

**IN FOCUS**

# RIGHT WING WATCH



## How **Not** to Respond to Political Bullies: *Lessons From the Smithsonian's Response to the Manufactured Right-Wing Controversy Over Hide/Seek*



## Introduction

In October, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. opened *Hide/Seek*, a groundbreaking exhibit that examines the gay and lesbian experience in American art. The exhibit, years in the making, won widespread praise and was on display for a month, one floor above a Norman Rockwell exhibit, without generating any protest from museum-goers.

But at the end of November, an operative with the right-wing Media Research Center manufactured a controversy over the exhibit that became an instructive example of the right-wing echo chamber in action. We've seen this kind of thing before: right-wing advocacy groups, right-wing media, and right-wing members of Congress working together to create controversies based on false information and to inflame activists with claims of anti-religious persecution by the Obama administration, Democrats in Congress, or liberal elites.

What makes the *Hide/Seek* controversy stand out is how quickly the situation unraveled: just one day after the controversy broke, the Smithsonian pulled from the exhibit a video that a Religious Right activist had labeled anti-religious hate speech. The aftermath has been, and will continue to be, longer lasting. People For the American Way President Michael Keegan called on the Smithsonian's Board of Regents to ask Smithsonian Secretary Wayne Clough, who made the decision to pull the video, to step down, but the board, meeting in late January, backed Clough, who described himself as "a little wiser than I was six months ago."

Talking Points Memo did an excellent recap of the first 24 hours of the manufactured scandal. And TBD has a useful timeline of the controversy's first month. This In Focus includes a recap of the right-wing attack on the Smithsonian and the *Hide/Seek* exhibit, the consequences of the decision by Smithsonian Institution Secretary Clough to pull a video from the exhibit, and lessons that might be drawn from these events about how to respond to right-wing culture-war bullies.

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Bill Donohue singled out this image of ants walking over a crucifix, which was shown in a few seconds of *A Fire in My Belly*.

## Manufacturing Outrage & Enlisting Politicians to Make 'News'

On November 29, 2010, CNS News, a far-right propaganda outlet masquerading as a news service, published a long article by Media Research Center Senior Staff Reporter Penny Starr with this whopper of a headline:

Smithsonian Christmas-Season Exhibit Features Ant-Covered Jesus, Naked Brothers Kissing, Genitalia, and Ellen DeGeneres Grabbing Her Breasts

That same day, Starr contacted congressional leaders of both parties and gave a short deadline for a response, warning that her next story would explicitly say whether members of Congress had responded. The substance of her email:

The federally funded National Portrait Gallery, which is part of the Smithsonian, is running an exhibition through the Christmas season that features an ant-covered Jesus and what the Smithsonian itself calls "homoerotic" art. Should this exhibition continue or be cancelled?

Starr also contacted Bill Donohue, the anti-gay head of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (on whose board of advisors Media Research Center leader Brent Bozell sits). Donohue has generated a



lot of media and made a lucrative career out of crying anti-Catholic bigotry at the drop of a hat. This time around, Donohue singled out a video image of ants walking over a crucifix, which was several seconds of *A Fire in My Belly*, an edited version of a video by late artist David Wojnarowicz. The video has been described as a surrealist meditation on AIDS, drawing on religious imagery from Mexico. Donohue called the video “hate speech” and denigrated the artist, saying, “The creator of this ‘masterpiece’ video is dead of AIDS. But he did not die without blaming society for his self-destructive behavior.” Donohue called on the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to “reconsider future funding.” Interestingly, Wojnarowicz had tangled with the Religious Right when he was still alive, winning a 1990 lawsuit against the American Family Association, which had distorted his work in pamphlets complaining about National Endowment for the Arts funding.



“[Hide/Seek] is an outrageous use of taxpayer money and an obvious attempt to offend Christians during the Christmas season.”

### **House Minority Whip Eric Cantor**

officially sanctioned Portrait Gallery that treats gay and lesbian identity as a respectable subject for serious artistic study and, by implication, social acceptance. Privately funded, as most such Smithsonian exhibitions are, “Hide/Seek” is not the first museum show to examine homosexual identity in art. But it is the first to do so in the nation’s capital with the establishment blessing of the popular Smithsonian Institution.

And so, to some, it needed to be stopped.

Who objected? Not the public. Museum publicist Bethany Bentley told the media that no complaints — none — were received from the day the show opened, on Oct. 30, until Nov. 29, when an online article appeared on the right-wing Cyber News Service.

The *Washington City Paper* highlighted Starr’s role and noted her own anti-gay history, including articles lambasting the Richmond Visitors Bureau for a campaign to “attract homosexuals to Virginia’s capital.” *Los Angeles Times* critic Knight also noted that Starr had slammed the Smithsonian earlier in “an article about the National Museum of Natural History, which did not include the conservative religious doctrine of creationism in a science display.”

Republican congressional leaders played their part. Boehner’s spokesman told Starr:

Smithsonian officials should either acknowledge the mistake and correct it, or be prepared to face tough scrutiny beginning in January when the new majority in the House moves to end the job-killing spending spree in Washington.

House Minority Whip Eric Cantor repeated the charges that the exhibit was designed to insult Christians and Christmas and threatened the museum’s future funding:

“Who objected [to Hide/Seek]? Not the public. Museum publicist Bethany Bentley told the media that no complaints — none — were received from the day the show opened, on Oct. 30, until Nov. 29, when an online article appeared on the right-wing Cyber News Service.”

### **Christopher Knight, LA Times**

Donohue’s response focused on charges that the exhibit was anti-Christian, but he and others were clearly just as upset about the gay content in the exhibit. In the words of the *New York Times*’ Frank Rich:

But of course Donohue was just using his “religious” objections as a perfunctory cover for the homophobia actually driving his complaint. The truth popped out of the closet as Donohue expanded his indictment to “pornographic images of gay men.”

Christopher Knight, an art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, makes this point as well:

The real story here is an exhibition at the nation’s

“This is an outrageous use of taxpayer money and an obvious attempt to offend Christians during the Christmas season,” said Cantor. “When a museum receives taxpayer money, the taxpayers have a right to expect that the museum will uphold common standards of decency. The museum should pull the exhibit and be prepared for serious questions come budget time.”

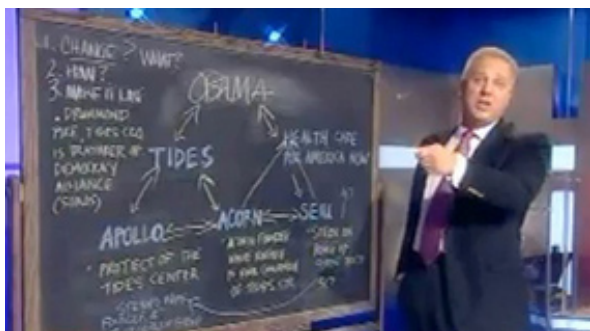
That response from GOP congressional leaders allowed Starr and CNS to run a follow-up story with the headline: “Boehner and Cantor to Smithsonian: Pull Exhibit Featuring Ant-Covered Jesus or Else.” And that was enough to make the manufactured controversy “news.”

Right-wing media, including Fox News and Matt Drudge, got into the act as well. Here’s Glenn Beck’s contribution, which not only perpetuates the false claim that the exhibit has something to do with Christmas, but also manages to work in the “breakdown of the family”:

It’s Christmas at the Smithsonian. Here’s this wonderful – oh, look, it’s Jesus with ants on him. They describe it as the first major museum exhibition to focus on sexual difference in making of modern American portraiture.

What? You got to be kidding me. What does this have to do with the birth of the baby Jesus and why is he now covered in ants? Whose values are these? And you wonder why there is the breakdown of the family.

On November 30, the Media Research Council (MRC) put out a press release citing CNS “reporting” (without noting Starr’s position at MRC) and attacking the Portrait Gallery and the exhibit, not only for the Wojnarowicz



On his show, Glenn Beck perpetuated the false claim that Hide/Seek had something to do with Christmas, and even managed to work in the “breakdown of the family.”

video but for the gay and erotic content. MRC also turned the exhibit into an attack on people of faith, claiming that the fact that the exhibition’s scheduled run (October to February) included the Christmas season could only be an intentional insult to “every Christian.”



**“[Hide/Seek] is an insult to every Christian. This disgrace of an exhibition must stop immediately.”**

**MRC President Brent Bozell**

Here’s the statement by MRC’s Brent Bozell in all its bluster:

This exhibition is a direct assault on Christianity and the timing – the Christmas season! – shows how offensive it is intended to be. This federally funded vulgarity by the Smithsonian Institution must come to an end immediately. How dare anyone use a federal facility – The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery no less – to exhibit such obscene materials.

This is an insult to every Christian. This disgrace of an exhibition must stop immediately, but that is not all. We are also calling on Congress to launch a full investigation into the approval process of the Hide/Seek exhibit.

We are sending the following letter to Speaker Pelosi and Speaker-Elect Boehner on the House side, and to Majority Leader Reid and Minority Leader McConnell in the Senate to demand an investigation. Americans should not rest until we receive answers to why this exhibit was approved, and how the Smithsonian justifies using tax-payer dollars for such a display of anti-Christian bigotry.

MRC also used the controversy to complain about the so-called liberal media, organizing a letter-writing campaign to protest the *Washington Post’s* coverage of the incident.

## Mistakes and Consequences

The decision by Smithsonian Secretary Clough to pull the Wojnarowicz video a day after a surge of right-wing-generated complaints may have been made with the best of intentions, but it clearly had harmful consequences for the Smithsonian and for the broader principle of freedom of expression. Defenders of Clough’s decision suggest that it was made to take the heat off of the rest of the exhibit and demonstrate

some responsiveness to the concerns and threats expressed by leaders of the incoming congressional majority. In the words of one letter to the *Post*, the “proper villains” in the story are “the small-minded and bellicose Catholic League and Republican leadership, not those who created a landmark illustration of gay and lesbian history.” The American Association of Museums told the *Post* that pulling the video was better than letting the controversy overshadow an “excellent show.”

**“[When Wojnarowicz’s work was removed from the exhibition] it sent a clear signal to both would-be censors and their opponents: the Smithsonian’s collections, and our collective history, are open to politically motivated revision.”**

**Michael Keegan, President  
People For the American Way**

While it’s true that the right-wing creators and abettors of the controversy are the major villains in this story, it’s also true that Smithsonian Secretary Clough’s decision to give right-wing groups a quick victory was a mistake that could have long-term consequences for the Smithsonian and for the culture at large.

As People For the American Way President Michael Keegan has written,

Within 48 hours of the CNS story’s publication, the Smithsonian bowed to pressure and removed Wojnarowicz’s work from the exhibition, leaving no time for a public debate on the role of our public museums, much less on the value of the work in question. When it closed the door on a public debate, the Smithsonian clearly hoped to close the door on a brewing scandal. It did not. Instead, it sent a clear signal to both would-be censors and their opponents: the Smithsonian’s collections, and our collective history, are open to politically motivated revision.

## **Ignoring the Manufactured Nature of the Controversy**

Secretary Clough seemingly panicked when the CNS article inspired a flood of right-wing complaints, even though the exhibition had been drawing visitors and praise without any complaints for a full month. In the words of the *City Paper’s* Kriston Capps:

So Bozell’s team cherrypicked the offense, manufactured the outrage, and then directed the response. The response was huge: Sullivan said the National Portrait Gallery had never heard such an outcry. But he also acknowledged it was likely that none of the plaintiffs had in fact seen and been scandalized by the artwork in person.

The Smithsonian not only bit on the outrage, but it also accepted that the outrage was organic. “One of the exhibition’s 105 works—a short segment in a four-minute video created as a complex metaphor for AIDS—was perceived by some to be anti-Christian,” said a brief statement released by the Smithsonian on Monday. “It generated a strong response from the public.”

“The public” in this case was of course not any broad segment of the public or of people who had visited the museum, but readers of the right-wing CNS site and activists from the right-wing Media Research Center.

## **Abandoning a Core Free Expression Principle**

The intensity of anger at the Smithsonian’s decision among arts institutions, arts funders, and free expression advocates reflected the fact that knuckling under to censorship demands without even putting up a fight may have seemed a pragmatic way to avoid continued conflict, but it undermined and sacrificed a core principle of the arts and of American public discourse: the freedom of expression. The Association of Art Museum Directors rebuked the Smithsonian for bowing to “unwarranted and uninformed censorship from politicians and other public figures, many of whom, by their own admission, have seen neither the exhibition as a whole or this specific work.”



**ASSOCIATION OF ART MUSEUM DIRECTORS**

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# PFAW, Arts, and Free Expression:

## THE 1990's: A CASE STUDY



Defending freedom of expression – a fundamental American value and core constitutional principle – has long been central to the mission and work of People For the American Way. Throughout the 1990's, another period when artistic freedom and the National Endowment for the Arts were under sustained attack, People For the American Way brought its legal and political expertise, and its experience as an advocate for the First Amendment, to the fray. A magazine profile in 1992 called People For the American Way a “key ally” for the arts community. In 1990, People For raised funds for a national poll on art and censorship, and used the results as the basis for a national radio and print ad campaign that featured Kathleen Turner, Garrison Keillor, and Colleen Dewhurst. Through much of the decade, People For's artsave project served as a clearinghouse that documented attacks on artistic expression and as an advisor and legal resource for artists, gallery owners, and others facing censorship challenges.



One of PFAW's artsave ads used to raise awareness of art censorship at the Phoenix Art Museum.

1990

1991

1992

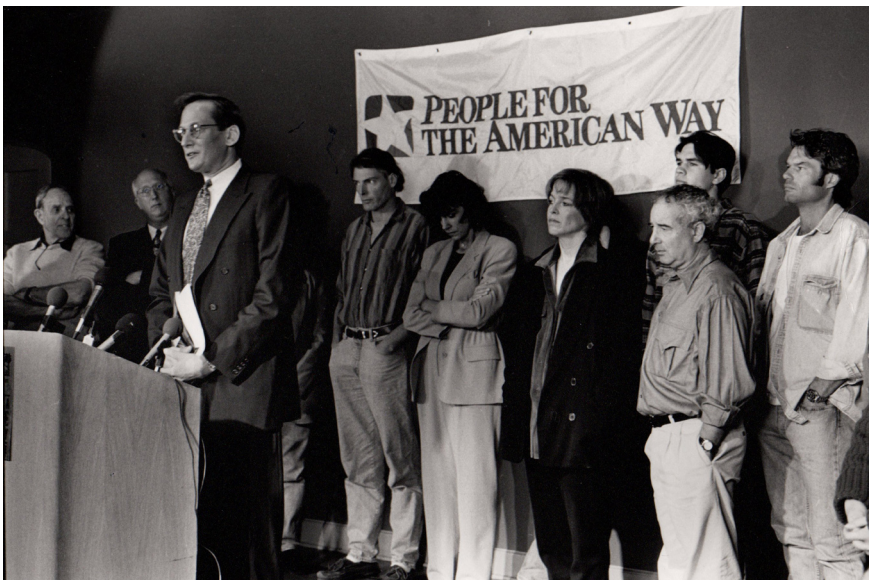
1993

1994

**1990:** People For represents choreographer **Bella Lewitzky** who challenged the requirement that she sign an “anti-obscenity” pledge as a condition of receiving an NEA grant.

**1993:** People For represents Brazilian artist **Zoravia Bettiol** in a suit against city of Menlo Park for censoring an exhibit.

**1993:** When an award-winning drama teacher was fired for working with students on the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Shadow Box,” People For organizes “Tucson Talks,” recruiting Hollywood stars for a staged reading and community conversation on censorship. Those participating include **William Baldwin, Christopher Reeve, Michael Tucker** and **Jill Eikenberry, Harry Hamlin** and **Estelle Parsons**.



PFAW recruited these Hollywood stars for a staged reading of “Shadow Box.”

**1998:** In response to threats and intimidation of the anti-Castro exile community opera and musicians, People For organizes a conversation with conservative Cuban exile leaders with community leaders for events celebrating

[WWW.PFAW.ORG](http://WWW.PFAW.ORG)

[WWW.RIGHTWINGWATCH.ORG](http://WWW.RIGHTWINGWATCH.ORG)

**1997:** People For launches intensive targeted grassroots lobbying campaign and encourages Working Assets to engage its activists in support for the NEA, generating tens of thousands of calls to members of Congress.

**1996:** People For mobilizes community support for Phoenix Art Museum, under attack for an exhibit featuring works of art about the American flag.



**WHEN YOU RESTRICT THE ARTS, YOU DEFACE A MASTERPIECE.**

Nothing is more American than freedom of expression. If you believe in freedom of expression, it is imperative that your voice be heard. Please call our toll-free number immediately. When you

*One of PFAW's ads used to engage its activists in support for the NEA.*

**1997:** On the Senate floor, Sen. **Tom Harkin** uses People For the American Way material to challenge a senator who was citing discredited attacks on the NEA.

**1997:** Board Member **Alec Baldwin** addresses National Press Club on efforts to dismantle NEA.

1995

1996

1997

1998

1999



*PFAW engaged activists in support for the NEA, generating tens of thousands of calls to members of Congress.*

**1998:** People For organizes "Quiet Walk for the First Amendment" in response to protests led by the Catholic League's **Bill Donohue** and threats of violence directed against production of the play "Corpus Christi." Among those participating were **Norman Lear**, playwright **Tony Kushner**, and actor and writer **Wallace Shawn**.



*People For Vice President Barbara Handman receives the National Medal of Arts for advocacy on behalf of the arts and the First Amendment.*

**1998:** Then-People For Vice President **Barbara Handman** receives the National Medal of Arts from President **Bill Clinton** for advocacy on behalf of the arts and the First Amendment.

intimidation from some extremist elements posed to visits from Cuban artists a project in Miami bringing together progressive activists and business and fighting freedom of expression.



- David Cole, writing on the blog of the *New York Review of Books*, said the Smithsonian had given Donohue a “heckler’s veto.”
- The PEN Center wrote that the withdrawal of the video “seems completely antithetical both to the core American values the Smithsonian represents and to a key freedom of expression position that the United States has been advancing internationally.”
- The *Washington Post*’s Blake Gopnik noted, “If every piece of art that offended some person or some group was removed from a museum, our museums might start looking empty - or would contain nothing more than pabulum. Goya’s great nudes? Gone. The Inquisition called them porn.”



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- Pablo Eisenberg, a senior fellow at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, wrote in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* that “The Smithsonian has set a dangerous precedent. Will it cave in to future pressures from politicians, religious fanatics, unhappy critics, or disenchanted art lovers when the next controversy arises?”
- James T. Bartlett, a member of the Portrait Gallery’s advisory board, resigned in protest, writing, “I believe it is a fundamental right of museums and their curatorial staffs to make such decisions [about exhibition content], even if some art is deemed objectionable by external critics. I choose firmly and resolutely not to be part of an institution that is and can be put ad infinitum in this position.”

## Fearing Controversy & Trying to Avoid Useful Public Discussion

Clough’s actions appear to have been motivated by a fear that controversy generated by the museum would be harmful to the Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian at large. While threats from congressional Republican leaders may have provided genuine reason for concern, embracing controversy and conversations would have been a more principled and productive response.

As the *Washington Post*’s Philip Kennicott wrote:

Among the most sacred doxologies of the museum is the conviction that controversy is a good thing, that it can be talked through, that it leads to progress. Clough’s rapid and craven decision to remove the video, and then his absence at any public discussion of the consequences, was doubly sacrilegious: It demonstrates fear of controversy and aversion to dialogue. The lingering anger against the Smithsonian is thus very much like the anger that supposedly began the controversy. A fundamental value has been insulted, and the system is now out of balance.

And Catholics for Choice President John O’Brien, in an open letter to Clough, argued that efforts to avoid controversy can in fact undermine confidence in an institution among both artists and the general public:

For artists, it suggests that in order to be considered by your gallery, their art may have to be uncontroversial. For the public, it suggests that what they see at the gallery may not be the full story, that exhibitions may be tailored so that they do not offend anybody. Neither scenario is positive.

## Empowering the Far Right’s Culture Warriors & Believing that Giving in Will Make the Bullies Go Away

Backing down so quickly to bullies like Bill Donohue will not satisfy Religious Right leaders who are eager to reignite the culture wars. It will encourage and energize them. Pulling the



Wojnarowicz video suggested that there was something wrong about showing it in the first place, giving credence to the Religious Right's claims that the museum was intentionally insulting Christians.

The *Post's* Kennicott argued that the decision to censor the artwork was "tactically, strategically and historically stupid."

It was tactically stupid because the culture wars were effectively over, at least in the museum world. Cough has re-empowered forces that will soon be back for more symbolic acts of contrition and subservience. It was strategically stupid because it harms not just the Smithsonian, but all museums. Clough may have saved his own institution from the immediate discomfort of political controversy, but he has exposed museums across the United States to new threats.

The *Los Angeles Times'* editorial page predicted a return to the 1990s "culture wars" in which conservative objections about avant-garde works led to steep budget cuts for the National Endowment for the Arts and an end to its grants to individual artists. The NEA has yet to recover. The editorial lamented that the Smithsonian had caved to pressure: "it's dispiriting that the defenders of culture and artistic expression seem so willing to surrender."

And from People For the American Way's Keegan:

Beyond the damage done to the exhibit itself, the Smithsonian's censorship of *A Fire in My Belly* welcomes even more meddling and censorship from the far right. The Religious Right and House GOP's hit job on the Portrait Gallery was just the opening salvo in the coming assault on those who don't share their narrow view of what it means to be American. Incoming Speaker John Boehner wants not only to remove the entire privately funded exhibit from the portrait gallery, but promises "tough scrutiny" of the Smithsonian's entire budget and, presumably its holdings.

**"It's dispiriting that the defenders of culture and artistic expression seem so willing to surrender."**

***Los Angeles Times*  
Editorial**



Rep. Randy Forbes said the Constitution only gives Congress the power to protect art, not fund it, suggesting that he believes funding for arts and museums may actually be unconstitutional.

Case in point: Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council continued to attack the Smithsonian even after it pulled the video. Perkins, who said the exhibit contained plenty of "in-your-face perversion," said in a radio commentary:

Right now, the Smithsonian gets 65% of its funding from taxpayers. But Congressman Jack Kingston says they can count on a lot less if this display doesn't change. And according to one official, it already has. Curators took down the Jesus video last week. But the Battle of the Smithsonian Smithsonian isn't over. All it's done is taken the debate over art funding-and framed it.

Rep. Randy Forbes appeared on the Religious Right "Wallbuilders Live" broadcast in December and agreed with the host that the Constitution only gives Congress the power to protect art, not fund it, suggesting that he believes funding for arts and museums may actually be unconstitutional.

## **Giving Credibility to Religious Right Claims to Speak for All Christians**

MRC President Brent Bozell's November 30 letter to John Boehner opened with a claim to be speaking on behalf of all American Christians, indeed, everyone who supports freedom of religion:

On behalf of all tax-paying Americans who respect and support freedom of religion, particularly the overwhelming majority of Americans who call themselves Christian, I call upon you today to take immediate action to halt the obscene and bigoted anti-Christian "Hide/Seek" exhibition currently on display at the venerable Smithsonian Institution National Portrait Gallery.

It is, on its face, a ludicrous claim, albeit one frequently made by Religious Right leaders. There are in fact many Christians and many freedom-loving Americans

who oppose the Religious Right and its hostility to freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, by folding so quickly to Bill Donohue's practiced outrage, the Smithsonian gave unwarranted legitimacy to the idea that Donohue speaks for American Catholics. Jon O'Brien, President of Catholics for Choice, wrote in an open letter to Clough:

The Catholic League does not speak for all Catholics – in fact it speaks for very few, but does so very loudly. However, as is often the case, the noise level should not be considered indicative of the strength of its support nor the correctness of its claims. We too are Catholics, but we do not

Unfortunately, by folding so quickly to Bill Donohue's practiced outrage, the Smithsonian gave unwarranted legitimacy to the idea that Donohue speaks for American Catholics.

support the use of our religion in this crusade. As Catholics, we absolutely do not support your decision and join the majority of Americans – Catholic and non-Catholic alike – who do not support censorship of the arts. We can only judge what we can see. We accept the possibility that we may be offended by what we see. In the spirit of promoting artistic freedom, we are happy to accept that possibility.

Paul Raushenbush, the *Huffington Post* religion editor, says the use of iconic Christian images makes *A Fire in My Belly* Christian art. "I do not think the artist's intention was to gratuitously disrespect religion. Instead, it was to use religious imagery in a new way. To show the figure of Jesus, crucified, bloody, with ants crawling over him, is to vividly portray all those who suffer in the world."

Christian theologian Patrick S. Cheng has echoed these sentiments, and argues that using the crucifix the way Wojnarowicz did in his art can serve a deeply religious function:

I can understand how these works of art might be viewed as being deeply offensive to many Christians. However, I also believe that one of the redeeming functions of these works, theologically speaking, is to remind us of the deeply scandalous and offensive nature of the crucifixion – a perspective that has been all but lost as our culture has become desensitized to the horrors of the cross...God

doesn't need those of us who are Christians to act as intellectual property watchdogs. Rather, God calls us to remember – through the cross – all those in the world who continue to suffer in the flesh and blood, whether through hunger, poverty, disease, sexual violence, hate crimes, or state-sponsored torture and executions.

## Not Telling the Truth

The Modern Art Notes blog has noted that the first explanations by the Smithsonian, and thus the first mainstream news reports on the decision to remove the video, falsely suggested that the decision was made by National Portrait Gallery director Martin Sullivan and Smithsonian undersecretary Richard Kurn in association with exhibition co-curator David Ward. In fact, as museum officials quickly admitted, the decision was made by Smithsonian Secretary Wayne Clough over the objections of the exhibition's curators. The Smithsonian's credibility, and therefore its ability to answer false charges and weather future culture war attacks, is undermined by its initial inaccurate communications about what happened.

## What to Do Next Time

People For the American Way's Michael Keegan argued that the simple solution to the mistaken act of censorship would have been to "just put the art back" for the remainder of the exhibit. That would have been the best way to acknowledge error, reaffirm the principles that were sacrificed by giving in to censorship, and signal the institution's willingness to defend those principles from future would-be culture warriors. That didn't happen. Now the Smithsonian and other institutions should use this episode to plan for future attacks from newly empowered right-wing organizations.

## Don't Panic: Have a Plan and Follow It

Exhibition co-curator David Ward has said that he and the National Portrait Gallery director wanted at least "a fighting retreat" in the face of the sudden right-wing onslaught. Unfortunately, that did not happen. A museum spokesperson reportedly said the exhibition "was becoming all about the video. We tried to avoid removing it. But it would have been the focal point, and everyone would have gone straight to that. It was overwhelming everything else. That's all everyone was talking about." But we're talking about only a single day of right-wing generated complaints.



The outpouring of support for Hide/Seek and opposition to the decision to censor part of the exhibition indicates that the Smithsonian could have mobilized influential allies if it had chosen to take a firm stand against censorship demands and had spent even a few days to rally those forces before deciding to pull the video. First Amendment organizations like People For the American Way have long encouraged museums, galleries, libraries and school boards to have clear plans and policies in place for dealing with censorship challenges. This would include anticipating possible attacks on upcoming exhibitions and preparing strategies for dealing with them. Having and following a plan makes it less likely that panic will lead to hasty and damaging decisions.



“In hosting the ‘Hide/Seek’ exhibition, the National Portrait Gallery sent a loud, and extremely laudable, message about inclusiveness and tolerance, a message that resonates with, and reflects the shared values of, Americans in government, in organizations like ours, and in local communities across the country.”

### **Statement by PEN International**

Any institution will be able to make a stronger case to the public if it is seen as standing consistently on the side of core, widely shared principles, such as the freedom of expression and the need for a national museum like the Smithsonian to reflect all Americans. That is especially the case when the exhibition was put together and presented with private rather than taxpayer funds.

Hide/Seek does reflect those principles, as well as a courage that many other museums, who declined to host the exhibit, lacked. It is admirable that the National Portrait Gallery decided to host this groundbreaking show and its potentially controversial subject matter, and admirable that the Smithsonian is standing by the exhibit itself, though deeply unfortunate that the controversy over the removal of *A Fire in My Belly* may dominate the history of the exhibition.

As free-expression organization PEN said in its letter to the Smithsonian:

In hosting the ‘Hide/Seek’ exhibition, the National Portrait Gallery sent a loud, and extremely laudable, message about inclusiveness and tolerance, a message that resonates with, and reflects the shared values of, Americans in government, in organizations like ours, and in local communities across the country. That message has been blurred by the museum’s decision to remove *Fire in the Belly*.

The outpouring of support for Hide/Seek and opposition to the decision to censor part of the exhibition indicates that the Smithsonian could have mobilized influential allies if it had chosen to take a firm stand against censorship demands.

In 1999, the Brooklyn Museum stood up to Donohue and then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani when the mayor threatened the museum’s funding based on Donohue’s complaints about a painting of the Virgin Mary adorned with elephant dung. The Brooklyn Museum rallied its supporters and mounted a full-scale defense. As Rena Silverman writes on BlackBook, “This one went to court, but Donohue’s side lost and the Brooklyn Museum was allowed to do what it is supposed to do—educate on all kinds of beliefs through art made with public funds.”

“We had to act rather quickly because of the world we live in of quick news cycles,” Clough said. “But looking back, sure, I wish I had taken more time. We have a lot of friends who felt left out. We needed to spend more time letting our friends know where this was going. I regret that.”

## **Defend Core Principles**

## **Understand and Expose Your Opponents**

The Catholic League’s Bill Donohue has a long record of bullying and ugly statements. He and many of his Religious Right colleagues are singularly unsympathetic characters to millions of Americans. Exposing the extremist records, anti-freedom agendas, and general disregard for the truth demonstrated by right-wing culture warriors can undermine the impact of their attacks. This, too, can take some time.

## Embrace Debate

The best response to irresponsible speech is more speech. Challenging art can play a vital role in our civic discourse by generating conversation that can lead people to new insights and new perspectives on issues and the world. Short-circuiting debate by trying to avoid controversy prevents art and arts institutions from having this potentially transformative impact on public debate.

Laura Fox writes on the Chicago-based website *New City Art*:

As the Smithsonian fiasco proves, socially engaged artwork and exhibitions are still vital to promoting inclusive civic dialogue. In the 1980s and 1990s, Wojnarowicz fought for his experience as a homosexual man suffering from AIDS to be acknowledged, instigating community actions to foster freedom of expression. In 2010, institutions, foundations, writers, social networks, museum visitors and many others are making sure his voice is still heard.

As several of his critics have noted, Smithsonian Secretary Clough compounded his initial error by essentially disappearing from public view after his decision and leaving the debate in the hands of others, including the right-wing bullies and the exhibition's curators, who

disagreed with the decision. That made it impossible for a full discussion of Clough's thinking and his actions.

## Demonstrate Accountability

Smithsonian Secretary Wayne Clough has damaged the credibility of the Smithsonian, undermined the work of National Portrait Gallery officials and curators, empowered right-wing culture warriors, and emboldened political demagogues. To protect this prominent national cultural institution and the principles on which it rests, People For the American Way, Art+ and other free expression advocates argued that the Smithsonian's board should have asked Mr. Clough to step down. In the future, administrators should be held accountable for decisions that undermine the values their institutions represent. ■

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## Lessons From the Smithsonian's Reponse to the Manufactured Right-Wing Controversy Over Hide/Seek *What to Do Next Time*

- Don't Panic: Have a Plan and Follow It
- Defend Core Principles
- Understand and Expose Your Opponents
- Embrace Debate
- Demonstrate Accountability