

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Since the 1980s, five government budget crisis shutdowns have affected the Smithsonian. During the shutdowns of 1981, 1984, 1990, 1995, and 1995–1996, the Smithsonian’s public facilities and functions, such as the museums, the National Zoo, and public programs, were usually closed. Non-essential Federal workers did not report to work, including most staff at research institutes. Essential Federal employees—the staff deemed necessary to ensure the security and safety of the Smithsonian’s assets—continued to work, as also did Trust fund employees who didn’t work for closed public functions, such as museum shops and theaters. One door in each building was designated to remain open.

1980–1981

Prior to 1980, administrations cut non-essential spending (such as travel and new hires) and furloughed individual agencies when a Federal budget was not passed. The proposed balanced budget legislation in 1980, however, required broad, across-the-board closures of all government functions that left little flexibility to keep essential government functions running, such as air traffic control and Federal prisons. Thus,



President Carter and Attorney General Civiletti (r) at the White House, 1980. B. Civiletti Papers, University of Maryland

President Jimmy Carter spent his last days in office exploring the legality and logistics of closing down the government. In 1980 and 1981, Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti issued opinions that the Constitution and Federal laws governing Federal spending do allow the president to furlough government workers but also “leave the executive leeway to perform essential functions and make the government ‘workable’ until the budget impasse is resolved.”

November 23, 1981

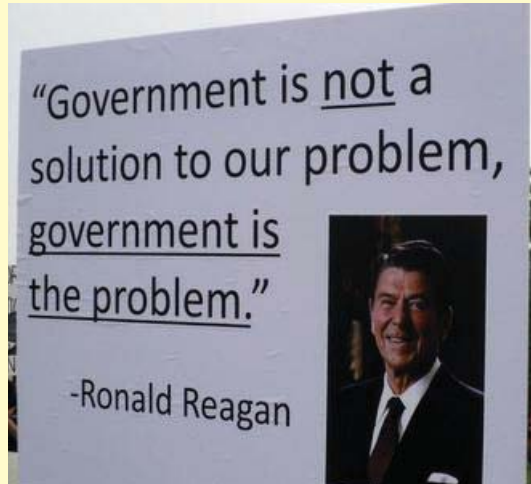
For the first time in U.S. history, a one-day government-wide furlough was ordered by President Ronald Reagan. Some 400,000 of 2.1 million Federal employees were furloughed. The Smithsonian sent home non-essential staff and closed the museums. Essential staff, such as guards, animal keepers at the National Zoo, and building engineers stayed on site. Employees were paid for the furlough day by the Federal government.



President Reagan with group of outside economic advisors, 1981, Associated Press

October 1984

After failing to pass a Federal budget bill for fiscal year 1985, Congress passed a series of continuing resolutions in early October 1984. On October 4, in the absence of a continuing resolution, President Ronald Reagan furloughed government employees, including non-emergency Smithsonian staff, for a half day. Smithsonian museums were closed and the Department of the Interior closed the Washington Monument and National Parks. An emergency bill was passed on October 11, 1984, that would serve as a continuing resolution for all of 1985. Although the budget contained significant cuts to the Smithsonian's Federal budget request, it was \$22 million higher than the fiscal year 1984 budget.



Poster of President Reagan, undated, Business Review

closed the national parks. Essential employees—such as senior management; a reduced staff of guards; buildings maintenance personnel; certain Office of Human Resources staff and computer services specialists; supply and mail/shipping personnel; accounting and financial services staff; collections care staff; zookeepers and medical staff; and employees necessary to carry out the terms and conditions of grants and contracts received or obligated by the Smithsonian—remained at work.

Some special events and classes involving contracts were held. Trust fund employees kept the Smithsonian's visitor services operational and fielded questions from the public. The Smithsonian anticipated and prepared for another shutdown on October 20, when the continuing resolution expired, but that was averted.

When President Bush announced that Federal workers would not be paid

October 6–8, 1990

Throughout the summer of 1990, Smithsonian management prepared for staff furloughs threatened by a provision of the Graham-Hollings-Rudman Act, which mandated a 32 percent sequestration of Federal funds in the absence of a final budget. A hiring freeze was put in place. President George Herbert Walker Bush vetoed the Congressional budget and closed down the Federal government from October 6 to 8, 1990. The impact of the shutdown was softened because it occurred over the Columbus Day holiday weekend, when many government employees

were not scheduled to work. The Smithsonian closed its museums for the three days, and the National Park Service



President George H.W. Bush leaves for budget negotiations, September 7, 1990, Government Executive, November 30, 2012

for the furlough days, the U.S. Congress promptly passed legislation ensuring that they would be paid, in response to threats of lawsuits. Since Federal employees were paid for the furlough days, questions were raised as to whether Trust employees, such as museum shop staff, should be paid for the days the museums were closed, despite the loss of business income on those days.

November 14–19, 1995

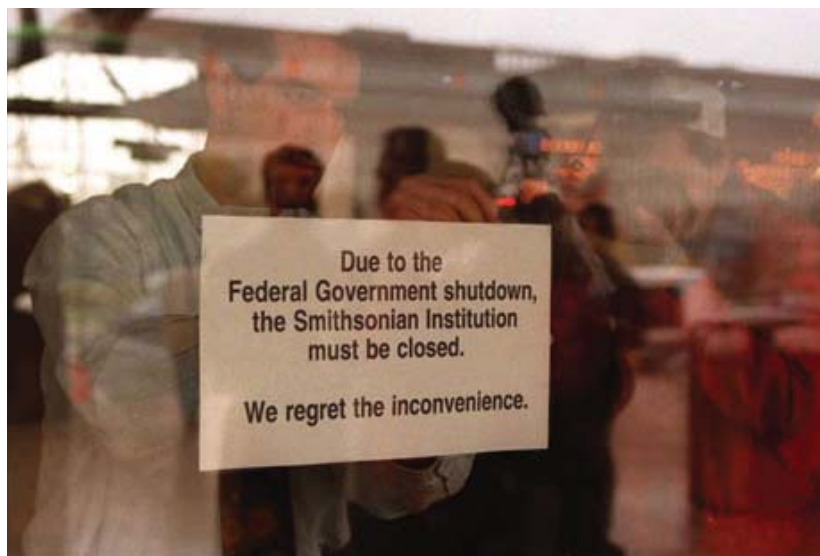
After a budget impasse between President Bill Clinton and the United States Congress, the Federal government was closed for six days, from November 14 to November 19, 1995.

Smithsonian non-essential staff were furloughed and the museums and National Zoo were closed to the public. A November 19 continuing resolution reopened the government, kept it funded at 75 percent of current levels, and paid Federal employees for the furlough days.



President Clinton and House Speaker Newt Gingrich face off over budget, 1995, MSNBC

December 1995–January 1996



Sign on entrance to National Air and Space Museum, December 1995, Getty Images

In December of 1995, the continuing budget standoff between President William Clinton and the U.S. Congress led to a government-wide shutdown for 21 days, from December 16, 1995, to January 5, 1996. Only emergency Smithsonian Federal personnel were at work during the budget stand-off and Federal employee furlough. With the exception of a few days, Smithsonian museums were closed to the public until Saturday, January 6, when they reopened to sparse visitorship.

Since the closure was at the height of the holiday tourist season, the Smithsonian sought ways to keep at least some museums open. The National Museum of American History (NMAH), for example, had a \$50,000 contract for performers that could not be cancelled. Management first considered contracting for guards and building management services through Trust funds, but concluded the contractors could not be trained to Smithsonian standards quickly enough. Management then asked for, and got, just enough volunteers who took leave without pay from their Federal positions (including forfeiture of Federal retirement contributions), signed waivers of claims to any reimbursed salary, and became temporary Trust fund security officers and building maintenance staff.

Both NMAH and the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) were open from December 26 to 31, 1995, using a skeleton staff of citizen volunteers and Trust fund employees. At NMAH, the galleries, shops, and

ice cream parlor were open. At NASM, the Planetarium, IMAX Theater, main shop, and entrance gallery (Milestones of Flight) were open, but all other galleries were closed. A temporary Vermeer show at the National Gallery of Art was kept open with private funding. The Visitor Information and Associates' Reception Center, staffed by Trust fund employees, responded to a record number of calls as the public inquired as to whether the museums were open and when specific exhibits would reopen.

On Sunday, January 7, one day after the reopening, a major blizzard hit the Eastern seaboard, paralyzing the Washington, D.C., region with more than two feet of snow. The storm closed the Federal government for three more days, and Smithsonian employees did not return to work until Thursday, January 11. On Friday, January 12, another snowstorm closed government offices.

Finally, after four weeks of disruption, normal operations resumed on Monday, January 15, 1996.

Throughout these closures, essential employees, including security officers and zookeepers, remained on the job, despite the fact that they, as well as furloughed workers, were not being paid. Although



Sledding down the Capitol steps, January 1996, The Washington Post

all Federal employees were later paid for furlough days, they had to find alternate sources of income until those paychecks were received, which was often at a significantly later date. Because Federal employees were paid, parity issues arose with regard to Trust fund employees who experienced a loss of income because of museum closings.

During the shutdown of 1995–96, the Smithsonian created the Smithsonian Employee Emergency Assistance Fund to provide loans of not more than \$500 to staff for basic necessities of life: rent, mortgage, medical bills, heat, electricity, water, and food. Eligibility

was determined by demonstrated financial need due to the furlough or medical crisis or disaster, and all expenses had to be documented. The program was administered through the Agriculture Federal Credit Union, with 3 percent interest to cover costs, and repayment was made through payroll deductions. During the 1995–96 shutdown, the Comptroller's Office estimated that 3,235 employees were furloughed in D.C., 158 in Maryland, and 43 in Virginia.

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