

Interview

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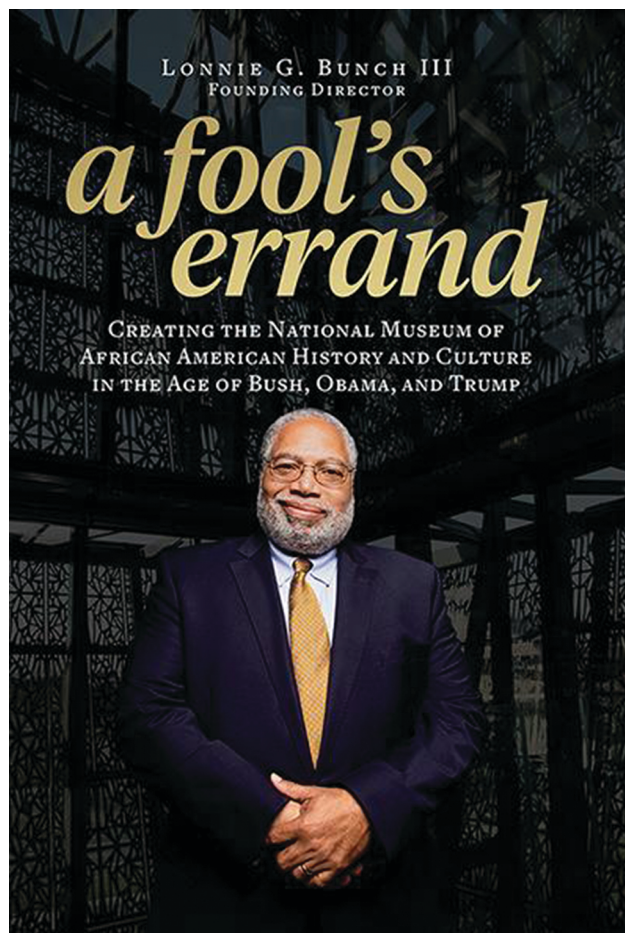
“A Fool’s errand”: Lonnie Bunch and the Creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture

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For decades, Lonnie Bunch III has been among the most prominent museum curators and directors in the United States. He worked at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles (1983–1989), at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (1989–2000), and as the president of the Chicago Historical Society (2001–2005) before returning to Washington, DC in July 2005 as the founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture which opened its doors in September 2016. On 16 June 2019, Lonnie Bunch became the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian.



Coming to work on that first day in July 2005, director Lonnie Bunch and his one member of staff, Tasha Coleman, found the door to the small office locked. It was suite 7102 of the office and hotel complex L'Enfant Plaza close to the Mall in Washington, DC, and no one was there to help. Bunch was able to convince a member of the maintenance staff to loan him a crowbar. He literally took things into his own hands. The “break-in” is one of the many revelations Bunch describes in his recently published book on the creation the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). The long and difficult journey reached its destination with the museum’s dedication on September 24, 2016 in the presence of Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush. The broken doorframe – of which unfortunately no image exists – was a reminder of a rocky start, but it can also be seen as symbolic of the many obstacles that were to be overcome. Bunch’s determination was vital to the success of what he calls his “fool’s errand.” It required the support of a dedicated team – however small at the beginning – and the “complicity” of many others in Congress and the White House, of donors of money or objects, and many others. But it also needed someone like the unnamed member of the maintenance crew whose crowbar helped to open one of many doors.

The NMAAHC might be the Smithsonian museum that has been the longest in the making, beginning in 1916 with a demand made by the newly created “Committee of Colored Citizens” to honor black soldiers by building a “National Negro Memorial” in the capital. In 1929 a respective resolution was approved by Congress and signed by President Calvin Coolidge, but nothing came of it. In the late 1960s the idea of a national museum of African American history and culture was first discussed in Congress, but the initiative did not pick up momentum until the mid-1980s. In 1988 Congressman John Lewis, the legendary civil rights leader, introduced a bill to build it as a new Smithsonian museum. It would take another 15 years for Congress to finally endorse the plan for a National Museum of African American History and Culture. In December 2003 President George W. Bush signed the law, and he always remained a major and important supporter. When it opened its doors to the public in 2016, Lewis spoke of “a dream come true.” (233)

By all measures, NMAAHC has been a spectacular success and truly “stands out” on the Mall with all its white and marble buildings and monuments. [Figure 1] What started as “a museum of no: no staff, no site, no architect, no building, no collections, and no money” (8) now boasts a magnificent building and exhibition space. Visitors – many of them young, many African American, and many first-time museum goers – have been flocking to the new museum in much higher numbers than expected. So far, over five million have come. On average they spend more than five hours looking at the 3,000 artifacts, 3,500 photographs and images as well as 160 media presentations.¹ [Figure 2]



Figure 1: “I needed the building to have a darker hue that would symbolically remind all who visit the Mall that there has always been a dark presence in America. A presence that was often overlooked or undervalued. This building would be a visual antidote to that historical amnesia.” The National Museum of African American History and Culture, next to the Smithsonian National Museums of American History and Natural History (right). Copyright: Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC.



Figure 2: The three-tiered corona was inspired by West African Yoruba culture and art, the bronze-colored aluminum panels were modeled on ornamental ironwork made by slaves in Louisiana und South Carolina, and the main entrance serves as a reminder of porches used throughout the African diaspora. Copyright: Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC.

In his book *Bunch* book describes in detail and in an entertaining and revelatory way that does not gloss over mistakes and failures the long process of deciding on a site, picking the architectural firm and the designers, the team of researchers and curators, the many meetings with politicians and possible donors, conflicts inside the Smithsonian, building up a collection, deciding on what to include in the exhibits and on the story lines, etc.

In bold letters the website announces “A People’s Journey, A Nation’s Story.”² That is the touchstone of the NMAAHC’s mission: to not be “a museum by black people for black people, not an ancillary narrative, but the quintessential American story,” (28) or as Obama put it: “African-American history is not somehow separate from our larger American story, it’s not the underside of the American story, it is central to the American story.” (236) It is a story consisting of many stories that were often omitted but should be remembered “using history and culture as a tool, [to help] a nation come to grips with its tortured racial past.” (X)

That story begins in Africa and Europe, and 70 feet below ground, in the first of three history galleries: “Slavery and Freedom 1400–1877” followed by “Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation 1876–1968” and “A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond”³ to “convey a sense of rising from the depths of the past to a changed present and a future of undefined possibilities.” (171) Among the main objects are pieces of a slave ship, a segregated Southern railway car and the casket of Emmett Till.⁴ The *Culture* und *Community Galleries* that occupy the two top levels of the building feature African American achievements in music, culture, sports, the military, fashion, and many other fields.

[Figure 3 and Figure 4]



Figure 3: Southern Railway Car, No. 1200. Copyright: Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC.



Figure 4: Chuck Berry's 1973 Cadillac Eldorado and The Mothership. Copyright: Alan Karchmer/NMAAHC.

On June 16, 2019, Lonnie Bunch became the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian. He is the first African American and the first historian in that job. Instead of running just one museum, he now oversees 19 of them, as well more than 20 libraries and many other units of the Smithsonian, including the National Zoo, making him one of the world's most influential cultural managers.

IPH Editors Andreas Etges and David Dean (IPH) interviewed Lonnie G. Bunch III (LB) on September 17, 2019.

IPH: In your book you frequently mention how stories you were told, meetings you had, objects you were given touched you emotionally and made you cry. Reading about that also brought tears to our eyes. Can you share one or two of those moments with us?

LB: Because I had to travel so much to fundraise – over 497 separate trips – I was in every airport around the world and the one superstition I have is shining my shoes. I don't like to get on the plane without my shoes

being shined. So, I know folks in every airport. And I was coming back from Texas, flying through Dallas. It was a stormy day, and I got my shoes shined. Normally when I go into a town, I try to get people excited about the museum, e. g. give interviews on TV. So the guy shining my shoes looks up and says “are you the museum guy from Washington?” And I said “well, yeah,” and he doesn’t say anything else, nothing. He finishes shining my shoes and I pay him, and he basically takes the money and then he says, “take it back and keep it for the museum.” Now I got to be honest, he is a shoe shine guy, that guy can’t afford to do that. So I literally pushed the money back and he said to me in no uncertain terms: “don’t be rude to me. I do not understand exactly what is going to be in this museum, but it may be the only place where my grandchildren will understand what life did to me and what I did to life.”

To me the success of the museum was tied to that aim. If I could make sure that those stories were told of average people who were really the strength of the movement of a people, of a country, then I knew I was doing right. That always kept me motivated.

And the other one is just literally I can’t walk down the street without somebody coming to me and saying “thank you for what you’ve done,” sharing their own personal story and then hugging me and crying. Literally, yesterday, I went to the grocery store and this woman stopped me, my ice cream is melting, and she won’t let me go, because she wanted me to know that she felt that the Museum allowed her to understand her mother for the first time. So, in a way it’s really been much more than I could have ever hoped for.

IPH: When you were hired as the founding director, the museum owned zero objects. Today, more than 3500 are on display and of course many more are in storage. Can you tell us more about the decision to collect objects and have object-centered displays? As you know there are other museums like the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, that had very few objects and opted to become an *ideas* museum, telling stories through displays and interactive elements rather than objects. Why did you want to go the way of getting objects?

LB: I really felt it was important to think about “What does it mean for the Smithsonian to do a twenty-first century museum?” We actually had long conversations about it: well, we don’t have collections should we not make it all virtual, use the digital? But I felt really strongly that that would work in many places but not at the Smithsonian. At the Smithsonian you come to see the Greensboro Lunch Counter,⁵ the Ruby Slippers,⁶ the Wright Flyer,⁷ and I felt that if we didn’t have significant artifacts we would be seen as second class.

I also wanted to stimulate a conversation in the country about history. And I thought that if we went around the country and help people preserve grandma’s old shawl or that nineteenth century photograph that would, at a local level, stimulate that kind of conversation. So we needed collections. What I didn’t know was how to find them. And I basically knew we didn’t have the money, so I wasn’t going to be able to buy them. And I knew that even if I went to everything the Smithsonian had they could only give me fifteen or twenty percent of what I needed. But I never wanted this museum to be the only place in the Smithsonian where Black artifacts resided. So that meant we had to go find new ways and that’s when we “stole” the idea from the *Antiques Roadshow* and went around the country and people brought out their stuff and we found amazing art.

IPH: What are some of the most special objects that you now have on display?

LB: After one of these treasures programs somebody called me to say that he had material from Harriet Tubman the great abolitionist. Because I realized I could find things from average people, working-class tools or ID cards from black Rosie the Riveters⁸ during World War II, but I wasn’t sure we could find stuff from people who were really crucial, pivotal figures in history. And when this guy called me and said he had Harriet Tubman material, I have to be honest, initially I said, well, you know, I’m a nineteenth century historian and there was just nothing available. It turned out this guy was a huge former football player and he begged me to come to Philadelphia. And when I did, he brought out this tiny little box – he was a big guy, like 6’5” – and he brought out this little box and he pulled out photographs of Harriet Tubman’s funeral that no one had ever seen, and I’m suddenly amazed. And every time I would say “Oh, my goodness, I’ve never seen anything like that,” he would get excited and he would punch me. That was the way he showed his enthusiasm. He pulled out thirty-three things and punched me every time. So, by the end, I’m crying and I’m not sure whether it is because of the pain of the punches or the amazing stuff we’d found. But then he pulled out a shawl that was given to Harriet Tubman by Queen Victoria in terms of a global recognition of what she had done. There is a famous picture of her wrapped in that shawl three days before she died. And there the shawl was in front of me. It was the most moving thing I think I could have ever experienced. And then panic hit me over: “Oh my God, he’s going to want money, and I don’t have any money” and so I danced around and finally I said “So, what is it going to take to get this to be part of the Smithsonian?” And he said: for you to carry the box with you when you go home. That kind of generosity is what happened over and over and over again and that’s what I think made the museum special.

There is a second one that really moved me. There was a man named Joseph Trammell who was born free but had to register every year to get his freedom papers in Virginia. Without those freedom papers he could be sold into slavery and taken back. When he got his papers he realized he had to carry them on him all the

time, and he was worried that hard labor and sweat might rip the paper. He was not very good with his hands and he created what he called a hand-made tin wallet, just a piece of metal that would protect the freedom paper while he worked every night. And when he came home – according to family lore – he would take the paper out and put it on the mantelpiece and talk to the family about freedom, the fragility of freedom, how important freedom was, how valuable freedom was. The family kept that piece of paper and that tin wallet for five generations, but then they heard of the museum and gave it to us. So, we were able to have stories about important people that you have heard about, but also these stories that really talk about freedom in an intimate, family-driven way.

IPH: Creating the museum also became a much more personal story for you than you had expected, even connecting you in different ways with your own family history. Can you also share some of that with us? And there's also the recurring theme in your book about the smiling ancestors.

LB: As a historian I never talked about ancestors, it was never part of the work I did in other projects, but when I came back to Washington to start the job somehow my ancestors were in my head. I could imagine my ancestors smile, and so for me it became this personal way of connecting with my ancestors, even though I have no idea who they are and I will never know. The most emotional moment for me, where it really hit me, was when we were at the opening and there all these famous people were on the stage – President Bush, President Obama, Chief Justice Roberts – and I'm feeling like, what am I doing up on that stage? And when it was my turn to speak I suddenly was terrified, really nervous, was the speech any good? Was I going to be able to do this? And as I got to the podium people were calling out my name – Lonnie Bunch. Now I'm Lonnie Bunch III so the notion was suddenly there that they were not honoring me they were honoring my grandfather and my father, people who lived lives and died but wanted to make the country better. And when I realized, or felt, that they were calling my father and my grandfather, all my nervousness went away. It was almost as if the notion of ancestors had come full circle. Here were people that I actually knew, were being honored by the work that we do.

IPH: The NMAAHC is the only history museum on the Mall that has a chronological narrative, tells the story beginning hundreds of years ago – and several floors down. That works very well.

LB: That was a conscious part of the decision and the struggle. I have never in my career crafted an exhibition that said people will follow it the way I wanted them to. But as we thought about the African American experience, we realized that most people didn't know much. But I didn't want visitors to work on the narrative, I wanted to give them a narrative so they would have to think about, "Oh, slavery is central to understanding America" and not: where am I going? How do I get from A to Z? It was really important, and it was a risk because nobody else in the Smithsonian does it that way. And I was worried a lot about a *forced march*. What I ultimately did was find a compromise. I gave you a *forced march* through three hundred years of narrative history. In the other areas there is a little more flexibility. But I felt that if people do not understand the narrative, then they are not going to get anything else. And I wanted people to realize that the transformation of a country was not a simple linear moment and if you had a victory that victory was at risk in the future. The way we built the ramps, it's not a linear march, it's up and back, up and back.

IPH: The exhibit is truly great, and the museum building is magnificent. But looking back, are there things you would do differently? Any missed opportunities?

LB: Not everyone in the Smithsonian wanted this to happen. There was great support from some folks, but some worried, "Is this going to hurt the Smithsonian?" I probably should have done a better job of reaching out and collaborating, because once I heard that I said "the hell with them, it's us against the world." That probably made it a little more difficult to get the support we needed. The other thing that I would do differently would be that I would have pushed Congress and the Smithsonian to give more support early on. There was money I had to raise to even get people to do the pre-building design and I think I could have saved a couple of years if I had done that. Even if you raised private money there was no mechanism to make sure it would be matched. So every year I had to think in two different ways. I had to think about what to do to get capital money, building funds, plus how do I get money to hire staff? Because at a certain point you have to have people to do this work. It really was a juggling exercise, and there were a couple of years where I probably should have gone for capital rather than staff, but I was just trying to keep this moving. The most important thing for me was to show each year that there was some progress, because I felt that if I had a bad year, if we treaded water, if we couldn't reach a fundraising deadline, there were reasons for people to say "See, it's not going to happen" and we could lose support.

And regarding the building: The aluminum with the bronze patina is beautiful, but I should have demanded that the building ultimately would be all bronze, instead of listening to architects who had decided against that

because of the weight. But in terms of the actual exhibitions, the people I hired, I wouldn't change it at all. I think we all grew by that process, and I am unbelievably satisfied because so many people got to shape it and make it what it is.

IPH: After what you call "A fool's errand," you could have taken it easy, get a nice job at a university or do some writing, reading, travelling. Why did you throw your hat in the ring to become the new secretary of the Smithsonian, taking on a possibly even bigger job?

LB: I'm asking myself that question right now! [laughter all round] I mean, in all honesty, I should have said, "You know what? I've done it. I know what my legacy is. Let me now teach a little, hang out with my grandchildren." But I'm convinced that I did it for a real reason and one reason only: building the museum was really the gift a lot of us gave to America and to the world, and there's nothing else I needed to do. I know what my legacy is. People say "you were the first African American Secretary of the Smithsonian." I realized that if I could become Secretary it would open doors for other people, that it was more than a symbolic gesture. But also, the Smithsonian, the staff at the Smithsonian, my colleagues here, that's the place that has given me so much. It's given me a career. It's given me amazing opportunities to travel the world and meet folks like you. So taking on the Secretary of the Smithsonian is really about me thanking the Smithsonian, helping the Smithsonian come to be the place it ought to be in the twenty-first century, and for as long as I can do this, it is about giving back to the institution and making it better.

IPH: Since 1996 there has been an initiative to build a National Women's History Museum in Washington, since 2004 to add a National Museum of the American Latino. Is the realization of those projects on your agenda? And if so, what chances do you see of at least getting them started during your tenure do you see?

LB: I think that it would be impossible for me as someone who built a national museum to say we shouldn't build any more. I would be supportive of building new museums if we receive the resources that we needed, if we had processes in place that would allow us to be able to help people realize that building a museum, building a building, is the beginning not the end of an endeavor and that if we could be sure that Congress would also help the Smithsonian regarding its maintenance backlog, helping with facility issues. If those and other things could be done, then I can build a museum that would be worthy of the culture, worthy of the Smithsonian, and maybe almost as good as the African American museum! But they would have to meet those criteria to make that work, otherwise I think it would be impossible to perform.

IPH: One of the approaches to telling the story of American history, the story of America, is the founding of separate museums – the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the proposed separate institutions for the histories of Women and Latinos. New Zealand's new national museum, Te Papa, is a bit like the old treasure box type museum where you start with the natural history, you start with the land, and then you talk about the people whether Maori or Pakeha [white settlers], and so on. And then you engage in modern history or contemporary political issues or whatever. So it's a different model of a history museum or just a museum of the nation. Canada has a whole series of museums, separated in terms of themes: there is a history museum, a war museum, a science museum, an aviation and space museum and so on. Could you comment on the advantages and disadvantages of all these different ways of telling national stories?

LB: Well, first of all, obviously I've visited so many museums, and in a way what Te Papa tried to do was something simple, brilliant but simple. When it opened, it was really focused on Maori and the British. It didn't talk about new recent immigrants. Framing everything through the Treaty of Waitangi was brilliant, but it didn't leave the doors open for what happened later, the complexity. Part of what I think we're doing in the States is we're not saying that these are separate stories. We are giving the public portals into what it means to be American, that they can get that going to the science museum and see what American technology does in shaping our identity or they can go to the American Art Museum or you can come to the African American museum. In some ways – even though it is a young country – the complexity of the United States, the challenge of diversity, really is too big for one museum. I was a senior person in the National Museum of American History and for years I struggled trying to figure out how do I tell these stories, how do I get people to understand? What I realized is that, much like Civil War battle sites in the United States, each with a particular perspective, but each one is talking about the Civil War. People come to the Smithsonian to experience history in different ways, people will wrestle with questions at the Smithsonian that they don't wrestle with in other places. So, for me, that's why I thought it was important.

IPH: It is a multicultural, multi-perspective approach across different museums. Do visitors make comparisons between the different Smithsonian history museums?

LB: Very much so. We, both the Smithsonian generally but then the African American museum specifically, did a lot of testing, interviewing people, trying to understand their experience through the rest of the Smithsonian. If you asked me what I wanted the public to get when they went to any museum, our job is to help the public embrace nuance and complexity. Often they get simple answers to complex questions, but I believe strongly that if we can help people understand that it is about the shades of grey, about the nuance and complexity, boy, then aren't we helping them become better people to deal with the challenges they face? That was really one of my desires to help build this new museum and challenge the Smithsonian. The real issue is how do you ensure that the museums are constantly talking with each other, engaging with each other so that they are really building on that relationship. Right now the African American Museum is a model, and so what I'm hoping is that the museum scares, stimulates, encourages other Smithsonian museums to step up. If there was a separate Latino museum or a women's museum, you would be helping people understand our collective identity, not just our individual one.

IPH: In the book you mention things that failed, mistakes you made, emotions you showed, your insecurities and you also do not shy away from making critical remarks even about certain people, though very tactfully, e. g. about Donald Trump; you call the death of Trayvon Martin "murder;" you talk about white supremacists. Do you think both your personal revelations and your political statements could backfire now that you are Secretary of the Smithsonian? You obviously did decide to not edit them out of the book, right?

LB: I wrote the book before I was Secretary and while I think I handled everything in a tactful manner, I always heard the great historian John Hope Franklin in my ear say to me that the job of this museum is to tell the unvarnished truth and the job of the historian is to have the courage to tell the unvarnished truth. I thought that I should not edit out things that actually happened. So, would it have been easier on me if I had? Sure. And maybe a smarter person than I would have said "oh, let's not tell anything about the last year," but once I decided to go down that road I thought it was important to tell those stories.

IPH: The Smithsonian as an institution, especially the history museums, never fully recovered from the Enola Gay exhibit in the mid-1990s.⁹ This is not to say that there aren't many really good exhibits, but it seems as if often the rather safe topics have been picked. There has never been a major critical exhibit on the Vietnam War. The exhibit on military history in the National Museum of American History is very patriotic starting with the very problematic title "The Price of Freedom" which even covers wars against Native Americans. In your book you write that it is important for the National Museum of African American History and Culture and for the Smithsonian to engage in the public sphere in a way "that brings reason, knowledge, and contextualization to the contemporary challenges faced by America. Actions like this are not without risk to an institution that operates within a federal umbrella." In your museum you did take some risks. Is the Smithsonian under your leadership now ready to take more risks again, especially in a very difficult political climate?

LB: First of all, I kind of disagree with your assessment that the Smithsonian never got over the Enola Gay. In some ways the Enola Gay made the Smithsonian better in ways in which you might not see. It made the Smithsonian think much more effectively about working with the media, getting its message across. It made the Smithsonian go from government relations in the form of having tours for spouses to something much more sophisticated in terms of working with Congress and the like. I think that part of my success was to be able to, (1) be clear from the very beginning that we were not to shy away from controversy, but, (2) working with fine political agents who recognized that it's not enough to be smart. You are going to get beat up, but if you could find thirty or forty people in Congress who will say "that's a good idea" or "I like that" that puts out the fire. And one of the things I worked hard at was to really learn how to work effectively with the media. You never master the media, they are never your friends, but I learned how to develop relationships so that I could get the story out that I thought would counter that. I think that there's no doubt that there are people who are worried that "oh my God, is the Smithsonian going to be political?" Well, the Smithsonian is always non-partisan, but every exhibition's political, just by the nature of what we choose. My hope is that I am not trying to push the Smithsonian down the path of controversy. The Smithsonian is such an amazing resource that it really ought to help the public deal with today and tomorrow and not just yesterday. And if that simply means crafting opportunities to engage around difficult issues, and some of it is very explicit, some less so. The really wonderful exhibition that opened at the Natural History Museum called Deep Time which was really about dinosaurs, a new way to think about dinosaurs, but it is also about the impact of climate change on the world. That's the kind of thing we do, to contextualize, problematize, let people see the best of our research. Are we going to get beat up? Oh God, yes! I might be coming to you for a job in a year or two, but the reality is I think the Smithsonian is too valuable, has too many connections, too much research, has the ability to convene and corral the world, it's too valuable not to help a country find the tools to live thereby.

IPH: Canada had its own controversy following Enola Gay, the Bomber Command controversy. Anticipating the problem, the museum had actually consulted a lot with veterans, they'd gone backwards and forwards

on wording, what was going to be exhibited and so on. In the end a veterans' group did complain that they were being branded as war criminals. The Conservative government of the time intervened and it led to the resignation of the museum director, a changing of the word panel – even though many scholars said the new changes were actually better. But although curators don't shy away from dangerous or complicated topics they are always sort of self-censoring, whether it is in terms of panel text or the selection of objects. Have you seen a similar sort of internalizing effect?

LB: I think there is no doubt that really from the Enola Gay on, and maybe even earlier, the biggest challenge for a place like the Smithsonian, or for any place that is a big museum, is the challenge of avoiding self-censorship. The only way you avoid that is when you have leadership that encourages people to explore the difficult issues. I've always said there's no story that a good museum shouldn't tell, but there are ways that a story might not be told, depending on politics, etc. That is always going to be a challenge, and in part it is good for scholars to say "well, wait a minute, what does this mean? What does this say? How is it going to communicate?" The key is to be able to say "OK, I'm still going to go forward with x because it's important to do this or that."

There is always going to be that surprise, always something that you can't anticipate. For us there was the challenge of Bill Cosby.¹⁰ You can't tell the story of American entertainment without telling the story of Bill Cosby, one of the first integrated TV shows, *I Spy*, it's complete comedy, it's family stuff. But obviously Cosby was not the person we thought, the person projected on television. So, the question was should Cosby be in the museum? And I got a lot of pressure from people saying "No, he shouldn't be." And my argument is I can't tell the story of entertainment without telling the story of Cosby. Now I felt an obligation at the time to say on the label which I wrote, and he wasn't found guilty at that point, but I said basically the allegations meant that his legacy was forever damaged, and he will no longer be the Bill Cosby that we once knew. I thought that was fair, that we were able to tell his story in terms of broad entertainment, but also recognized that the personal issues had shaped his legacy. It's a slippery slope, but negotiating and navigating the slippery slope is what a museum is supposed to do and if you're not comfortable with that, then this is the wrong business for you.

IPH: At the meeting of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Kyoto, Japan in early September there was a major controversy about a proposed new definition of what a museum is. According to the website of the Changing America 1968 and Beyond exhibit in the NMAAHC, it shall, "Encourage visitors to think about the ways we can help make America a more just and equitable place by providing historical context for honest discussion about race and social justice." That seems to resonate absolutely with the new proposed definition. You were in favor of adopting the new definition that didn't pass – it was postponed. Could you tell us a little bit about your experience in Kyoto and what you think was at stake?

LB: The challenge for me was that I got into this process late. They had already written the new definition, there was a process in place. My concern was, that the debate around wording that hurt museums in Europe, especially in Germany and France in terms of what a museum is, did it hurt them with their ministries of culture etc., or was it really about opposing this sense of museums as places that are essential to social justice and that they play a contemporary role not just a historic role? The new definition of museums wasn't crafted the way I would have preferred it, it wasn't crafted in a way that you could get people who normally wouldn't like that idea to be involved in it. But I support the notion of saying that museums have a social responsibility, a responsibility to reflect diverse voices and points of view, that they have an obligation to be more than palaces of treasure, palaces of stuff. They have the opportunity to be places that use collections for stimulating the imagination, not just furnishing a room. So I really liked thinking about using definition in a broader way. I was really disappointed that the vote was postponed. There was a process in place, and if you didn't like the definition, then vote it down.

I really wanted to stay out of it, but I just couldn't let what I thought was a wrong go by. I am disappointed that it didn't get the formal vote. I am disappointed that I don't know what the process is going forward. I would have been very comfortable if you'd have said, "you know, this is not really written as well as it should be, let's take another year, let's put together a different group to rewrite it, and then let's bring it back a year from now rather than three years from now," I could live with that. It has also caused a schism in the organization. It seemed as if Germany, France, it seemed as if Europe was opposed to this idea. It seemed as if countries that were opposed to the United States were against the idea, even though this wasn't an American definition at all.

IPH: Initially it looked like it was essentially the old traditional European museums versus everybody else, with the exception of countries like Sweden and Denmark, but the UK was also sort of ambivalent about the whole thing. Canada was both in favor of the postponement and had declared publicly it would vote against the new definition if the vote wasn't postponed. And the Australians did actually propose a compromise, not to accept the definition but to accept the principles of the definition ...

LB: And that was brilliant! I thought the hero of the day were the Australian delegation, they brought real passion, but brought compromise.

I was really disappointed not so much that it didn't go yea or nay in my direction but that there were really smart attempts to find a middle ground to keep this moving forward and those voices were basically shouted down. Those who opposed were really organized, they had had meetings, they had come with language and it's almost like those who are in favor felt "oh, we're good people, we're doing the right thing, isn't that enough?" And so, I mean the fact that those who opposed, you know, had a panel with seven people speaking, so I was impressed with the organizational skill of those arguing for the old definition, quite impressed!

The loser is the leadership of ICOM. They did not tell us where we need to go, let us make sure the process seems to work well. They've now got me in the fight, so I'll see how it goes moving forward.

IPH: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us.

Notes

1 Visitor Stats. <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/about/stats>. The museum decided to use of free timed entry passes during peak hours to cope with the masses of visitors. They are available here: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/visit/passes>.

2 <https://nmaahc.si.edu>.

3 The Museum App provides a good introduction and also features significant objects. See also the "virtual tour" in Aaron Steckelberg/Bonnie Berkowitz/Denise Lu, A Peek at the Mall's latest Addition: Tour through the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in: *Washington Post*, September 20, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture/guided-tour/>.

4 In the summer of 1955 while visiting relatives in Mississippi, the fourteen-year old African American Emmett Till from Chicago was brutally murdered by white racists. His mother decided to show his mutilated body in an open casket, a watershed moment in the black freedom struggle.

5 The chairs were used in one of the most famous desegregation sit-ins when, in 1960, four African American college students sat down in the "whites only" section at a Woolworth counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.

6 Judy Garland (as Dorothy Gale) wore the slippers in the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

7 The "flyer," built by the Wright brothers, was used in the first successful flight of a powered airplane in 1903.

8 Women working in factories and shipyards during World War II were immortalized in songs and posters as "Rosie the Riveters."

9 Facing protests from members of Congress and veterans' groups, the exhibit "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War" in the National Air and Space Museum was cancelled. Director Martin Harwit resigned.

10 In September 2018 the actor was found guilty of sexual assault.