

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 5, 2025

The Honorable Lonnie G. Bunch III
Secretary
Smithsonian Institution
1000 Jefferson Drive, SW
Washington, DC 20560

Dear Secretary Bunch:

We write following the August 12 letter sent to you by three White House officials regarding their “comprehensive internal review” of Smithsonian Institution museums and exhibitions and the August 19 statement from President Trump denouncing the Smithsonian as “OUT OF CONTROL.” We deeply appreciate your leadership at this time and urge you to resist any attempts by the President or the White House to bully the Institution to go against its mission and values.

As you know, the Smithsonian Institution is a national treasure, and it is also a public-private partnership managed as an independent federal trust. It is not an executive agency over which the President can exert unilateral control over its historical, scientific or artistic content. The Institution was created by Congress to care for the bequest of James Smithson and to found “an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” In recent years, it has been funded with a relatively even split of private donations to support its programming, and federal appropriations provided by Congress to support its core operations including the maintenance of the facilities, further underscoring its unique status.

Congress assigned the trust responsibility for this gift of private property to the United States and its ongoing mission to the Smithsonian Board of Regents, not to the executive branch. As you are aware, the Board’s voting members consist of eight private citizens and six bipartisan Members of Congress, with the Chief Justice of the United States and the Vice President of the United States serving as *ex officio* members who do not vote on Board matters. The Secretary of the Smithsonian has the authority to lead the Institution and is selected by a vote of the Regents and may only be removed by the Regents.

Given its history and structure, oversight of the Smithsonian Institution is the responsibility of Congress. Presidents and their staff may be important stakeholders of the Smithsonian, but they do not have any legal authority to dictate how the Institution is run, or remove its leadership staff, much less dictate historical or scientific content of the Institution’s museums and exhibits. Nothing the President or his officials say can change these facts. The Smithsonian’s Board and leadership have an obligation to maintain the Institution’s independence and integrity in the face of any attempts to pressure the Smithsonian to follow a particular political agenda.

As Americans from different backgrounds, we are all proud of our heritage. As an institution created “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” the Smithsonian must strive to tell the full story of America. It should go without saying that this includes the troubling parts of our history such as slavery, forced removal of indigenous peoples, and other injustices committed that have shaped our nation, along with the historic struggles for freedom that make America a country that we are proud to call home. Similarly, there can be no question that the Smithsonian Institution must be committed to scientific integrity and accuracy, when it comes to established science regarding evolution, climate change, or other matters which some may find controversial.

We understand that prior to receiving the August 12 letter, the Smithsonian had already independently begun a review of its programs and exhibits to ensure that it meets its own standards and provides the appropriate context in its interpretive materials. We expect this review process to be conducted appropriately, free of political interference, and for the Institution to keep the Board and Congress regularly updated on that review.

Further, as you consider the appropriate response to the White House letter sent to you, we emphasize the necessity to consult closely with the Board of Regents and with Congress. Accordingly, we request that any materials that the Smithsonian determines are appropriate to provide in response to the letter also be provided to the appropriate congressional oversight committees on a bipartisan basis.

Thank you for your commitment to the long-standing independence and integrity of the Smithsonian Institution. We look forward to working with you to ensure that it remains a national treasure that tells the full story of America for generations to come.

Sincerely,



Alex Padilla
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Rules and Administration



Jeffrey A. Merkley
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
the Department of the Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs