

**Written Statement of Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution  
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Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I originally joined the Smithsonian in 1978 as an educational specialist at the National Air and Space Museum. Subsequently, I served as associate director of curatorial affairs at the National Museum of American History and as founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). In 2019, I became Secretary of the Smithsonian, the same year I was last able to testify to this committee.

I have been so gratified by the continued support of Congress, the Administration, and the American people. At the Smithsonian, we honor the crucial responsibility we have in advancing the civic, educational, scientific, and artistic life of this nation. The broad support we receive enables us to engage and educate people on important topics like the essence of the American experience, the diversity of the world's cultures, the sustainability of the planet, and the nature of the universe.

Our founder James Smithson never set foot in the United States, but he wanted to give a gift to the nation he admired for its spirit of discovery, democracy, and dynamism. The clarity and simplicity of his vision of an institution "dedicated to the increase and diffusion of knowledge" still propels us today.

During the decade of Congressional debate to decide how Smithson's vision should be realized, many ideas were suggested: to make the Smithsonian Institution a national university, a scientific institute, an observatory, a library, or a museum. Ultimately, Congress would take the idea of a national university off the table, but those initial ideas—education, scholarship, scientific research—are all still deeply embedded in what the Smithsonian is and does. Our educational programming is becoming more formalized, with widespread efforts underway to reach every home and classroom across the country. And our scientific endeavors are as varied as helping capture the first image of a black hole to running a century-long reforestation project. Not only does our science provide incredible bang for the buck to the American people; it's work that can only happen at the Smithsonian, work that researchers around the world rely upon.

As I look ahead to the future of this indispensable institution, I'm excited about what lies ahead for the world's largest museum, education, and research complex. The nation's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2026 will be a launching point for the transformation of the Smithsonian into an institution that can better meet the needs of the nation. That pivotal event will not only serve as a celebration of what we've been, but also give a glimpse of all we can be: a nimbler, more relevant, and more effective institution, proving that the Smithsonian matters today and tomorrow, in everyday life and in every corner of the country.

To coincide with that event, we will have programming that both celebrates and contemplates who we are as a nation and the Smithsonian's place in it. And we will invite Americans to explore all corners of our complex histories and find ways of moving forward together into our shared future. The renovated National Air and Space Museum should be fully open to the public in time for the commemoration, and I have asked our teams to work toward the goal of temporarily opening the Castle to the public for the celebration as well.

Since I last appeared before this committee, a stretch of historic events has challenged us all. We have endured a deadly pandemic, racial and social strife, more extreme weather related to a rapidly changing and more volatile climate, and instability around the globe. As did the entire nation, the Smithsonian has had to navigate these events.

When the pandemic hit, it proved what I already knew when I became Secretary: our talented and dedicated people were up to the task, providing resources and expertise in a time when it was needed most. The moment was an inflection point. In response, we have become a more effective, responsive, and representative Institution, a tremendous reservoir of knowledge for the American people to dip into, even—or I would argue, especially—in moments of crisis.

To take the lessons learned during the pandemic and apply them to every aspect of the Smithsonian, I introduced a five-year Strategic Plan in the winter of 2022 that dovetailed on previous plans and progress. It outlines our aspirations, priorities, and planned impact as we continue our transformation to better serve the public and meet the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing world.

Today, I'd like to tell you a little about how far the Smithsonian has come since I last testified, how your support has helped us achieve much on behalf of the American people, and where I think we are headed.

One of my goals as Secretary was for the Smithsonian to increase our reach in education, in scholarship, in scientific research. I believe we should be in every home and classroom in the country. It is an ambitious goal, but one I think is possible.

One of the main ways to reach more people is to continue becoming a more digitally adept institution. Nothing replaces the authentic objects we display, but we need to reach millions who cannot visit us in person, using all the digital tools available to us. One of the main areas in which we can most readily apply technology is through the digitization of our collections.

Our Digitization Program Office is leading the way with efforts like the collaboration between NMAAHC and the Getty Research Institute to digitize 4 million items from the Johnson Publishing Company Archive, one of the most extensive photographic collections documenting African American life from the 1930s onward. A pilot project digitizing 9,000 items from this collection has just been completed, and we will digitize the remaining collection over the next couple of years.

We have also digitized 3.8 million specimens in the US National Herbarium housed at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), making it the first fully digitized herbarium in the

United States. Using a digitization conveyor system, the project created 2.8 million new label transcriptions and revealed 80,000 new taxonomic names that the museum did not realize were represented in the collection.

With more than 157 million specimens and artifacts in our collections and more than 2.3 million library holdings, digitizing them is a massive undertaking, which is why we are exploring the use of artificial intelligence and optical character recognition to increase the pace at which we can transcribe collections information from analog records.

We also created the Office of Digital Transformation, the first Smithsonian office dedicated to developing and implementing an Institution-wide digital strategy. By leveraging state-of-the-art resources and innovative internal and external collaborations, the Smithsonian can help more people everywhere experience our scholarship, research, and collections in new and exciting ways.

Although digital technology can greatly enhance our reach, we can also use no-tech and low-tech approaches, taking advantage of existing networks and cultivating partnerships to invite new audiences to use Smithsonian resources. We are determined to build trust with Americans from all walks of life, including those who are unable to visit the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. One example is our rural initiative, which is working to reach communities often overlooked in the national conversation.

By exploring current, relevant issues in rural America, we are providing resources to help those communities build resilience. In the years ahead, we will expand our programming and services to collaborate with and learn from rural and Tribal communities in the United States. Through this initiative, the Smithsonian will provide space for dialogue, prioritize diversity, help identify and root out bias in our collections and programs, and form partnerships around the country.

Since I last spoke to this committee in 2019, one of the consequential developments for the Institution was the passage and enacting of bills to establish the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL) and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum (SAWHM). After an extensive almost two-year site selection process, we are awaiting legislative action on the optimal sites we identified.

NMAL and SAWHM will help the Smithsonian further reimagine what new museums look like in a post-pandemic world, incorporating a digital mindset from their inception, applying efficient processes in design and construction, and developing a comprehensive funding model to carry the museums through the next decade. They will also expand the meaning of the American story and help us better serve all audiences by adopting an audience-focused approach to program development.

Highlighting the stories of American women and Latino Americans is vital to fulfilling the Smithsonian's purpose. Based on the success of NMAAHC, we know that visitors to our museums and websites are best served by seeing American history through many lenses.

When we were building NMAAHC, we created a gallery in the National Museum of American History (NMAH) to demonstrate the value of the museum and give us a chance to test out ideas and get feedback from the public. The same principle underpins the Molina Family Latino Gallery at NMAH.

Recently the gallery has received criticism for one of its exhibitions. As a museum, education, and research complex, we strive to create educational experiences and programming based on scrupulous scholarship that considers multiple points of view. Meeting this standard is a challenge we continually strive for.

Our exhibits are made stronger when they incorporate diverse points of view, and we value the feedback we have received from Congress and the public. Constructive criticism only helps make the museum better in the long run. That is why I had the founding director of NMAL, Jorge Zamanillo, conduct listening sessions and visit Latino communities across the United States to understand how best to portray the full picture of Latino history and culture, one inclusive of the diverse geographies, backgrounds, political viewpoints, and generational differences that comprise the American Latino experience.

It is essential to the Smithsonian's mission that we help the nation have informed and civil discourse on important topics, and that means confronting controversial topics. As long as what we offer is driven by rigorous and diverse scholarship, I will always support inspiring dialogue, not inhibiting it.

I am confident in Jorge's leadership and the expertise we have at the Smithsonian to accurately tell a robust story of the American Latino. For more than twenty years, we have strived to increase the Latino presence and tell their stories throughout the Smithsonian's museums, collections, research, and programs. Those efforts have expanded with the addition of the Latino Gallery and will do so even more when NMAL opens its doors.

This is a moment of self-reflection for all institutions, including cultural ones. When we consider the objects in our collections and the ways we present narratives based on those objects, we must think about our ethical and moral obligations.

As the United States' national museum, education, and research complex, the Smithsonian seeks to set a standard for ethical practices. That is why we adopted a formal policy for ethical returns and shared stewardship with communities represented in our collections. Building on the decades-long work of the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian, it authorizes Smithsonian museums to return collections to their communities of origin based on ethical considerations, including how they were originally acquired.

It is also why we put together a Human Remains Task Force to determine the best way to repatriate the human remains in our collections. The majority of these were amassed decades ago, many of them unethically. The task force's recommendations are expected at the end of the year and will guide our policy, the first of its kind. It will set a new standard not only for

repatriation, but for interrogating the problematic museum practices that drove these collections in the first place.

If we are going to continue our transformation into a truly modern, nimble institution capable of meeting the expectations and needs of our audiences, we must also consider the state of the buildings and collections spaces that house the nation's iconic artifacts and scientific specimens.

With your support, we are nearing completion of the revitalization of the National Air and Space Museum. About half of the building is currently open to the public with brand new exhibitions. We anticipate principal construction to be completed this summer. From there we will begin reinstalling artifacts and gradually increase public access to the building as the refreshed exhibits are completed. Just as the building originally opened its doors for our Nation's Bicentennial celebration, we will welcome visitors celebrating our 250<sup>th</sup> commemoration.

We continue to make progress on other Mall buildings. We have awarded a contract to revitalize the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden and the Smithsonian Castle closed earlier this year for its much-needed revitalization. These three buildings represent a significant portion of our maintenance challenges, and their revitalization will address many of our most pressing maintenance needs.

The overall maintenance backlog continues to grow as inflation increases our cost assumptions, Capital projects are ongoing, and our buildings continue to age. Managing our facilities needs is an ongoing challenge, and we are on the right path. Since becoming Secretary, the President's Budget request for the Smithsonian has steadily increased maintenance funding and addressed our most critical needs through Capital projects. Additionally, I have insisted on a thorough building by building analysis to precisely target our resources.

It is our responsibility and priority to ensure that our museums, research centers, libraries, and educational centers are maintained and cared for at a level worthy of these national landmarks.

As I look to the future of this hallowed Institution, I think we are positioned to do great things. I am more confident than ever because I have seen the resilience, determination, and creativity of the Smithsonian community.

As we approach the nation's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2026, it is a chance for us to celebrate all the dimensions of the Smithsonian that make it such a quintessentially American institution. But it is also an opportunity to recognize that what began as a gift to the United States and has been sustained by the support of so many is really a gift to the American people. This milestone will be a fitting occasion to give back by launching a host of new initiatives, programs, and exhibitions that show our value to the country. It will also be a momentous occasion not only to look to the nation's past, but to what I am confident will be a brighter shared future in which the Smithsonian will be indispensable.

With your support, we will build on our resources, expertise, and trust. We will restore our aging buildings while bringing two new museums to life, expanding the American story. And we will chart a bold new course for the Smithsonian that strengthens our shared future.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. Now I am happy to answer any questions you have.

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