

Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service



October 3, 2019

Porter N. Wilkinson
Chief of Staff to the regents
Smithsonian Institution
600 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Mr. Wilkinson:

This is probably the last letter you or anyone at the Smithsonian will receive from me. It greatly disappoints me that a venerable institution like the Smithsonian decided to insult literally thousands of Native American veterans by not including them in the National Native American Veterans Memorial now being constructed on the Mall.

I don't know how long you have been around town, but I have been here for many years. I understand how the political class works in Washington, and I always held the Smithsonian as being science-based, and not subject to the ill winds that dog so many entities. I was wrong. You all are no better than the worst of the others, and that should be cause for shame on your part.

We don't have two classes of veterans in our country. We have veterans. Period. But the Smithsonian decided to create two classes of veterans and has stuck to its decision even when it was shown to be wrong. I have been reading and analyzing legislative history for close to forty years, and after reading the history of the 1994 law that allows construction of the Native American Veterans memorial, I understood what the bill's authors wanted: a memorial to honor Native American veterans. Not a memorial to honor some veterans, and not others. A memorial to honor all Native American veterans. As you undoubtedly know, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services and his legal team also studied the legislative history and came to this same conclusion. Secretary Azar told then-Secretary Skorton of his conclusion in a letter dated April 9, 2019. You all disregarded both my analysis and that of Secretary Azar, for reasons that I do not understand.

Your recent letter to me dwells on the language of the 1994 law. You know and I know that if the Smithsonian had chosen to do so, it could have gone to the oversight committees on Capitol Hill and said something along the lines of, "We see now that the drafters of the 1994 law made a mistake and inadvertently left out certain Native American veterans. We would like to

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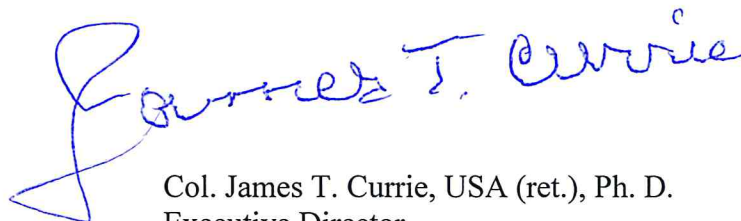
include them in the memorial. Any problem with that?" I am reasonably certain that there would have been no problem. But you all did not do this.

Instead, you blamed your decision on Native Americans themselves, some of whom do not understand the role that officers in the USPHS and NOAA have played in our country's wars. I doubt that you know their story yourself, because it is not well known. I'm a historian, and I researched it. USPHS and NOAA officers have been there alongside the men with guns going back to World War I.

I asked for records of the "listening sessions" you all allegedly had with certain Native Americans. I filed my request in early May and have yet to receive anything. It is clear to me that the Smithsonian is acting in extreme bad faith in not filling my request.

This is your legacy, Mr. Wilkinson, and the legacy of the current group of Regents. It is their shame, and though the story may never be told adequately, some of us will know and remember. It is a very large and deep hurt to those Native Americans who are left out. Shame on all of you.

Sincerely,



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