums. Smithsonian positions that had heretofore been funded with federal money now had to be paid out of trust funds to be competitive. This transfer put enormous pressure on the Institution's trust fund, causing a massive shift of energy to increase it with outside private funds. The Institution is not alone in its need for outside support and now has to compete with similar institutions and universities seeking funds from the same sources. This is not necessarily bad, because today it must continually assess its programs and projects to insure that they are competitive in the open market for financial support.

There is no question that the Smithsonian has changed. Is it for the better or worse? That is the wrong question to ask because it is neither; rather, it is now different and reflects the Secretary's ambitions and thoughts on the future as well as those of its constituencies. I have been blessed to have worked at the SI for 33 years and to have observed the changes that have taken place. My own theory is that if the Smithsonian stays its current course and maintains its high goals, it should achieve a cultural immortality by continuing its mission to increase and diffuse knowledge to humans the world over.

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