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# United States Senate

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July 20, 2020

Lonnie G. Bunch III  
Secretary  
The Smithsonian  
600 Maryland Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Secretary Bunch:

I write to you to request information about the Smithsonian's recent "Talking About Race" initiative.

The "Talking About Race" website claims the material is meant to provide an "opportunity to engage in thoughtful, respectful, and productive conversations" about race in America. However, the materials published under this initiative – some of which have recently been removed after public scrutiny – appear to embrace ideas likelier to foment racial division than mutual respect and understanding. Included in the recently deleted materials were assertions that white culture, as distinct from the cultures of other races in America, is defined by commitment to the following ideas:

- "Self-reliance"
- "The nuclear family"
- "Objective, rational linear thinking"
- "Hard work is the key to success"
- "Plan for the future"
- "Quantitative emphasis"
- "Intent counts"
- "Be polite"

The claim that these qualities and commitments – ideas Americans of all races have traditionally celebrated and strived to teach to their children – are distinctive to white Americans would be troubling enough given its implication that they are foreign to Americans of color. However, the position of the Smithsonian, as suggested by the materials prior to their removal, appeared to be even more troubling: that these attributes are actually emblems of "structural racism" in American life to be rejected rather than embraced.

For reasons that remain unclear, much of this material appeared to be quoted verbatim from controversial educational materials dating back to 1990 that the Smithsonian cited uncritically. Other content quotes approvingly from the work of Robin DiAngelo, a controversial author whose book *White Fragility* is recommended as further reading by the Smithsonian. I am curious as to the manner in which the Smithsonian sourced these materials given the wide range of

opinion and scholarship that would reject the assertions of the exhibit about the ostensibly racial distinctiveness of characteristics more commonly understood to have nothing to do with race.

I am pleased that the Smithsonian has removed some of the most offensive content from the “Talking About Race” website. I urge you to conduct a full review of this initiative to remove similarly concerning content and to review the process by which this material escaped the review of your leadership team.

Additionally, please respond to the following questions by next Wednesday, July 22:

- Why did the Smithsonian suggest that self-reliance, the nuclear family, objective and rational thinking, hard work, planning, quantitative emphasis, concern about intent, and politeness are distinctly “white” qualities? Did the Smithsonian mean to suggest that Americans of color are deficient in such qualities, and that anti-racist efforts necessarily entail a rejection of these qualities?
- Does the Smithsonian believe the nuclear family to be a construct of white supremacy that should be deemphasized? Please elaborate on what the nuclear family’s presence in these materials was meant to suggest.
- Why did the Smithsonian suggest that white people believe “wealth is worth” and “bland is best,” that white people are uniquely capable of “decision-making,” and that white people are characterized by a drive to “master and control nature?”
- How many senior leaders at the Smithsonian reviewed these materials before their publication, and how did they pass through the Smithsonian’s approval process? Please identify any such senior leaders.
- Did you review these materials yourself prior to writing in *Smithsonian Magazine* that though this initiative “we are helping audiences better understand our differences and bridge the chasm of race,” and do you condone the assertions made within them?
- Does the Smithsonian agree with the proposition at the heart of the American way of life that “all men are created equal?” Does the institution agree with the timeless principle espoused by Dr. King that people should “not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character?”

Finally, please identify this material’s connection to The Atlantic Philanthropies and any payments made to Robin DiAngelo or other scholars referenced in this exhibit in the form of consulting, speaking, or licensing fees, as well as any forthcoming programming involving such individuals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Josh Hawley  
United States Senator