The Committee of 100
on the Federal City

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THE COMMITTEE OF ONE HUNDRED ON THE FEDERAL CITY
WASHINGTON MONUMENT SECURITY- A NON-INVASIVE PROPOSAL

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A valuable service was rendered by the National Park Service when it commissioned a Cultural Landscape Report by Oehrlein & Associates and Robinson & Associates in anticipation of security enhancement at the Washington Monument in 2001-02. This gave interested parties a convenient opportunity to examine and consider the history of the structure in useful detail. In the eight years since that time, the complexity of the problem of balancing security and access at many national monuments has given NPS valuable experience in identifying the broad range of threats and risks which must be taken into account, and in determining the countermeasures most appropriate for particular sites. Formerly, when a sizable visitor orientation facility was included in the program, the broad principle of security screening at the greatest distance from the target guided NPS' process at the Washington Monument, and no acceptable solution was found. The inapplicability of that principle to the Monument has been demonstrated by the presence of a temporary screening structure at its very doorway for the last ten years. We may assume that NPS would not have created and maintained the existing condition if it had not been deemed effective when combined with a system of vehicle barriers in the landscape. The Committee of 100 anticipates that, since NPS and we and other signatories of the 2002 MOA have participated in many subsequent security improvement processes, the present undertaking will benefit from our cumulative experience and the enhanced technologies now available.

The roots of the following comments lie in two fundamental principles. The first, embodied in the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation, is that a historic structure must not be unnecessarily and irreversibly modified. The second, a matter of common sense and sound policy, is that the relative costs of alternatives deserve serious consideration when public funds are at stake. We are fortunate that time-proven technology is readily at hand to allow the caretakers of this great national icon to avoid the expensive, massive, and permanent intervention into its historic fabric that an earlier generation of planners may have considered necessary. Of the five options presented at the public scoping meeting on November 8, 2010, only one could be executed without irreversibly changing the historic structure, and that was Option E: replacement of the present temporary screening structure with another of a higher caliber of design.

Early in America's search for appropriate symbolic expression in a representative republic, the Washington National Monument Society advertised for a design that would "harmoniously blend durability, simplicity and grandeur". Robert Mills responded with an assemblage of disparate architectural, abstract, and figurative elements drawn from Greek,

Roman, Christian and Egyptian sources. Though undeniably grand, his monument's inadequate foundations threatened its durability, and its simplicity dwelt entirely in the eyes of its contemporary beholders. It was the Monument's destiny however, to shed every interpretive detail and to be constructed as a pristine unity from its foundation to its crowning pyramidion. The elegant obelisk that pierces the skyline of the Federal City today has been a creation of History, not of a single designer. The Monument's rescue from the stylistic conventions of its original design was the result of its completion being assigned to a man of Science rather than Art. An army engineer, Major Thomas Lincoln Casey, saw through to the essence of the problem of completing the great task undertaken by Mills, and when he was done he presented only that essence to the nation. Under his direction the Monument became one of history's greatest examples of "less is more", the modernist dictum formulated half a century after he had stripped it down to its bare geometry.

Beneath the Plaza, the Monument's foundations encapsulate the story of the maturing of American engineering. Casey began to study engineering at West Point at the very moment when the Washington Monument Society began construction on the naïve original foundation he would learn to correct and stabilize (5b). Uneven subsidence had already tipped the abandoned structure by the time he undertook its completion thirty years later. Buttresses and additional footings were installed, with great care taken to balance and resolve the gigantic forces at play. Gross quantities of materials needed to be dis-placed and re-placed with great delicacy over an extended period of time (6a, 6b, 6d). In its own grand symmetry, it was a major feat of engineering. The photographic record brought forward by NPS allows us to appreciate the simple magnificence of its final form, much too easily forgotten after its completion and burial in 1880, never to be seen again (5a).

In 2001, NPS also commissioned and made available a study of the soils underlying the Monument site, by Mueser Rutledge Consulting Engineers. A single set of principles guided its major recommendations: the existing conditions of loading on the soils must be maintained within prescribed limits, and whatever changes are required must be symmetrical relative to the Monument. This means that removing soil, stone and concrete to tunnel through the foundations for visitor access into the cellar of the Monument will require an equal mass to be removed from the opposite side for balance (6c). In practice, both subtraction and addition of material will be required. However well this operation may be carried out, the symmetry of the existing masterpiece of engineering would be irreversibly destroyed by such an intervention and restructuring. Such considerations should be enough to turn our attention away from any alternate involving sub-surface access, and to encourage investigation of non-invasive solutions.

Three types of non-invasive alternates exist: screening at a distance from the Monument; replacement of the temporary structure at its base; and screening within the walls of the Monument.

Screening at a distance was first proposed in 2002 and rejected after thorough vetting. The recent reintroduction of the idea was unaccompanied by any acceptable solution to the many difficulties involved in separating unscreened visitors from those who have been screened in the vicinity of the Monument. Either freedom of circulation on the Monument Grounds would be compromised or a disruptive vehicular access system would have to be overlaid on the landscape. Extensive discussion of this alternate has resulted in no satisfactory answers to many legitimate NPS concerns.

Replacement of the existing temporary screening building (4a) by one that is less unattractive might seem a reasonable and practical alternate, since its effectiveness has stood the test of time. It could be a masterpiece of architecture, though, and it would still be the wrong solution. The Monument's pristine nobility would be diminished by any addition to it, however beautiful it might be in another setting. The only advantage to compromising the Monument's visual integrity in such a way would be that a future generation, wiser and more sensitive to its heritage, could undo the damage by removing it.

The third alternative (4b), screening within the fifteen foot thick stone walls of the Monument, was proposed by the Committee of 100 and has been supported by several Section 106 consulting parties over the past ten years. The version illustrated here is a refinement of that idea resulting from recent conversations with NPS security and staff members. It is, in essence, the same system as that currently housing the screening process, but with the advantages of enhanced safety for security staff, greater resistance to penetration, total reversibility, and no

change to the appearance of the Monument or the Grounds. Because it would not affect the historic fabric in any way, this solution may not be covered by Section 106. Whether or not that is the case, NPS may select the "No Build Alternate" and proceed with the installation of this improved security system.

In conclusion, two points must be emphasized. First, the cost of this proposal is likely to be less than one hundredth of the cost of any system that irreversibly penetrates the historic foundations, and that consideration alone obliges NPS to take it seriously. Second, NPS has had ten years to explain in specific terms why this system would not work at least as well as the present system. As recently as February 8, 2012, security personnel failed to explain their ten years of resistance to the idea.

The Committee of 100 is dedicated to the preservation of the historic fabric of the Washington Monument, to its uncluttered symbolism, and to its accessibility to a million visitors a year. Firm in our belief that the National Park Service shares that dedication, we continue to offer our cooperation in reaching satisfactory solutions to the questions at hand.