

PUBLICATION

Seven Questions with Lonnie Bunch, Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture

Authors: Sheila P. Burke

September 24, 2020



Lonnie G. Bunch III is the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and the former Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. No stranger to the Smithsonian, having spent a collective 27 years, Secretary Bunch had spent time at the American History Museum and, of course, most notably as the founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). It is his experience building the latest jewel in the crown of the Smithsonian that we spoke about.

1. When you began as the Director of NMAAHC, what was to be the 19th Smithsonian museum, you had one staff member, no collections, no funding and no site for the museum. How did you transform your vision into a reality?

The biggest challenge was making the museum a reality. The challenge, and the one that seemed insurmountable, was finding the artifacts that would tell the stories we had in mind while at the same time hiring curators and raising funds for the design and construction. I like to say we were a museum long before we opened our doors in September 2016. During those years, we had public programs around the country, published two books and presented a series of exhibitions in our sister museum, the National Museum of American History.

2. You have cited your optimism as a driving force that fueled your leadership in completing the NMAAHC. How can Americans keep optimistic regarding racial equality?

Today, one cannot help but reflect on the history of race relations in this country. How far we have come and how far we have yet to go.

My family has sustained me over the years, both as a child and a husband and father in believing progress was possible. I have always believed the fundamentals in America: the rule of law, democratic institutions and freedom of the individual. Frankly, given my upbringing, I never understood that I couldn't achieve my goals. I guess I was just not smart enough to know I can't.

3. What can we learn from the history of the African American story that informs us on how we can best respond to the seemingly insurmountable problems we face today as a country?

There is nothing insurmountable in my view. We have, as a country, the ability to dream of a world that has addressed the many issues confronting us. We have a vision, we have hope. But it is not enough to dream. We must act. Civic engagement. Proposing and acting on real solutions is critical.

4. What single exhibit in NMAAHC most inspires you and why?

Emmett Tills' casket. There is of course the tragic story of this young man's death in 1955. His torture and mutilation. His murder became a rallying point for the civil rights movement at that time. But it is the story of his mother's efforts at the time and over the years that deserves our attention. In the midst of the horrific loss of her child, she fought to expose to the world the barbaric act committed against her son. She demanded the body of her son be returned to her in Chicago and asked for an open casket so all could see. She never stopped fighting for justice for her son, but when asked years later stated, "I have not spent one minute hating."

5. What was the largest obstacle you faced in taking the NMAAHC from an idea to a reality and how did you overcome it?

Convincing people that the museum was more than a dream. The ability, early on, to secure crucial financial support. When Boeing committed \$5 million early on, people began to see a future for our vision.

We also needed a team. I began with one staff person, no building and no collections. I had my colleagues at the Smithsonian to call upon for the use of their facilities and collections to begin to tell our story.

6. You assumed the position of Secretary of the Smithsonian in 2019 and in that role oversee 19 museums, 21 libraries, the National Zoo and numerous research centers and education units. Did race play a role in your ability to advance and, if so, how did you address that?

Yes, it certainly played a role. Being Black helped me gain allies and provided an opportunity for the Smithsonian. But was it a "diversity" choice? No. The fact that I am an insider, that I had successfully navigated the Smithsonian over a long period of time, was a critical factor. I also had a keen appreciation of the variety of expertise and knowledge within the institution and the challenges faced by the administrative and curatorial staff. The greatest challenge for anyone is to know the place.

7. What advice would you give to Americans who are horrified by the death of George Floyd and are asking what they can do to help foster racial equality?

The death of George Floyd was clearly a tipping point. Social media has effectively kept the world informed and helped activate communities across the globe. How we respond in each of our communities, how we engage with each other and continue the conversations is critical. History has shown us that we can become a better society- but only if we collectively demand it from each other and from the institutions responsible for administering justice. We all have a role to play.

Sheila P. Burke is a senior advisor and the chair of Baker Donelson's Government Relations and Public Policy Group, and previously served as Chief of Staff to Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole. Prior to joining the Firm, she served as the deputy secretary and chief operating officer of the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum and research complex, where was responsible for the overall operations of the 19 individual museums and galleries, the National Zoo and nine research facilities located in Washington, D.C., five states and 150 foreign countries with revenues of approximately \$1 billion and an endowment of \$1 billion. During her seven-year tenure at the Smithsonian, she oversaw the completion of the National Air and Space Museum's Udvar-Hazy Center, the National Museum of the American Indian, the renovation of the Smithsonian's Reynolds Center for Art and Portraiture, and was involved with Mr. Bunch in the initial planning for the National Museum of African American History and Culture.