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John Arbogast

From: John Arbogast [arbogastjr@ms.state.gov]
Sent: Thursday, February 17, 2000 5:22 PM
To: 'J. Terry Edmonds@who.eop.gov'; 'Terry Edmonds@who.eop.gov'
Subject: FW: Black History Month 2000 & the Clinton legacy re race -- something significant the White House can do

Dear Terry:

This is further to the message below which I understand Paul Glastris passed on to and discussed with you. (Paul suggested that I follow up with you directly.)

As a further argument in support of White House support for a National Museum of African American History and Culture, as set out below, we understand that the President's budget calls for \$3 million in seed money for a national music museum in DC (near the MCI Center), a pet project of the First Lady's. Given the relative significance, symbolic and otherwise, of the former undertaking compared to the latter, could not the Administration at least see its way clear to similarly lend its support, through seed or feasibility study money and as a first step, to the nation's first national/international African American museum idea? In considering this, the following factors (among several others, some touched on below) should be taken into account:

-- The only African American museum in the nation's capital is in a bunker-like building in Anacostia which few people visit.

-- There is already an available building on the Mall in which (as remodeled) the D.C. site of the museum can be centered, i.e., the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building, where the Smithsonian's Center for African American History and Culture is already housed. Considerable progress has already been made in providing collections for such a facility.

-- The proposed New York City site of the national museum, the African Burial Ground, is slated to soon be nominated by the National Park Service et al as the next U.S. (and first African American-related) World Heritage Site. By merely embracing what is going to happen anyway, the White House can do much in the way of using developments at the African Burial Ground -- including the proposed creation of a magnificent museum complex/research center there -- to help address the slavery/apology issue that still simmers (witness Randall Robinson's recent book, "The Debt"). [Note: the two-city museum concept is consistent with the National Museum of the American Indian.]

-- Apropos to the National Summit on Africa currently being held in Washington (and which both the President and Secretary of State addressed today), the national/international museum and related proposals summarized below contain a significant Africa component, i.e., a new US/Africa partnership (consistent with the pending African Growth and Opportunity Act, as well as the notion of an "African Renaissance") built on the promotion of mutual cultural tourism, including the identification, protection and promotion of African (and U.S.) sites of historical and cultural importance.

Many thanks in advance for whatever consideration you and your colleagues are able to give this. We really do believe it is worthy of a good, hard look, as it really does have outstanding potential to produce bigtime returns -- attitudinally, economically and otherwise. It is also, we feel, very achievable and, finally, that it is perfect for this president and his legacy.

ja (ph. 647-2860)

cc: Maria Echaveste, Ben Johnson, Sylvia Mathews (OMB)
 -----Original Message-----

From: John Arbogast [SMTP:arbogastjr@ms.state.gov]
 Sent: Monday, January 31, 2000 3:46 PM
 To: 'Paul D. Glastris@who.eop.gov'
 Subject: Black History Month 2000 & the Clinton legacy re race -- something significant the White House can do

Re: Creation of a National Museum of African American History and Culture, and related measures (support for the John Lewis legislation, as amended)

Dear Paul:

Again, kudos to you and colleagues for a magnificent SOTU address.

This is further to the packet of stuff I left with you over the holidays, with a view (then) toward reference to this matter being considered for inclusion in Thursday's address. As you know, it occurred to me subsequently that the more appropriate opportunity for a Presidential embrace would be the first Black History Month (which begins tomorrow) of the new millennium, and the last of the Clinton presidency.

It is the hope of those of us working on this that enough folks at the White House will come to view this as the virtual no-brainer that we do.

Previous WH contacts include a letter of support from Mike McCurry, other support from Sylvia Matthews' staff and from Alexis Herman, and a meeting with Maria Echaveste, Ben Johnson, Judith Winston, Ann Donovan et al. The material I gave you reflects the breadth and depth of other support for this effort, including that of NEH's Bill Ferris, Presidential Medal of Freedom winner (and Amnesty International USA Chair) Ginetta Sagan, the daughters of Malcolm X/Betty Shabazz, and several Members of Congress/Senators.

As you are aware, we are working with Cong. John Lewis on a package of amendments to his longstanding bill to establish an African American museum on the Mall. This legislation ("The National African American Heritage Preservation and Opportunity Act of 2000") addresses the entire area of A/A heritage preservation in a comprehensive and holistic way, including through seizure of the wide range of educative, economic and other opportunities -- local, regional, national and international -- that are created by heritage preservation done right. It does so, like the National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989, on the basis of a public-private partnership, and via a positive approach that serves to honor and enlighten rather than to dwell on past wrongs. Cong. Lewis has talked about a White House launch of this initiative, and we would love to see that happen.

The proposed Act (which is based substantially on the 1989 NMAI Act) provides for:

-- A National Museum of African American History and Culture, with two sites (like the NMAI) -- in Washington, D.C. and at the African Burial Ground in New York City (but also linked, electronically and otherwise, to museums and other facilities throughout the U.S., as well as in African, Caribbean and other countries). The Washington facility would be centered in a refurbished Arts & Industries Building (out of which the Smithsonian's Center for A/A History and Culture already operates), so that the issue of new Mall construction does not arise. (In this regard, it is no longer acceptable that the only African American museum in our nation's capital is of minor scale and tucked away, out of sight and mind, across the river -- the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum.) There could also be associated facilities located elsewhere, e.g., Anacostia, Howard University, and the downtown arts district, and links to other sites, such as the planned Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, the Black Civil War Veteran Memorial, and the Museum of African Art.

* NYC's colonial-era African Burial Ground, located behind City Hall and just blocks from where slaves were first bought and sold in this country -- Wall Street -- holds the remains of over 20,000 enslaved Africans and first-generation African Americans. Uncovered during construction of a federal office building in 1991 and already a National Historic Landmark, it is now positioned to be nominated in the near future by the U.S. (the

Nat. Park Service et al) as the nation's next -- and first African American-related -- World Heritage Site. A magnificent museum complex at the site, which would complement nearby national/international symbols -- including Ellis Island, the Museum of the American Indian and the Statue of Liberty -- would pay tribute (vice "apologizing") to these early builders of America and those they represent, and explore the institution of slavery (the "perfect" place to do so, in the view of recently-departed Secretary of the Smithsonian Michael Heyman). A research center would provide the means for visitors of African descent to research their roots, using techniques similar to those employed at Ellis Island and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Among the bases for such study would be the results of DNA testing of the African Burial Ground remains conducted by Howard University scientists, and documentary evidence of the business of the slave trade compiled by Harvard.

-- A public/private advisory committee that would help promote/coordinate -- on the basis of public/private partnerships (including federal seed money) -- A/A heritage projects, and related cultural tourism, around the country.

-- A cultural tourism partnership between the U.S. and the nations of sub-Saharan Africa.

-- Educational and training opportunities in heritage preservation and related scientific fields (in line with the Tuskegee precedent).

Reasons for doing this:

-- There is an obvious need. Past national legislation in the area of historic preservation has not operated in a way that does justice to the rich and distinctive historical and cultural legacy of African Americans. And the lack of a coordinated approach to the protection and protection of that legacy has had the effect of robbing those limited steps that have been taken of much of their true potential for far-reaching symbolic, educative, and economic/community-building impact.

-- The proposed legislation is clearly consistent with the President's notion of "One America." This and other "ethnic" memorialization undertakings -- such as the planned National Museum of the Americas honoring Hispanic/Latino heritage, and the envisaged Angel Island museum (San Francisco) dealing with Asian And Pacific Islander immigration -- should not be viewed as divisive, but rather as logical expressions of natural identifications that reflect and celebrate America's diversity and its multi-faceted history and culture. At the same time, most would not dispute, in the words of the White House press statement launching the Race Initiative, the "unique experience of African Americans throughout our history." This, in our view and that of many others, compels a more active federal government role -- in the direction of that accorded the memorialization of the American Indian experience in this country.

-- It is a concrete step (which lends itself to being portrayed as a concrete result of the President's Initiative on Race, which for all its merits, was criticized for its lack thereof).

-- It will produce concrete results. With its emphasis on education and consciousness-raising (and the increased understanding, and tolerance, that flow therefrom), the proposed legislation holds outstanding potential, as we embark on a new millennium, to produce significant healing effects in a nation that continues to seek remedies for its racial ills. It is clear that worthy symbols and repositories can have incalculable beneficial effects, e.g., the Holocaust Memorial Museum and Ellis Island. Also, in addition to furthering the preservation of our nation's heritage (as well as that of African countries), the Act is unique and unparalleled in that it links preservation with economic and community development, through increased cultural tourism and other means (consistent with other Administrative initiatives re urban revitalization, etc.). Examples abound of how a project undertaken in the name of heritage preservation, beyond serving as a source of pride and an educative tool, can produce a range of positive economic effects by serving as the linchpin of a redevelopment effort or a spur to employment.

-- It is doable. Dealing as it does with history and culture -- matters that have generally been treated on the basis of mutual respect in this country -- passage of this legislation is realistic, as several precedents have shown. As such, it represents one of the few race-related issues upon which Americans can broadly agree. Finally, the price is right (cheap compared to social programs) and both the money, and value for dollar -- in terms of both economic and symbolic returns -- are there.

-- Finally, we continue to feel strongly that in addition to what is proposed in this legislation being the right -- and the smart -- thing to do, it is also right that this President (as well as this First Lady and Vice President) be associated with and remembered for such steps. (The President's support for this effort can be viewed, as well, as consistent with the ongoing, loyal support he has received from the African American community in this country.)

We would much appreciate anything you could do to get folks over there to focus on this and, hopefully, to give it serious consideration.

Many thanks, Paul. ja