

**Statement of Jane Abraham, Former Chairman of the Congressional Commission to
Study the Potential for an American Museum of Women's History
Committee on Rules and Administration
10 am, Tuesday, November 17, 2020**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, and committee staff, thank you for inviting me to join you here today. I proudly stand in support of Senate Bill 959 to establish the first ever comprehensive women's history museum as part of the Smithsonian. I'd like to tell you why I believe this the best way to pay tribute to the remarkable role women have played in America's history.

In December of 2014, Congress considered this question important enough to form a bipartisan national commission consisting of eight women, all appointed by the House and Senate Leaders, and all from very different walks of life. I had the honor of chairing that Commission. Over 18 months, from July 2015 through November 2016, we explored how to most effectively tell the story of women's phenomenal contributions to the history of America.

As I'm sure each of you knows, in Washington in recent years, finding bipartisan solutions to policy challenges can be nearly impossible. Indeed, any group of four Democrats selected by Speaker Pelosi and Senator Schumer and four Republicans picked by then-Speaker Boehner and Leader McConnell might be expected to reach an impasse on almost any policy solution. Trust me when I say our group of eight commissioners were an outspoken, opinionated group representing the full spectrum of political viewpoints. No one was shy about expressing her views.

The good news is we did *not* end up with gridlock. Instead, this bipartisan commission found common ground. We found a way to stand together ... work through differences ... listen deeply to each other ... respect and trust that we were committed to the same outcomes. Ultimately, that is the spirit that devised a democratic government for America at its inception, and it is that spirit which this American Women's History Museum will recognize, elevate and celebrate. We believe the unified, bipartisan plan we forged together deserves your support, and the support of the American people.

Our overall conclusion was that America needs and deserves a national museum — one that is part of the Smithsonian Institution — that is dedicated to the often untold stories of exceptional women who changed the course of our nation's history. We believe this museum is now more important than

ever. Such a national museum will reflect all the many different ideas, perspectives, and causes that were championed, invented, and led by American women. It will remind us of our nation's inspiring history — and our limitless future.

That's why we believe we can raise significant funds from the private sector to support this venture. This museum reflects the desire of so many women and men to reflect on the uncommon achievements that contributed to America's place in the world — and their desire that the next generation know about those achievements as well. Now, more than ever, we believe Americans are eager for such a museum — not just mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, but fathers, husbands, brothers and sons as well. We believe the new leadership of the Smithsonian Institution also recognizes that.

The Commission acknowledged that museums aren't built overnight and the project would require a ten-year timeline. But we wanted to get going immediately! During the Commission's deliberations, we had a series of conversations with Smithsonian leadership. As a result, the Commission proposed that the first critical phase establish an entity called the *American Women's History Initiative* within the Smithsonian.

We felt that this initiative would immediately make women's history a top priority across all of the Smithsonian's museums, and would be the first essential step toward a permanent museum. We're delighted that, as a result of our recommendation, the Smithsonian immediately launched this first step in 2017. As you have heard from Secretary Lonnie Bunch, the Initiative has been very successful over the past four years. We're grateful to the Smithsonian for taking the Women's History Initiative from idea to reality.

My fellow Commissioners and I unanimously support Senate bill 959. We ask each of you to join us — and we encourage unanimous support from the entire Senate.

I especially want to thank Senator Collins for sponsoring the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum Act and Senator Feinstein for being the original co-sponsor along with the many members of this committee who are also co-sponsors.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning and I'd be happy to answer any questions.