



Why won't the Smithsonian agree to honor all Native American veterans in its new memorial?

BY COL. JAMES T. CURRIE, RETIRED, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/18/19 04:00 AM EDT
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The Smithsonian Institution is about to make a huge mistake by creating a Native American Veterans Memorial that will omit certain Native American veterans.

The Smithsonian plans to construct this memorial on the National Mall, with groundbreaking scheduled for September 2019. It's a wonderful idea — one that is long overdue.

Congress passed legislation in 1994 allowing the national monument to be built, and it took 24 years — until June 2018 — for the Smithsonian to agree to a memorial design. The design, [which can be found on the Smithsonian website](#), consists of a series of concentric circles, which the Smithsonian says represent a "Warrior's Circle of Honor." The designer is Native American veteran Harvey Pratt, and it is a handsome design, indeed.

There is only one problem with it. It includes only the seals of the five armed forces, omitting the seals of both the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Veterans who earned their status by service in these two smallest of the seven federal uniformed services are understandably upset by this omission. We, meaning a non-profit organization that represents the

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officers in the USPHS, have called this omission to the Smithsonian's attention, and our concerns have been summarily dismissed.

The reason offered by the Smithsonian reflects the narrowest possible interpretation of the 1994 law, which was clearly intended to honor all Native American veterans. In a letter to retired USPHS Rear Adm. George Blue Spruce, the first Native American dentist in our country's history, Smithsonian Secretary David Skorton explained his reasoning: "The enabling legislation ... only references 'Armed Forces of the United States.'"

Native American veterans who served in the USPHS and NOAA simply do not understand the Smithsonian's stubbornness. As Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said in a 9 April 2019 letter to the Smithsonian, "The 1994 law authorizing the National Native American Veterans Memorial used the term 'veterans of the armed forces,' but this does not preclude the inclusion of the USPHS logo on the memorial."

In September 2018, 26 member organizations of The Military Coalition, a group headquartered in Alexandria, Va., sent a letter to congressional leadership. The organizations whose signatures are on the letter represent all five of the armed forces, and also include the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. The letter cites the words of then-Rep. Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.), principal House sponsor of the 1994 law, who closed his remarks on the floor of the House when he introduced HR 2135, "with the hope that all our colleagues will join us in honoring our Native American veterans." TMC wrote that, "We believe the language in the law is flexible enough to allow the logos of the USPHS and NOAA to be placed on the memorial."

To be perfectly clear, individuals who serve in the USPHS and NOAA are veterans under federal law, entitled to all the rights and privileges thereof. They draw military pay and benefits, serve alongside their armed colleagues during our country's wars, and are entitled to burial in Veterans Affairs cemeteries. They have served our country proudly for more than 100 years in NOAA's case and for more than 125 years in the case of the USPHS.

Native Americans serve in both organizations and wear their veteran status proudly. It is unseemly for the Smithsonian to plan a memorial to "Native American Veterans" that does not include all Native American veterans. We are surprised and disappointed that such a venerable organization like the Smithsonian would choose to insult these two groups of Native Americans by omitting them from the proposed memorial.

Col. James T. Currie, retired, is executive director of the Commissioned Officers Association of the US Public Health Service.

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