



Commissioned Officers Association

of the U.S. Public Health Service

September 17, 2019

Kevin Gover
Director, National Museum of the American Indian
4th Street SW and Constitution Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20013

Dear Director Gover:

Thank you for your letter of September 10. I appreciate a response after my many letters to the Smithsonian Secretary have gone unanswered. Your letter does not, however, address our concerns. To be clear, we will not give up our efforts to persuade you and other Smithsonian leaders to change the design of the memorial and make it inclusive. We cannot stop our efforts to persuade the Smithsonian to have an inclusive memorial, as that would be a betrayal of all those who have served and bled and died for our country.

You state that the Smithsonian held sessions with tribal leaders during the period October 2015 through June 2017. In May of this year we asked for the records of these sessions. Though our request was acknowledged, we have received nothing from the Smithsonian, and I have no reason to believe that the Smithsonian will ever comply with our records request. Your statement that none of the participants in these sessions “requested the inclusion of NOAA and USPHS commissioned corps in the Memorial design” is totally meaningless and cannot be the basis for excluding these two groups of veterans. The fact is, very few people—Native Americans and others—understand the history of USPHS and NOAA participation in defending our country, starting with wars we fought well over 100 years ago. Had these Native Americans with whom you met been made fully aware of how thoroughly USPHS and NOAA officers integrated into the armed forces of our country during these many wartime periods, including our most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the outcome of your discussions might well have been different. Incomplete information should not be the basis for the discrimination that is now being visited on veterans of the USPHS and NOAA.

I don't know whether you have read all of the legislative history of the 1994 law as I have. It is clear that Rep. Craig Thomas (R-WY), main sponsor of the legislation, intended for his bill to include all Native American veterans. The Secretary of Health and Human Services had his staff research the 1994 law, and they came to the same conclusion, as he stated in a letter to the Smithsonian Secretary. Your statement that “Congress itself has recently confirmed that the purpose of the Act was to recognize Native members of the armed forces only” is completely in error. I don't know who fed you that line, but Congress has not expressed anything on this issue since 2013, and even then, all it did was repeat some of the language in the 1994 law.

We understand that the Smithsonian will soon be holding a not-open-to-the-public

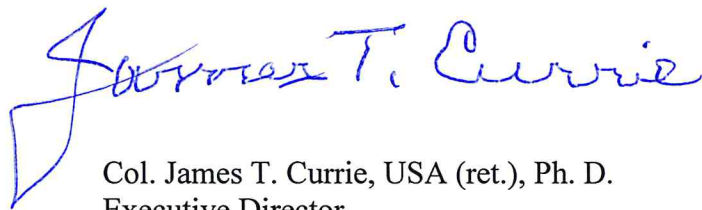
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groundbreaking ceremony for the memorial. In all my years in Washington, I have never heard of a closed ceremony of this type. It's almost as if the Smithsonian is ashamed of the discriminatory nature of this memorial and wishes to hide it from those who might question it publicly. You state that "we do not mean to diminish the contribution of Native members of the commissioned corps," but that is precisely what your design does. It not only "diminishes" their contribution, it ignores their contribution. It would perpetuate the myth that veterans of the USPHS and NOAA never took their place alongside those who served in the Army, Navy, and other services during America's wars. It would tell every person who visits the memorial that those whose service is recognized on the memorial were the only Native American veterans. It ignores history, a position I find most ironic for an institution like the Smithsonian that prides itself on its respect for history.

The history of Native Americans in this country has often been distorted and told only through the eyes of others. Your memorial continues that distortion, though it is through your own eyes that the erroneous history is being presented. As far as we are concerned, our effort has not ended. We will continue, through whatever means are at our disposal, to see that you understand just what a mistake you are making.

Perhaps you have seen my most recent letter to Secretary Bunch, together with the half-page ad we placed in *Roll Call*, a newspaper that circulates on Capitol Hill. I call your attention to the last bullet point in the ad, which lists veterans' groups that have endorsed our position on the memorial. All of these groups have stated publicly that the memorial should include both the USPHS and NOAA in it. Are you prepared to ignore them and continue to discriminate in the design of the Native American veterans memorial? I don't see how you can do that as the public face of an institution that honors Native Americans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James T. Currie". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

Col. James T. Currie, USA (ret.), Ph. D.
Executive Director