

## NEWSMAKER PROFILE

# Wayne Clough Wants Smithsonian Science to Escape Its Shadow

Domestic politics compete with his billion-dollar plans for a global expansion of research to bolster the Smithsonian Institution's famed museums and collections

An impressive record as a researcher, university president, and fundraiser made G. Wayne Clough an obvious choice to become the 12th secretary of the venerable Smithsonian Institution in June 2008. His reputation as a consensus builder and a genuinely nice guy was also seen as a plus after his predecessor, banker Lawrence Small, was forced to resign when his management and spending practices created a furor at the quasi-governmental agency and within the halls of Congress. "If you find anybody who doesn't like Wayne, there's something wrong with them," says Charles Liotta, a former vice president of research under Clough (pronounced "cluff") at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta and chair of the search committee that recommended him for the presidency in 1994.

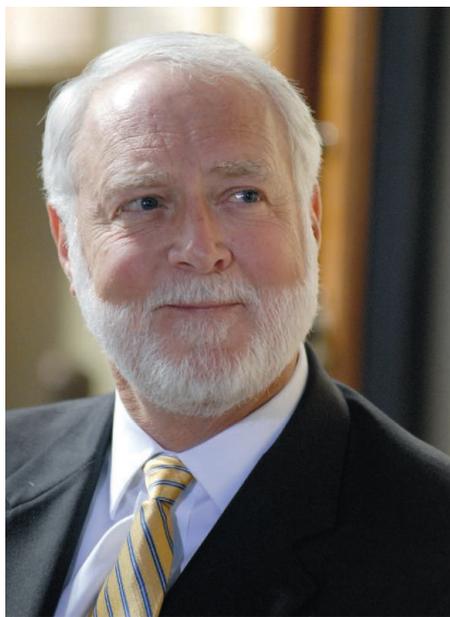
Clough's winning ways—this fall Georgia Tech will dedicate a new student learning center that bears his name—are enhanced by a south Georgian accent and a trim white beard that could land him a movie role as captain of an ocean liner. But behind that genial appearance is a strong vision—and a thick skin. Three years into his tenure, the 69-year-old seismic engineer is waging an aggressive campaign to end what he calls the Smithsonian's "near invisibility" on Capitol Hill and throughout the scientific community.

He says its reputation as the nation's "attic"—the 137 million objects in its far-flung collections at 19 museums are unparalleled—has overshadowed the work being done at its nine research facilities. To bolster that research, he is one-third of the way toward raising more than \$1 billion in the Smithsonian's first-ever capital campaign. He's using a \$10 million gift from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to seed interdisciplinary research collaborations that he likens to start-up companies. And to spread the word, he's broadening the Smithsonian's already extensive outreach efforts by digitizing its collections and striking a deal with Comcast to quadruple the audience for its television programs.

A new strategic plan groups the Smithsonian's activities into four grand challenges: Unlocking the Mysteries of the Universe,

Sustaining a Biodiverse Planet, Understanding the American Experience, and Valuing World Cultures. He says the exercise prodded the institution's 6000 employees to rethink their priorities; it also arms him to defend a \$1.2-billion-a-year budget (65% from the federal government) in what Clough anticipates will be tough times ahead.

Clough has already hit some bumps in the road since coming to Washington. His most publicized battle followed his removal last fall of a 13-second video from an exhibit, titled *Hide/Seek*, exploring sexual identity in



American portraiture. Although many in the art community accused him of kowtowing to conservative politicians, he defends the decision as necessary to avert a potentially serious fiscal backlash from Congress.

Although Clough seems to have weathered that storm, he remains in the midst of a less visible but no less acrimonious fight with archaeologists over an exhibit, which just closed in Singapore, containing artifacts from the *Belitung* shipwreck off the coast of Indonesia that were commercially salvaged and exploited. Scientists say the exhibit, which the Smithsonian helped to design, violates ethical guidelines and international

treaties aimed at halting treasure hunting. Clough says that the exhibit's plans to come to Washington in 2013 are under review in the wake of the controversy. But he chides the scientific community for placing academic purity above pragmatism.

Clough visited *Science* on 14 July to discuss his plans for the Smithsonian, which marks its 165th anniversary this month. Here are highlights of that conversation. A longer version is available online.

## On science's low profile:

**W.C.:** People referred to the Smithsonian as "the nation's attic," so they thought of it as a dusty place not going anywhere, looking backwards as opposed to looking forward. That hurt us a great deal when I went up on the Hill and spoke to Congress about the possibilities for funding [research]. They tended to view us as a Washington-based institution that was a museum, ... and sometimes that was a pejorative term. ... Certainly, science is clearly one of the most dynamic pieces of the Smithsonian, but it wasn't visible. It extended to the science community itself. ... And the Smithsonian itself didn't put its pieces together.

## On the grand challenges:

**W.C.:** It was an amazing, natural process. ... We started out with maybe 20 areas of potential focus, and we ended up with four that we call our grand challenges. ... They give you a set of umbrellas under which the Smithsonian's work takes place. That's not to say that you won't have something taking place that's outside of that. But you have to think very hard about why you're doing that.

We have enough collections, fundamentally, in size—we have 137 million objects and specimens—so, now, we only want to grow our specimens if they meet this test of fitting within the grand challenges. ... We have a process now where our directors meet regularly to make those joint decisions as to what we will not do anymore. Some of those decisions may get a lot harder, if, in fact, our federal budget is cut severely. We've been fortunate not to fall victim to that yet.

## On the *Belitung* shipwreck exhibit:

**W.C.:** I'm told there are, perhaps, up to 1000 shipwrecks in shallow waters in and around Indonesia and other countries that cannot afford to undergo a thorough salvage exercise. And so somehow you're going to have to find a way to protect these shipwrecks, because otherwise, while you're standing there talking about the most pristine way to do it, somebody's going to come in and loot it.

CREDIT: PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

So I think the people in these professions need to sit down together and say, ‘What can we do about this?’ Because, as this shipwreck was discovered, it was in shallow waters, and, I was told, it could have been looted any day. So the Indonesians contracted with a company who did, at some point, get serious about curating the objects from it, and, therefore, there was some science base to the curation. ... It explained a great deal about the trade between the Chinese and the Arab nations, which was very little understood.

As it stands now, that exhibition will not come to the United States, and people who otherwise would have learned a great deal about this trade will not. ... I think the curator, Julian Raby, and his staff felt, when they were working with the Singaporean government, which had, in fact, bought these artifacts for the express purpose of helping educate people, that they were doing something that was useful and productive. Now, certainly not everybody agreed with that, but that’s the way these things are. ... I think the Smithsonian tried to do it right.

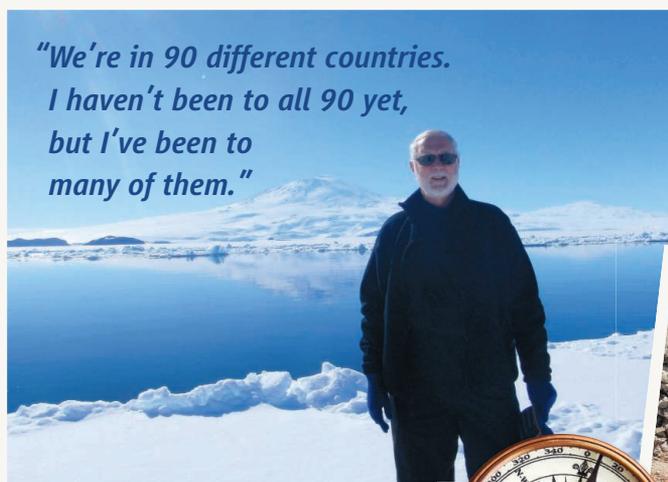
#### On removing a portion of the *Hide/Seek* exhibit:

**W.C.:** I thought [the exhibit] was fantastic. It was based on scholarship; it was based on a careful choice of the objects, by and large. We had a review process. It turned out that particular video was not part of the review process, but that’s another story.

After the exhibition had been up for a while, a group obviously chose that [video] as a point of contention and exploited it, and it came in at a time when there was an election cycle, and so there was a lot of controversy in that sector. So I felt we ran the risk of losing the entire exhibition. The Smithsonian has been forced in the past to take exhibitions down ... by Congress and by the public. Folks tend to forget we’re funded 65% by the federal government, which means every person in America owns the Smithsonian, and part of our job is to be bridge builders, not simply show an object for its shock value. ...

I also had to step back and think, I’m in charge of the fate of 6000 people at the Smithsonian, and we have lots of ideas and plans going forward. We were clearly going to be going into a period of very difficult budget circumstances. And so, from that point of view, I didn’t think we needed to be in a long-standing debate about religious desecration.

*“We’re in 90 different countries. I haven’t been to all 90 yet, but I’ve been to many of them.”*



**On the road.** Wayne Clough enjoys traveling to places where Smithsonian scientists are doing research, including (clockwise from top) the Antarctic, Wyoming, and Kenya.



And so to keep the exhibition up, I decided to remove the video. I think I made the right decision.

#### On accepting a donation from philanthropist David Koch, who supports efforts to cast doubt on climate change, to fund a \$15 million Hall of Human Origins:

**W.C.:** We don’t take into account a person’s political view. We would take a gift from George Soros, and we would take a gift from the Kochs, if they meet the criteria of philanthropists; that is, they make a gift without the intention of dictating content of what the gift is used for. Mr. Koch was, in fact, a perfect donor. He gave us his money. He never, at any time, interfered with the exhibition or the content of the exhibition.

#### On its upcoming fundraising campaign:

**W.C.:** The Smithsonian has never had a campaign before. It’s always raised money, but it’s done it sort of [on] a museum-by-museum basis and not in the sort of coherent, professional way that universities do it. And so we are gearing up to do something like that. ... [Our] donor base is very generous, but it’s small. We don’t have an alumni base, and so we need to do everything we can to increase our donor bank. ... At the end of the campaign, we hope to have raised a certain amount of money—well over \$1 billion—but, particularly, we hope to have increased, for the long haul, people who are willing to give to the Smithsonian.

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#### On federal support for large scientific facilities:

**W.C.:** You know, sadly, the federal government probably is out of the game [for the James Webb Space Telescope], and that’s a loss, I think, for our country. Astronomy



and astrophysics has been one of the great strengths of this country, and for our country to sort of withdraw from that, I think, is a mistake, and we see this happening in a number of places in our national endeavors now. We don’t seem to be able to build big infrastructure projects anymore. We’re not supporting the National Science Foundation like I think we should be. Some of the big international collaborative science initiatives are going elsewhere or are being initiated elsewhere and not here. China, particularly, is investing enormously in their science infrastructure. We’re not. So I think there are a lot of signs that suggest that we have problems.

#### On the Gates collaborations:

**W.C.:** They’re sort of like start-up companies, and not all of them will succeed. But that’s okay because you have a lot of fun doing them, and people get to know each other. What we’re doing is really a culture change at the Smithsonian. They’re talking to each other and collaborating with each other, and so even if that particular idea does not pan out in the long run, it’s not a failure. ... Out of that set of 20, maybe only five will be able to sustain themselves for 10 years.

—JEFFREY MERVIS

Online  
sciencemag.org  
Full transcript  
of the interview  
available online.