

Part of the Glue That Holds the Nation Together

An Interview with Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary, Smithsonian Institution

EDITORS' NOTE Lonnie Bunch III is the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian (si.edu). He assumed his position in 2019 and oversees 21 museums, 21 libraries, the National Zoo, numerous research centers and several education units and centers. Two new museums – the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum – are in development. Previously, Bunch was the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.



Lonnie G. Bunch III

When he started as director in July 2005, he had one staff member, no collections, no funding, and no site for a museum. Driven by optimism, determination and a commitment to build “a place that would make America better,” Bunch transformed a vision into a bold reality. The museum has welcomed more than 8 million visitors since it opened in September 2016 and has compiled a collection of 40,000 objects that are housed in the first “green building” on the National Mall. Occupying a prominent location next to the Washington Monument, the nearly 400,000-square-foot National Museum of African American History and Culture is the nation's largest and most comprehensive cultural destination devoted exclusively to exploring, documenting, and showcasing the African American story and its impact on American and world history. Before his appointment as director of the museum, Bunch served as the President of the Chicago Historical Society. A widely published author, Bunch has written on topics ranging from the Black military experience, the American presidency and African American History in California, diversity in museum management and the impact of funding and politics on American museums. His most recent book, *A Fool's Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump*, chronicles the making of the museum that would become one of the most popular destinations in Washington, DC. Bunch worked at the Smithsonian in the past, holding several positions at its National Museum of American History from 1989 through 2000. As the museum's Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs for six years, he oversaw the curatorial and collections management staff and led the team

that developed a major permanent exhibition on the American presidency. He also led the team that developed “Smithsonian's America” for the American Festival Japan 1994; this exhibition, which was presented in Japan, explored the history, culture and diversity of the United States. Bunch served as the Curator of History and Program Manager for the California African American Museum in Los Angeles from 1983 to 1989. While there, he organized several award-winning exhibitions,

including “The Black Olympians, 1904–1984” and “Black Angelenos: The Afro-American in Los Angeles, 1850–1950.” He has also produced several historical documentaries for public television. Born in Belleville, New Jersey, Bunch has held numerous teaching positions at universities across the country, including American University in Washington, DC, the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth and the George Washington University in Washington, DC. In service to the historical and cultural community, Bunch has served on the advisory boards of the American Association of Museums and the American Association for State and Local History. In 2005, Bunch was named one of the 100 most influential museum professionals of the 20th century by the American Association of Museums. Among his many awards, he was appointed by President George W. Bush to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House in 2002 and reappointed by President Barack Obama in 2010. In 2019, he was awarded the Freedom Medal, one of the Four Freedom Awards from the Roosevelt Institute, for his contribution to American culture as a historian and storyteller; the W.E.B. Du Bois Medal from the Hutchins Center at Harvard University; and the National Equal Justice Award from the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund. In 2021, the Society of American Historians awarded Bunch the Tony Horwitz Prize honoring distinguished work in American history of wide appeal and enduring public significance. In addition, he received the David McCullough Award for outstanding work in Public History, the Lifetime Achievement Award from both the American Alliance of Museums and the African American Association of Museums, and the Chairman's Award of the Congressional Black Caucus. In 2020, he was presented with the Dan David

Prize from Tel Aviv University. In 2021, Bunch received France's highest award, The Legion of Honor. Bunch received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the American University in Washington, DC.

INSTITUTION BRIEF The Smithsonian Institution (si.edu) was established by an act of the U.S. Congress in 1846 as an independent federal trust instrumentality, a unique public-private partnership that has proven its value as a cultural and scientific resource for more than 170 years. The federal commitment provides the foundation for all the Institution does, and is especially helpful in attracting private support. The Institution leverages its federal funding to enrich the lives of the American people and advance its mission for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

Where did your interest and passion in museums develop?

I'd say it's really an extension of my love of history, which has shaped my career and been my weapon of choice in the struggle for justice and racial equality. It began with one of my earliest memories, before I could read. My grandfather was reading one of his books to me and came across a black-and-white picture of kids in a 19th-century classroom captioned, “unidentified school children.” The curiosity piqued by that photograph, as I sought to learn more about them and their lives, would drive my lifelong interest in history.

As for my passion for museums and the Smithsonian – institutions that help bring history alive – it started with a road trip from our home in New Jersey through the still segregated south to visit relatives. As a young history student, I wanted to stop at some of the historical Civil War sites on the way, but my dad understood the hazards and sensibly chose not to stop. On the way back, though, he made a detour into the nation's capital, and we pulled up at the Smithsonian. He told me that this was a place we could understand science and history and culture without worrying about being treated differently because of the color of our skin.

What interested you in becoming Secretary of the Smithsonian and made you feel it was the right fit?

I knew I was a good fit because of my wide-ranging experience at the Smithsonian. I started here in the late 1980s as an educational



The Enid A. Haupt Garden and Smithsonian Castle

specialist at the National Air and Space Museum, returned as a curator at the National Museum of American History, and eventually built the National Museum of African American History and Culture as its founding director, so I had a deep understanding of the institutional culture here. I also firmly believe that the Smithsonian is part of the glue that holds the nation together and saw the potential for us to do more to benefit the common good.

How do you define the mission of the Smithsonian Institution?

The mission of the Smithsonian since its inception has been the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.” It means that across many areas of discipline – art, history, culture, and science – we seek to use scholarship and research to understand the world around us and then share that knowledge with the citizens of the United States and the people of the world. The way we have both interpreted and achieved that mission has continued to evolve since we began 176 years ago, and as society has changed, we have adapted to better serve our audiences.

Will you provide an overview of the Smithsonian’s work and programs?

I could fill several issues of LEADERS with all we do, but to sum it up, we are the world’s largest museum, education, and research complex. With the recent legislation that formalized our two upcoming museums, the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum, we are now an organization of 21 museums, numerous research facilities, educational centers, libraries, and archives, and the National Zoo. Scholarship and research underpin everything we do, whether it’s working to understand the impact of climate change, examine and contextualize the full American story, or peer into the universe. We then share

that knowledge with people across the country and around the world through our programs, exhibitions, and educational curricula.

You created the National Museum of African American History and Culture. What was your vision for this Museum and how do you see its impact?

I knew the hopes and dreams of so many rested on our shoulders when we were building the Museum; it was my responsibility to make it a place that both revealed pain and reflected joy. It had to tell the full scope of the African American story, from the human tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade to the resilience of a people who were instrumental in shaping the nation and holding it accountable for living up to its most cherished ideals – freedom, justice, and equal opportunity. At heart, I knew it needed to make clear that the African American story is the American story.

I’m proud of the work we did and the way the National Museum of African American History and Culture has become a pilgrimage site for people across the country and has helped lead a discussion about the issues of race that need to be confronted if we are ever to fully live up to our potential as a nation.

Do you feel that there are opportunities for diverse candidates in museum management and what more can be done to build these opportunities?

Absolutely. I think the first step is acknowledging that more can be done and following through by devoting resources to building a pipeline of diverse talent. That includes partnering with other groups to give aspiring museum professionals avenues to employment and fostering opportunities within organizations.

For instance, museums like the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Smithsonian American Women’s

History Museum, and the National Museum of the American Latino have strong internship and fellowship programs to help develop the next generations of museum professionals.

What do you tell young people about the importance and value of understanding and studying history?

History is valuable, I’d argue even essential, in a couple ways. First, it provides understanding, showing us the progress we have made, and contextualizing how we have gotten where we are. By illuminating our past, we can make informed choices and better fulfill our obligations as citizens.

Second, history is a mirror that we can hold up to ourselves and to society. It is my fervent belief that there is nothing more powerful than a people, than a nation, steeped in its history, even when that history is painful or counter to modern values. We can only hope to move forward by reckoning with our entire past and examining the unvarnished truth.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?

I always return to something my father said to me: “no one has a monopoly on wisdom.” That philosophy has served me well in my career and in my life. Leadership requires us to both define reality and give hope. Being willing to listen to others and to realize you don’t have all the answers is how I approach leadership, and it’s always been effective for me. Diversity of background, of experience, and of viewpoints makes for more creativity and flexibility. When we rigidly adhere to doing things the way things have always been done, that’s when we stagnate as institutions. I think leadership means tapping into people’s disparate talents so we can innovate and move forward as one.

You have been a mentor to many young people. Did you have mentors who influenced your life?

Too many to count, but it certainly started with my parents, who were educators and instilled in me the importance of lifelong learning. I think anyone who is lucky enough to be successful can look back and identify people who shaped you in indelible ways. I think of people like my grandfather who read to me when I was little and made me want to learn about the past, or a teacher during my senior year of high school who stoked my passion for history. Paradoxically, I also see anyone who told me I could not do something as a kind of a mentor, since it made me want to prove them wrong.

You have accomplished so much during your career. Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?

Running the Smithsonian doesn’t leave you a lot of time to do so, but I certainly make it a point to try. There are many times where I’ve forced myself to take a breath, look around, and appreciate the moment. I think sitting with John Lewis and President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama, all of us watching Patti LaBelle and Stevie Wonder perform at the grand opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, is pretty tough to beat. ●