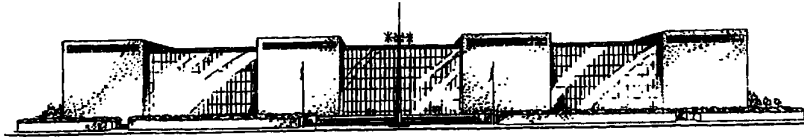


Viewpoint



Are We Doing Our Job?

The National Air and Space Museum, like most of the Smithsonian Institution, is partially funded by Congress and partially supports itself through income from our educational films, planetarium shows, gift shops and restaurant, private donations, and other sources.

Our congressional appropriation suffices to provide for salaries, maintain exhibits, restore airplanes and spacecraft in our collections at a modest rate, and support archival and historical research guaranteeing the accuracy of our exhibits. But as congressional budgets have tightened, the Museum has increasingly gone to industry, foundations, and individual benefactors to raise funding for new galleries and films.

We pride ourselves on raising those funds on behalf of the public without having to ask the taxpayer for more. Not that we invariably succeed, but we are fortunate in having so many friends. They have helped us to open new galleries on topics of interest, such as the forthcoming "Where Next, Columbus?" exhibition, which is based on the best current engineering and humanistic thinking on space exploration in the centuries to come—an exhibition designed to show youngsters at the kindergarten through high school levels the challenges they could face in joining the next generation of space explorers. Complementing that will be the "How Things Fly" gallery, which is planned to open a year later and designed to explain the scientific and engineering principles of powered flight through the air, lighter-than-air craft, rockets, satellites, and spacecraft. That gallery is expected to include a variety of wind tunnels, subsonic as well as supersonic, with which youngsters can experiment.

This can be heady stuff for any kid fascinated by flying and exploration. And the solid physical and technical foundations underlying those galleries will be balanced by the comprehensive historical approach we have taken in such galleries as our retrospective "Legend, Memory and the Great War in the Air,"

which deals with World War I and fittingly opened last Veteran's (formerly Armistice) Day, November 11.

The Museum's approach matches an emphasis increasingly appreciated in the nation's leading engineering schools—namely, that our future engineers should be taught not just engineering but also the broader social impact and historical development of modern technologies. That approach is also featured in the Museum's wide-screen, IMAX-format film *Blue Planet*, which emphasizes the importance of ecological studies and environmental forecasting made possible through oceanic, atmospheric, and landmass surveillance from space.

I stress all these efforts because occasionally the Museum's requests for foundation or industry support are regretfully turned down with a note stating, "Our Board of Directors is dedicating its resources solely to science and technology education this year."

Does that mean we have failed to educate the eight million people visiting the Museum each year—one million of whom are under age 19? Or have we, just as seriously, failed to take our message to the people most concerned with science and technology education in America?

Recently, I visited one of the nation's wealthier philanthropists. After I had enthusiastically recounted all the directions the Museum is pursuing, he dryly responded, "I've been forward-looking all my life. I never look backward. Museums look backward. I never support museums." A brief attempt to sway him proved fruitless.

You win some and lose some. But I did want readers of *Air & Space/Smithsonian* to recognize how dedicated the Museum is to its educational goals, and how emphatically we look forward, with both realism and concern, to the impact of technology on our society, environment, and planet, and the prospects for ever-deeper exploration of space.

—Martin Harwit is the director of the National Air and Space Museum.

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