SECRETARY'S RESPONSE TO THE EXHIBITION POLICY REVIEW PANEL REPORT

We appreciate the hard work and wisdom reflected in the report and recommendations of the Regents Exhibition Policy Review Panel. The public controversy surrounding the exhibition, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, provided the Smithsonian community with opportunities to consider and debate the role and responsibilities of the Smithsonian in the 21st Century America.

We share the Panel's fundamental observation that

[a]s the national museum, the Smithsonian must lead and encourage civil dialogue on important and transitional issues facing the nation. To do that, the Smithsonian is obligated to produce thoughtful exhibitions and programming with themes or content that may at times be considered controversial or sensitive.

We agree with the Panel that the Smithsonian's exhibition selection and planning process must be more clearly defined and transparent and, to the extent practicable and appropriate, should encourage more participation by Smithsonian stakeholders.

In doing so, the Regents, the Secretary and senior leadership team, and staff share responsibility for maintaining the Smithsonian's integrity as a public trust and fidelity to its mission for the "increase and diffusion knowledge."

As the Panel observed, the Smithsonian will inevitably be required to explore topics that are controversial or potentially sensitive. And as technology allows for more rapid and diverse dissemination of information, reaction and opinion, controversy arising related to Smithsonian exhibitions will occur with greater frequency.

The Report's seventeen recommendations address aspects of the Institution's practices in three general and intertwined categories of activity –planning exhibitions and programs, communicating effectively, and ensuring consistency with mission.

Many of the Report's recommendations seek to sharpen lines of information, consultation and accountability and solidify the partnership between the curators and exhibition planning professionals, museum directors, museum advisory boards, Smithsonian senior leadership and the Board of Regents. At the panel's suggestion, we have already appointed a senior arts advisor in the Castle and engaged the Directors Advisory Group to identify effective approaches to future Smithsonian Directive (SD), "Exhibition Planning," 603 reviews. In March, directors and senior curators met to determine whether the exhibition review process, including the lines of information and consultation called for by SD 603, should be refined. (See Appendix 1). We are continuing to review this process with the Panel's guidance in mind.

In partnership with the Regents Strategic Planning and Programs Committee, we have

developed an advance calendar of Smithsonian exhibitions. The calendar will encourage early identification of potentially controversial exhibitions and help trigger engagement with key stakeholders. At the Committee's May 2, 2011, meeting, members discussed how to best use the calendar not only to anticipate controversy, but also, reflecting the Panel's recommendation, to measure progress under the Smithsonian's strategic plan. The calendar will provide museum and research center directors organized information on activity outside of their own units and generate collaboration and sharing of knowledge regarding exhibitions and outside funding. The calendar should also help flag potential conflicts between units regarding exhibition content or donor relations. (See Appendix 2).

As recommended by the Panel, we are strengthening outreach to our public and congressional stakeholders. Our government relations staff is identifying ways to engage Regents, museum directors, and advisory board members as effective advocates for Smithsonian programs. In April, we conducted a forum on the *Hide/Seek* controversy and the challenges of presenting controversial exhibitions at a public cultural institution. From the conversation at that forum and with our museum professionals, we are better educating our stakeholders – from the Congress to our visitors -- about what it means to be a public trust and will providing meaningful opportunities for public input on exhibitions.

We appreciate the Panel's analysis of the contemporary exhibition planning environment as being challenging, especially for a large, public institution such as the Smithsonian. The report has already served as a catalyst for internal discussion and sharing of information among directors, curators and leadership. An important legacy of the Panel's work will be the improved exchange of information across the Smithsonian and the use of best practices related to exhibition planning, communication and accountability.

APPENDIX (1)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS RELATED TO REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel Report states: Smithsonian Directive 603, is an excellent template and should be studied and followed. New technologies, including film and the Internet, should be recognized. Standards and processes for reacting to the eruption of public controversies should be clarified, including timing, involvement of advisory boards and review.

After considerable discussion with directors and curators and the Secretary's DAG, there appears to be general consensus that SD 603 is a robust and flexible tool as currently framed and should not be changed. However, the directive should be used consistently, be adapted to individual situations and contexts, and be a visible step in the exhibition planning processes. The Secretary has charged the Under Secretaries with finding ways to heighten awareness of SD 603 and encourage its consistent use within the exhibition process.

The Panel recommended for consideration: The Smithsonian should consider initiating a summer executive education institute for curators and Directors to discuss case studies applicable to Smithsonian exhibition planning and implementation. The program would emphasize problems and strategies and best practices for crisis management in the unique context of a national museum. An executive education program – short in duration, built around case studies – would allow curators and others to come together in mutual deliberation on questions about the role of the Smithsonian in its many exhibitions and how to handle controversies after they break out.

Initial input from directors and curators is that instead of an Institute, other existing venues for sharing best practices could be used to communicate on real experiences including:

- Material Culture Forum
- Seminars
- Congress of Scholars
- Smithsonian Leadership Development Program

Finally, directors and curators have discussed several communications related recommendations in the Report such as the use of a *Public Editor or Ombudsmen*, the solicitation of pre-decisional public input and the use of an immediate public forum when controversies arise. There is agreement among senior leadership, directors and curators that finding ways to collect public input, comment and reactions to exhibitions should be a part of exhibition planning considerations but that each exhibition is different and allowing director discretion regarding strategies is important. Fostering pan-institutional communication about best practices and experiences and providing early information to leadership and the Regents about possible sensitive exhibitions will ensure that good public input strategies are understood and deployed.

APPENDIX (2)

SUMMARY – DIRECTORS AND CURATORS RETREAT MARCH 18, 2011

Seven of the Report's recommendations speak to fundamental operations of the museums and the processes for planning and communicating about exhibitions. Given the key role and fundamental responsibility of Smithsonian directors and curators in these activities, an in-depth discussion with directors and senior curators was organized in mid-March to explore the Report's recommendations in the context of real world experiences. Over 40 of these leaders attended. The retreat included a realistic (hypothetical) exercise to spark discussion of the exhibition issues raised in the Panel report. This exercise provided a base for a richer discussion of strategies for anticipating issues during exhibition planning, creating transparency and accountability and strengthening communication.

The group reached consensus in several areas relevant to the Panel Report's observations and recommendations. For example, the group agreed that:

- Exhibitions and projects (research, papers, etc.) should align with the SI Mission
- Communications remains a significant challenge.
 - It is important to communicate early to Regents, Congress, funders about sensitive exhibitions and to consult, inform, and build advocacy
 - More pan-institutional staff communications (consultation and information) would broaden and strengthen positive advocacy for projects and provide early identification of issues around projects that could potentially affect multiple units
- Roles and responsibilities at each stage of the planning and execution must be clear
 especially between those that require information and those who should be consulted and
 all relevant parties should acknowledge that the respective roles (responsible, accountable,
 support, consultant, informed) may shift through the stages of the process
- Directors are the front line decision-makers in time of crisis and controversy
- Directors and SI Leaders need to be equipped to handle the political and crisis situations
 effectively and this means more training, more exposure to the government and
 communications strategies, and more support from senior leadership (even when mistakes
 are made).
- Preparation for controversy and crisis should start at the earliest planning stages
- Strong relationships and trust between stakeholders is the best ally in times of crisis
- It is important to effectively manage our external co-curators to ensure that SI mission is driving choices
- SD 603 is a solid document and if it is used consistently and is visible in the planning process it probably does not need to be altered.
- The Regents should be kept abreast about how best practices are being used to engage and inform audiences and stakeholders during exhibition planning.

The group used the RASCI model to diagram the roles <u>during a crisis or controversy.</u> The identification of the stakeholders, and recommendations to engage them as consultants or keep them informed in the moment of crisis are outlined below

RASCI Model:

R= Responsible, A = Accountable, S = Support; C = Consultant; I = Informed

	R	Α	S	С	I
Curator				С	
Director	R	Α			
US		Α			
Secret		Α			
Adv. Board					I
Regents				С	I
OGR				С	
OGC				С	
OEA				С	
Advisors				С	
Sponsors					I
SI Peers			S		
Outside Peers			S		
Unit Staff					I
SI Staff					I