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After a Scandal, the Smithsonian Makes a Smart Choice

By Pablo Eisenberg

The Smithsonian Institution's announcement that it has appointed G. Wayne Clough, president of the Georgia Institute of Technology, to lead the troubled complex of 19 museums and research facilities heralds a promising new beginning for the institution.

The selection of an outsider and prominent university president with impressive credentials was a surprise to many observers who expected the nomination of the acting secretary, Cristián Samper, or somebody else well known in the museum world.

That would not have been the answer to the problems facing the jewel in the country's cultural crown.

The institution has been torn apart over the past few years by the inappropriate expenditures and unethical behavior of the former secretary, Lawrence Small; the extremely poor performance of the organization's Board of Regents; the high salaries and inept practices of the institution's business-venture office; the institution's culture of secrecy; and the financial and governance shenanigans at the National Museum of the American Indian.

Mr. Clough brings to the job a distinguished résumé and record, not only from the worlds of engineering, science, and academe, but also from the roles he has played as a board member of the National Science Board and the President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology, as well as his term as vice chairman of the Council on Competitiveness, a nonprofit group that seeks ways to improve American science and technology.

As the president of Georgia Tech since 1994, he has been responsible for the university's remarkable growth on both its main campus and its overseas facilities. Under his watch, the university's student body has grown to more than 18,000, and the institution has been ranked among the top 10 research universities.

Mr. Clough faces a daunting challenge in restoring the integrity, financial health, and reputation of the Smithsonian.

One of his initial tasks will be to review and put into place a recent set of ethical and accountability guidelines adopted by the Board of Regents. That should include adherence to a policy that guarantees full public information about the institution's activities.

After refusing to reply to more than 20 inquiries under the Freedom of Information Act from reporters at *The Washington Post*, the organization's general counsel issued a directive clarifying its public-information policy, which, unfortunately, states that the institution will not provide information that it deems is not in the interest of the Smithsonian. That is a large loophole that needs to be eliminated.

Probably Mr. Clough's toughest challenge will be to overhaul the governance system that has been a major cause of the institution's troubles.

The current Board of Regents has been dysfunctional, composed of six members of Congress — three each from the House and the Senate — the chief justice of the Supreme Court and the vice president of the United States, all of whom have little or no time for this responsibility, and nine lay members who have not distinguished themselves over the past few years.

The current regents failed to exercise their fiduciary responsibilities and properly oversee the operations of the Smithsonian, yet they have not really been called to task for their lackluster performance.

The chief justice, the vice president, and two or three of the members of Congress should not continue to serve on the board. Some of the current lay members should be replaced by new, tougher, and publicly spirited regents.

Potential candidates for those slots should not be limited to wealthy individuals, corporate executives, and other well-known people who usually dominate museum boards. And the prestige of the institution could be enhanced by the appointment of an outstanding new chair with impeccable credentials and a reputation for integrity and public service.

In organizing a more effective system of internal accountability and communication, the new secretary will want strong and intrepid watchdogs in the posts of inspector general, general counsel, and chief financial officer. Their timidity and weakness in the past led to many of the Smithsonian's problems.

Another major challenge for Mr. Clough will be to convince Congress that it has the responsibility to provide the bulk of the \$2.5-billion budget required to repair, improve, and maintain the institution's facilities through 2013. For lawmakers who prefer earmarks to normal appropriations for important priorities and who are reluctant to spend money in tough economic times, even for national treasures like the Smithsonian, that will be a demanding task. Mr. Clough's diplomatic skills will be stretched to the limit.

The problems and struggles at the Smithsonian over the past couple of years have been a painful experience for everyone who has benefited from its bountiful exhibits, concerts, publications, and other pleasures. It is a great institution with dedicated employees and appreciative visitors who deserve better than what they recently received from a few top administrators. Now that a new course is being set, we can be more optimistic about its future.

The regents, notwithstanding their past failings, should be commended for selecting a secretary of great promise who has the capacity to transform the Smithsonian into something even greater, an institution that is financially sound and publicly accountable.

Pablo Eisenberg, a regular contributor to these pages, is senior fellow at the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute. His e-mail address is pseisenberg@erols.com.