

Museums

Lonnie Bunch, the Smithsonian's first black leader, on the challenge of making it 'a place that matters'

By [Peggy McGlone](#)

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He has a reputation as an affable storyteller and a leader with the smarts of a professor and the demeanor of your next door neighbor. So there was little doubt that Lonnie Bunch III would be a new kind of leader for the Smithsonian Institution.

But would he be open to questions? Even this early in his tenure?

Just two months after his historic appointment as the 14th and first African American secretary to lead the 173-year-old institution, Bunch sat down for a wide-ranging interview with The Washington Post. He showed a willingness to discuss tough subjects, including the challenges of making the Smithsonian “a place that matters.”

Bunch has been candid and outspoken, both in his forthcoming memoir and in one of his first interviews as secretary. In his new office in the Smithsonian's historic administration building — where photos of his wife, two daughters and extended family are displayed alongside an autographed electric guitar (a gift from fellow New Jerseyan Jon Bon Jovi) and a poster of actor and activist Paul Robeson — Bunch offered a peek into his new job, tackling big issues and small with his trademark blend of humor and humility.

He is still in student mode, he insisted, trying to grasp the many units and missions of the sprawling organization. He said he hasn't made any decisions, but he also said he won't rubber-stamp two high-profile projects he inherited — the outpost in London that's been in the works for five years and the controversial redesign of the acres around the Castle, the Smithsonian's administrative building on the southern edge of the Mall. (“I've asked the provost and others to make sure they're working on getting plans [to him] so I can say this makes sense or it doesn't,” he said.)

Before June 16, when he became secretary, Bunch spent 14 years as founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the 19th and newest Smithsonian museum. The museum has been praised for its clear-eyed and unflinching portrayal of African American history and for its joyful celebration of African American contributions to American culture.

02/2018 Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch on the challenge of making the Smithsonian and its role of education in America relevant. The Washington Post
A deeply personal memoir detailing the highs and lows of the effort, “A Fool’s Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama and Trump,” will be published Sept. 24, the third anniversary of the museum’s opening.

The following conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: *You are now leader of the world's largest complex of museums. How do you make or continue to make the Smithsonian Institution relevant?*

A: It really is crucial to recognize that museums, and especially the Smithsonian, have to figure out how to become valued, not just visited. Americans are grappling with a myriad of issues, whether it’s climate change, race, gender, the impact of technology. The Smithsonian ought to be a place where people can go to wrestle with that, to find the tools to live their lives. I want people to see that we are as much about today and tomorrow as we are about yesterday.

Q: *How do you do that?*

A: You build on the trust that you already have. You make sure that the scholarship is sound, that the things you want to do are not shaped by politics but shaped by the research, shaped by the people that are helping you think this through. Do we do, for example, a focused “Year of X” and at the end of that year be the great convener, bring people together to sort of grapple with these issues and then make sure you use all the platforms we have? What’s the Smithsonian magazine doing? What’s the [TV] channel doing? What’s our social media? This is a place that I love so much and it has so much, but sometimes it hides its light under a bushel basket. I want it to be a place that matters.

Q: *Can you give me an example from the National Museum of African American History and Culture that illustrates this vision?*

A: We did a symposium about mascots, myths and monuments with [the National Museum of the American Indian] that really showed that the Smithsonian was really cognizant about contemporary issues. We did what we do best, which is first of all contextualize it and to bring reason to arguments that often are without reason. That’s one of the great strengths, it seems to me, at the Smithsonian.

Q: *Since the African American Museum opened in 2016 there seems to be more division in the country, more racism and unrest, including protests around Confederate statues and mass shootings motivated by racist beliefs. What role does the Smithsonian play in this arena?*

A: One thing is to recognize that as American citizens we need to be part of the discussion and, hopefully, the solution in these areas. Can the Smithsonian solve gun violence? Probably not. But the Smithsonian can help us understand what the Second Amendment was created for, how it evolved over time. It sounds almost trite, but I believe in an educated electorate. And the Smithsonian is one of the places that people trust to help educate them.

Q: *In your memoir, you describe your disappointment about one such educational moment: President Trump's tour of the African American Museum in February 2017. You write: "The president paused in front of the exhibit that discussed the role of the Dutch in the slave trade. As he pondered the label I felt that maybe he was paying attention to the work of the museum. He quickly proved me wrong. As he turned from the display, he said to me. 'You know, they love me in the Netherlands.' All I could say was let's continue walking. . . . I was so disappointed in his response to one of the greatest crimes against humanity in history." You wrote this before your appointment as secretary. How do you feel about it now?*

A: I think the goal was to say that, look, the job of the Smithsonian is to provide educational opportunities for everybody. And I was very pleased the president came. There is no doubt in my mind there were things he learned, engaged with. What I hope is that the Smithsonian can play that role in a time of partisanship and division.

Q: *Museums are grappling with questions of diversity and equity, and making all audiences feel welcome. Do you think it is important for visitors to see themselves reflected in the collection, in the staff? Can the Smithsonian accomplish this?*

A: For me, other than history, the most important thing is about fairness, is about helping people realize that America has got to live up to its stated ideals. I am not going to be the diversity secretary. It's not who I am. But I expect that those issues will be at the heart of conversations in many quarters throughout the Smithsonian. I think it's crucial for us to model the behavior, model the expectations, model the hopes that we want for the rest of the country.

02/2016 Smithsonian Secretary Imani Davis on the challenges of making the Smithsonian and the rest of America's museums more diverse. *The Washington Post*

I can't recall how many times in my career I walked into a room and I integrated it. But what I realized is that just my presence changed the conversation. So to me, it's really important that people [are] around the table. They don't have to even carry the fight. Sometimes just their presence does.

Q: *The Smithsonian staff is not fully integrated, though. It has a mostly African American security force, while the curators and other higher-paid positions are mostly white. How do you feel about that?*

A: You would never hear me say that the Smithsonian has the diversity that it needs. Are we where I want us to be? Not yet.

Q: *There are bills in Congress backing museums for Latinos, women's history and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. You mention in your book how important the Smithsonian's support was for the African American Museum. Will you use your influence?*

A: You mean am I going to go out and campaign? I believe in letting a thousand flowers bloom, but I don't want to create anything if we don't have the resources, the skills, the collections to match what we did at the African American Museum.

Q: *The public response to African American Museum has been overwhelmingly positive. Did that surprise you?*

A: I'm overwhelmed by the way people respond. I knew it would be good. I knew that because these folks that worked for me were really good. But the way that it's become this pilgrimage site . . .

Q: *It has made you into a celebrity, and that's not that typical for the museum world.*

A: That visibility continues to be the thing that is hardest for me. It's also the thing that tells me that we really did touch the people the way we wanted to touch them.

Q: *What is the role of government in the arts and in museums in particular?*

A: When I look around the world and look at the importance of culture, both as a mirror to a society but also as a way to heal, I think that many nations recognize that this is part of the government's responsibility. I am really gratified, candidly, that we have the support of Congress. Our budgets have grown over the last several years partly because people trust the Smithsonian but also they realize that culture matters. So my hope is that

02/2016 Smithsonian Secretary Tom Hanks on the challenge of running the Smithsonian and the role of government in American life. The Washington Post
government will recognize that to keep a country together, culture is crucial. For me, the Smithsonian is part of the glue that holds this country together.

Q: *The Smithsonian has managed to dodge the attacks that have targeted the National Endowment for the Arts and other federal cultural agencies. Why is that?*

A: I think the Smithsonian has a longer history than those institutions, and it's almost a pilgrimage site. And so I think the challenge is to build on that trust, to never abuse that trust, but to also use that trust to help people explore questions that they may not want to explore.

Q: *You're the first historian, and the first individual unit director, in more than a half-century, to become secretary. How will you not play favorites?*

A: This is my fourth posting in the Smithsonian. You know I started at National Air and Space Museum, then National Museum of American History, then African American [Museum], now here. So I argue that different parts of the Smithsonian own different parts of me, and so, therefore, I think I can be fair.

Q: *In your memoir, you're critical of some of interactions you had with secretaries you worked for. How will your inside knowledge help you, and do you view those battles differently now?*

A: I've lived so much of my life thinking of myself as the quintessential outsider ... and suddenly one day you wake up and you are the quintessential insider. So that's an adjustment. But what it really means is that I know there are things that secretaries — in general, I'm not talking about specific secretaries — could have done. Make sure you fight against the isolation of the Castle; make sure that you're not just listening to large groups but that you're creating smaller groups that actually can do things. It's really a collaborative process of change.

Q: *What have the first months been like?*

A: It's like when you buy a new car, right? You know how to drive, [but] all of a sudden that button does something different or you hadn't looked in that compartment. So even though I know the Smithsonian like the back of my hand, there are buttons and departments I didn't know. ... The biggest challenge, I think, of being secretary is controlling your time. So much water comes your way that often you're treading water rather than swimming to the Promised Land. And I'm a Promised Land guy.

Q: *How does this job compare to being founding director of the African American Museum?*

A: The most important work I'll ever do was building that museum. Probably the most complicated work is this. So they're both challenging in different ways.

Here, you have to delegate but also put your fingerprints on it. It's about the greater good of the institution. So fix the pipes, get the vision so that this is a place that's about tomorrow, not just yesterday. It's those kinds of things that I feel are a little harder to define, a little harder to measure.

Q: *Does that make them harder to achieve?*

A: Building that museum was pretty hard, let me tell you. But the difference is I knew African American history like the back of my hand, so I could always dip into that. Here, there are things I don't know, and I've got to figure that out. My expectations are very high. That's one thing I brought from the museum. The expectations are high that we have to be excellent. I do not do mediocre.

Q: *You grew up in Belleville, New Jersey, a blue-collar, mostly white town on the northern border of Newark*

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A: I would say blue-collar *overwhelmingly* white town.

Q: *How did your upbringing shape you, and does it still influence you?*

A: In profound ways. First of all, it taught me how to straddle many worlds. It taught me how to find ways to get along, to find common ground. It also taught me how to fight, run and talk my way out of things, because I realized you couldn't fight every day. It taught me about supporting the underdog and supporting the outsider.

Q: *In your memoir, you recall a moment of frustration with a Smithsonian colleague and you write, "I almost went 'New Jersey' on him." What does that mean?*

A: [Laughs] What it means is I rarely get angry, because I work so hard to control myself. When I'm feeling like I'm being disrespected, then I will go Jersey, then I will put my arm around you and ask you, 'Do you want to go to Naples?' You know, a variety of things that would let people know that I'm not happy.

Q: *There have been many questions recently about donors and their financial sources. Activists have spotlighted the Sackler family's role in the opioid epidemic and pushed for the resignation of a Whitney Museum trustee whose company makes tear gas. Are attitudes changing? Should museums adapt?*

A: There's no doubt that museums have to do a better job of vetting donors. I said at the [African American Museum] "no liquor money." That was something that was important to me. But I think we need, as institutions, to actually say, "Here's where we're going to dance, here's where we're going to evaluate whether we dance, and here's where we're not going to listen to the music at all." I would love to say all money comes from saints. I'd love that. But that's not the world we live in.


Q: *Did you face any backlash on those decisions?*

A: Oh, yeah. Good development people say, "We don't leave any money on the table." But I think that this is about my belief that the Smithsonian has a moral high ground. That doesn't mean that we don't slip from time

07/2019 Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch on the challenge of making the Smithsonian and the rest of museums in America live. The Washington Post
to time. But we need to remember that the Smithsonian ought to be the leader, globally, on issues of museums and culture. And sometimes that means we say no to things.

I also think it's really important that the Smithsonian live up to the commitments that it's made. The Smithsonian lives and dies partly on the federal government and partly on the donations of the public. You've got to live up to those commitments. And so sometimes you'd like to go back, but you can't.

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