

Rules Committee Hearing: “to review S.959, Smithsonian American Women's History Museum Act; and S.1267, National Museum of the American Latino Act”

November 17, 2020

Opening Statement by Senator Bob Menendez

Chairman Blunt, Ranking Member Klobuchar and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this important hearing to review S. 1267, the National Museum of the American Latino Act...

...A bill that would help fill the most glaring gap in our national history and on our National Mall, by authorizing the construction of a new museum dedicated to telling the Latino story.

As the lead sponsor of S. 1267, I firmly believe that it's time that Hispanic Americans get their own world-class museum on the National Mall, built and administered to the standards that only the Smithsonian Institution can uphold.

This effort has been decades in the making. As our former colleagues Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida and Senator Ken Salazar of Colorado wrote in the New York Times this Sunday:

“In 1994, a task force outlined the ways in which the Smithsonian “almost entirely excludes and ignores Latinos in nearly every aspect of its operations.” Its report, “Willful Neglect,” offered 10 recommendations for improvement, including that it should support the development of a museum on the National Mall dedicated to honoring and preserving over 500 years of American Latino history and culture.”

Mr. Chairman, I would like to submit the entirety of their op-ed for the record.

This not a partisan issue. There is strong support from both sides of the aisle to establish a museum devoted to Hispanic American history.

My bill, S. 1267, has near unanimous support from Senate Democrats and six Republican cosponsors – an accomplishment that seems barely achievable in today’s hyper-partisan era.

And the companion bill in the House, H.R. 2420, passed the lower chamber by voice vote with overwhelming bipartisan co-sponsorship.

Presidents from both parties have supported the creation of a National Museum of the American Latino.

In fact, the first bill to create a Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Museum of the American Latino was first introduced in the Senate back in 2004 by Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah.

Now is the time for this Congress to finish what it started almost two decades ago.

No one can deny that the 60 million Latino Americans living in this country will continue to shape America's future, just as we have shaped America's past.

From day one, Hispanics have shaped this nation in countless ways – as military leaders, as pioneers in

business and the arts, as activists and elected officials. Yet, the history and contributions of Hispanic Americans to the United States since its inception have been at-best overlooked and at-worst, erased.

When our nation's children read their assigned American history textbooks, the presence of Latinos in the United States is missing.

They are not taught that half-a-century before English speaking colonies were settled in Jamestown, Virginia, Spanish was already being spoken in a settlement established in St. Augustine, Florida.

Or that Bernardo de Galvez, a Spanish Colonel of the Louisiana Regiment in New Orleans, thwarted every British advance in the area, helping the army of General George Washington win the American Revolutionary War.

Neither are our children taught that the *origins* of Latino presence in the United States have little to-do with economic migration, as many would believe today, and

more to-do with American imperial expansion which integrated Hispanic-occupied territories.

These are but a fraction of the numerous examples of galleries and exhibitions a Smithsonian National Museum for the American Latino could house for millions of visitors from all over the world to learn about.

And, if there's anything this recent election has taught us, it is that both Democrats and Republicans, have lots to learn about who the Latinos and Latinas living in this country are.

We are not a monolithic community. Some of us have ancestors who've lived on American soil since before there was an America. Some of us have immigrated into the U.S. from any of 20 different countries around the western hemisphere searching for the promise of opportunity.

We all have unique cultural identities that make us different, and yet all of us living in the United States share

a common bond, the continuous strive to make this country the best version it can be of itself.

That's the story that only the Smithsonian Institution can tell... that's the history the National Museum for the American Latino will bring to life.

It will inspire families, tourists, students and people from all backgrounds to celebrate the diverse threads that bind the United States of America together as one nation.

Representation matters – especially when it comes to our history. Imagine what it could mean to Latino children coming to visit our nation's capital and seeing their ancestors' contributions to our country.

What it would mean for children of different ethnic backgrounds, to learn about the history of the people that look like their neighbors and their friends at school.

These are the building blocks of acceptance and inclusion.

It is hard to believe that a month and a half from 2021, a museum devoted to Latino history does not already exist in the nation's capital.

And today, I'm sure some may argue that now is not the time to build new museums...

...that the Smithsonian has a maintenance backlog in the millions of dollars in order to bring every older museum up to standards ... and that we must first address that backlog before beginning to discuss a new Museum.

But we've heard that excuse before. And I'm sure Secretary Bunch heard that excuse many times before turning the dream of a Smithsonian National Museum of African American History into a reality.

We must also not forget that S. 1267 has a 50/50 public and private cost-sharing model. Pass this bill now, and dare us to harness the economic power of Latinos and Latinas in the United States, and I guarantee you that our community will meet the challenge.

It is long past time for Congress to pass legislation to authorize the construction of this museum and allow the Smithsonian to begin the planning process towards building another world-renowned destination in our nation's capital that celebrates the incredible history and contributions of Latino Americans to make America great.

Once again, I thank the Committee for discussing the importance of this bill, and I look forward to passing this legislation into law.

Thank you.

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