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Smithsonian Accused of Skewing History to Please Anheuser-Busch

CSPI Calls for Restoration of Historic Plane to Its Pre-Bud Glory

WASHINGTON—The Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum (NASM) should restore a historic plane to how it appeared when it won the aerobatic titles that earned it a place in the museum’s collection, according to the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). But Smithsonian officials claim--incredibly, says CSPI--that it should retain the controversial Bud Light advertisements it began sporting after the Loudenslager Stephens Akro Laser 200 ended competitive flying. CSPI says that the Smithsonian is sacrificing historical accuracy in order to please Bud Light’s corporate parent Anheuser-Busch, which has donated at least \$1.5 million to the museum.

“Crass commercialism is rampant across the Smithsonian,” said George A. Hacker, director of CSPI’s alcohol policies project. “But Bud Light’s presence in the Air and Space Museum sends the wrong message about beer to the millions of impressionable youths who visit the museum each year. Museums are no place for beer ads.”

An e-mail from a Smithsonian official to key congressional staff people implies that the plane is in the collection primarily because of the fame it gained on the air-show circuit, when it was sponsored by Bud Light: “The artifact in question is an aerobatic plane that became famous at air shows, during which time it was sponsored by Anheuser-Busch and carried the Bud Light logo. In an earlier phase of its career, it also broke several records,” the official wrote.

But according to CSPI, that official is deliberately inverting the historical significance of the plane’s titles. When Smithsonian curators first made the case for adding the plane to the collection they only cited the plane’s aerobatic titles and design as the reason for its inclusion. A memo to the museum’s collection committee makes no mention of air shows, and even the plane’s description on the NASM web site makes only passing reference to its air show career.

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“What’s next? The Coors Light Lunar Lander? The Smirnoff Shuttle?” asked Hacker. “The Smithsonian should have clear guidelines that prohibit alcoholic-beverage and tobacco companies from plastering their logos on objects of historical significance accepted into the museum’s collections. The Smithsonian’s damage control verges on dishonesty when they pretend this plane’s impressive titles are just an afterthought compared to its career as a flying Bud Light ad.”

Earlier this week, 20 members of Congress told the Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence M. Small that the Bud Light logos on the plane “needlessly commercialize the plane’s exhibition while marginalizing its true historical significance.”

According to a recent national telephone survey commissioned by CSPI, 77 percent of respondents oppose the Smithsonian’s policy of accepting aviation exhibits that promote beer brands. That poll has a margin of error of plus or minus four percent.

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*The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit health-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., that focuses on nutrition, food safety, and pro-health alcohol policies. CSPI is supported largely by the 800,000 U.S. and Canadian subscribers to its **Nutrition Action Healthletter** and by foundation grants.*