LONNIE BUNCH
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Lonnie Bunch
Secretary
Smithsonian Institute
Interviewed by John Maggio
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Total Running Time: 32 minutes and 14 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

Secretary Lonnie Bunch interview, take one.

JOHN MAGGIO:

Good? Speeding?

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Lonnie Bunch

Secretary

Smithsonian Institute

Interest in history

01:00:16:05

LONNIE BUNCH:

What got me interested in history was photography. I was--it was--my grandfather died the day before I turned five so I was less than five years old. And he took me down into the basement, he was looking at a book. And the book had pictures of school children that were roughly my age. And he said, "This picture was taken a hundred years ago and more than likely those kids are now gone." And I was stunned. You know, kids looking at my age. And then he said lines I've never forgotten.

01:00:41:12

LONNIE BUNCH:

He said, "Isn't it a shame that people could live their lives and die and all it says is, 'Unidentified children'?" And that kept with me, so I began to look at photography as a way to understand what people's lives were like, and it really motivated my interest in history and it became--history became my tool, my weapon to change the country. So really, photography was really the first thing that got me interested in the past.

Life Magazine

01:01:13:23

LONNIE BUNCH:

I think for many Americans, *Life* was the way that they saw their life in a visual way. Many people read the newspapers, listened to the radio, but it was

Life Magazine that made real things you had heard about, that made concrete the stories of- of the community. And so for many people *Life* Magazine was the- was the Bible that said this is real because it's in *Life* Magazine, and you can believe it because you see these images and after all, photography never lies.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Remember, photography was something that not everybody did or everybody took, you know, little shots with their Brownie cameras, but the reality is, to see the quality of the images, to see the diversity of images. You couldn't see that anywhere else, and so for many people it really was *Life* Magazine that helped them understand what was going on in America.

Gordon Parks' work at *Life* Magazine

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, I think what's so important is *Life* Magazine reflected the America that everybody thought that it was. An America that was White, an America that was full of exotic stories, but America that wasn't as diverse. And what I think is so powerful about Gordon Parks is that in both a subtle way and a not so subtle way he said, let me help you understand an America you haven't seen.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Let me help you realize that you can't understand yourself as a country, as an American without understanding some of these other images, some of these other things that he brought forward. So for me, in a way, what he did with *Life* Magazine was give us complexity, give us nuance, give us a fuller understanding of what America really was and what it could be.

01:03:01:01

LONNIE BUNCH:

What he did was, he didn't just capture images of African Americans. What he did was he gave them a sense of humanity. He didn't allow the visitor to think of them or the reader to just think of them as sort of exotic stereotypes. You suddenly were drawn into their lives. You wanted to understand a little more, you wanted to understand what happened to them. And in a way what he was able to do was to get people who cared little about African Americans to suddenly care about them through the power of his imagery.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

You could make an argument that what happened at *Life* were really the darkest moments of the African American experience. I would argue, however, that rather than see it that way I think you had an America that really knew so little about the African American experience that the ones he really helped focus on were tough, were difficult, but were true and I think he

gave people a more complexity--a better sense of who this community was. But I think there's no doubt in my mind that for some people that fit into the stereotypes.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

All Blacks are Harlem gangsters, so I think he--where I feel he did a service was not allowing you to stop and say, oh they're all Harlem gangsters, but suddenly you began to understand maybe what led them down that life or gave a sense of what their lives were like. So I think in some ways he added levels of complexity and levels of understanding that you might not have gotten in other photography.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Think about it, whenever you read something about somebody African American in the newspaper, it was always a negative story. My father us to always say that he would read the newspaper and, you know, somebody White could create a huge crime, it would just say his name but if somebody Black stole a loaf of bread it would say Joe Jones, a negro. So in a way, what Gordon Parks was doing was floating in an area, in an atmosphere that really didn't allow people to understand the fullness of Black life, and even though you could argue we would have liked to have seen other images that he had

taken, the reality is I think the fact that he allowed people to see more deeply into the story that he was going to tell is really a major contribution.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Which is why I would argue his work is so strong, because the writing, the editing could have watered it down, could have allowed us not to see complexity and nuance, but his imagery was so powerful that, I think, it overcame horrible writing, it overcame bad choices by editors because of his eye and his commitment to finding humanity in every frame.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

A photograph for Black America was a way to prove your worthiness, to prove that you were worthy of citizenship, and that's why there is a real desire to see at the very time when so many racial stereotypes and caricatures are--you begin to see photographers craft a different view of Black life, so that rather than see Blacks as always poor or tattered, you'll suddenly see in the late 19th century a middle class aspiration, a middle class affectation.

01:06:22:01

LONNIE BUNCH:

So in some ways, what's crucially important is African Americans recognize that a photograph was more than a photograph. It was a document that

allowed people to think they understood the African American experience. So they wanted to make sure they countered the standard image of poverty, of broken bodies, and they wanted to show that there were middle class aspirations; and therefore they were worthy of the citizenship that had been denied them.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I think, remember, many African Americans came out of slavery, so families were splintered, you didn't control your destiny. One of the most powerful things in the 20 years after the Civil War is you see advertisements in Black newspapers around the country saying, "I was sold from my mother in 1857. If she's still alive, please reach out to me." So, what these images are, recognize how important family is, how important to suggest that despite the circumstances you're in that you come from some place stable. And that in essence what these images say is, "I may be poor, but I'm loved. I may not have the fairness of this country, but I've got a family, and we will do better because of that family."

01:07:40:14

LONNIE BUNCH:

And in some ways, the photography– the photo is in a way it makes concrete your dreams, it made concrete your connection to family, and that's why it's so powerful. You know, I won't waste your time, but, you know, after I opened

the museum, a woman called and said that her godmother was 90 years old and knew my family. But I decided to go visit her, she's about 40 miles away, and it turned out she had a photograph of my grandmother taken in 1910 that I had never seen because I had only known my grandmother as an old lady.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And suddenly to see this photograph from 1910 made me realize there's so much about my grandmother I didn't know. I never saw her as a young one, I never saw her smile. So for me, the photograph is really the object that makes us believe. Makes us believe in family, makes us believe that we can understand people whose lives we'll never know.

Ebony Magazine

01:08:43:15

LONNIE BUNCH:

I think what *Ebony* wanted to do was it argued that 95% of the imagery of Black life was negative, or only talked about a small percentage of that community. What they wanted to do was to follow that notion that Blacks were worthy of equality by focusing on middle class respectability, by focusing on celebrity. What they really wanted to do in a conscious way is to

say, “You think all Black people are poor? Look at these images of movie stars and singers.”

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And that in essence what Ebony does is––and it’s an important corrective. What Ebony says is, Black middle class people are just like White middle class people. Same expectations, same hard work. And that was so important in the late 40’s and early 50’s, to kind of--because remember, the goal was an integrated world, and to say that if there was a middle class Black community that sometimes you even admired, that would make integration easier.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I think that in some ways, the power of Gordon Parks' imagery, in some ways, not only is not counter to Ebony, but it really completes a complete picture. And so in a way, just like you can criticize *Ebony* for avoiding some of the darker parts of the African American experience, I think marrying some of the work that Gordon Parks did with *Ebony* gives you an understanding of the richness and complexity of Black America.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

In some ways, I would have been surprised if he worked at *Ebony* for a long time because talk about control. But I think part of what is so powerful to me

about Gordon Parks is he can touch so many different genres in a way. I mean, I know a lot of photographers that are really good with fashion and lousy with other parts of it. And- and his ability to bring his eye so that he--again he finds the nuance, the beauty, and the complexity in every image whether it's an image of fashion or if it's an image of a gang leader. I think that's so powerful to me about what Gordon Parks was able to do.

Gordon Parks' work

01:11:02:13

LONNIE BUNCH:

I think there are two documents that capture photographically Black America in the 20th century. One is *Ebony,* with all the photographers there, and the other is Gordon Parks. In some ways, he put himself in situations where he could explore poverty, where he could explore the rural landscape. He put himself in situations where he could understand the impact of the migration from the south to the north, and really humanize it by looking at families in Chicago. And so, in many ways he then takes that, the notoriety that he begins to build up to be able to shoot the Civil Rights movement, to be able to talk to and have an image of Eldridge Cleaver and Kathleen Cleaver.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

To be able to say that during his period as a photographer he documents the sweep of Black life in a way few people have. And I think that's what's so powerful–– that's why it's a–– that's why his imagery, that is both a great document of a history, but it's also this amazing unfolding. Whenever I look at his work, even though I know it so well, I'm always surprised by what I find. I didn't realize by looking at that angle, I understand more about the gang leader or I understand more about, you know, the charwoman cleaning in the building here. So for me, he gives the sweep, but he never rose away from going deep and humanizing, and I think that's what's so powerful about his work.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

In some ways, what that was able to do was, especially for a younger generation, make real those images because for many people, yes, black and white somehow blunts some of the pain, but the color you really see it. The sign jumps out at you, you can't miss it. Um, and so in a way what I think it does is the color imagery brings us into that scene more than black and white, and I found myself, every time I look at his color imagery, his color--I find myself saying, "I want to know more." I think if I could just turn the corner, I'd learn a little more about that community. And so, in a way, that curiosity that his photograph also stimulated is really special because a lot of photographs give you the answer. He gives you some answers, but he- but he

tells you there's more you've got to think about in order to understand this fully, which I think is very powerful.

Emmett Till

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LONNIE BUNCH:

So, Emmett Till is a fourteen year old boy from Chicago who is going down to Mississippi to visit relatives. His mother warned him about what it would be like because you're a kid from the city and you're going to the south and be careful. Emmett Till ran afoul of the- the racial boundaries of the time. He went into a store with his cousins, he either whistled, had a lisp, said something. His cousins were terrified that something would happen. Two days pass and then all of a sudden one night two men come in, take him from the bed, and a few days later his broken body is found in the river.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And initially the governor of Mississippi didn't want to allow the body to come back. His mother demanded that it came back. And then, as she told me, that it was initially in caskets and chained so she couldn't look at it. She demanded they open it up, and when she saw the body she was devastated because she said the only way she could tell it was her son was by the ring on his finger and the lobe of his ears. And she said that she– her first thought

was, “Oh my God, this is horrible.” And then she realized that her son, to use her word, was crucified on the cross of racial injustice, and she felt that the world needed to see this and so she kept the casket open.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And *Ebony* and *Jet*–– *Jet* published the photograph. It was horrible, but what it did is, as she said, the world needed to know what they did to her son. And maybe more powerful to me was her commitment then to use the darkest, most painful moment of her life to help reinvigorate the Civil Rights Movement. So Emmett Till becomes both a cautionary tale for kids like me who grew up in the north about going to the south, but he also becomes the symbol of why you have to fight racism because any of us could be Emmett Till.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And so, I think that photograph really spoke about the power of photography. It spoke about, in some way, the permanence of photography, and it also talked about the political impact of what a photograph can do. And so, I think that was, without a doubt, one of the most important images of the 20th century.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

You know, and I was very close to his mother in Chicago and- and the things she would say. I mean she would tell me about––when you walked into her house, she had that big picture of Emmett Till with that bad looking tie, was right in the middle of the living room. So everywhere you went he was with her, and she said to me that for fifty years she carried the burden of Emmett Till and now it was my turn, which is why I did the exhibit in the museum. But it really stems from that photograph.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

What I realized is that as somebody who was at American history and other museums, we tend to talk about the grand narrative and forget to humanize it, so I wanted to use that photojournalism to humanize these stories so that everybody had to engage rather than graze by. I wanted you to be arrested by whether the gaze was looking at you. The image was at the level that you had to confront it. So it was a conscious decision to say, my job is to humanize history and the best way to do it is through photography.

Ella Watson

01:17:15:10

LONNIE BUNCH:

Probably, the first image that I knew was Gordon Parks was that photo of Ella Watson because I remember thinking, "What an amazing image." First I

was–– you know I had studied sort of Grant Wood and American Gothic and so I caught that, but then when I realized what it was saying so powerfully is that here is a woman who in some ways is the backbone of America, alright?

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Doing the work that doesn't––that is unaccredited, and yet she is standing in front of a flag in front of an America that didn't believe in her, that didn't embrace her. And for me, I found myself wrestling with the contradictions there. That I wanted to know about who this woman was, I wanted to know more about an America that wasn't fair to her, so I found that an amazing, intriguing, and troubling image. That to this day, it is the only image I have in my living room.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

It's the only image I have, because I want to look at that and I want to marvel at the strength of that woman. I want to also remember an America that wasn't fair to that woman, and then I want to remember that without Gordon Parks capturing that, none of those emotions would be with me, and so in a way, it is a simple image but it's an image that is so powerful and that I am connected with almost every day. It's literally the only one in my living room besides my kids.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

In some ways–– what I love about it is it's the quintessential Washington that nobody knows, right? Because people don't think of Washington as a segregated town, as a southern town, as a town with rigid lines that you don't cross. And there is that image, and as he then told the story, he really deconstruct Black Washington, deconstruct the federal city in a way that I had never seen before. And so it struck me that a few images could be so transformative, such as what he did with her.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I would argue that what Gordon Parks does is use that anger. Use every slight to basically shape his photography. Not the kind of, you know, anger that destroys, but an anger that helps us understand. An anger that humanizes people, an anger that says there are people who are left out of the narrative and I'm gonna make sure they're no longer left out. And when you look at his whole career, from photography to film, you realize that what he was doing was using those moments where he remembered the pain, he remembered the hurt, but he remembered the humanity.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And that's what you see in so much of his work. So I think a lot of artists use their anger. Some let the anger get ahead of them. You know, Roy Decarava,

you know, sometimes his anger got ahead of his photographs. But I think Gordon always simmered rather than boiled over.

Gordon Parks' mentors

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison. So what- what happens is you then have people of letters who write visually, that help him think about, how do you encapsulate that now photographically. And so in some ways there is a––you know, there's an Ellison-like feel, there's a––sometimes a Langston Hughes improvisation to the work that he does.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

You know, I don't want to make too fine of a point, but I really do think that what it taught him was that there's depth and complexity in these communities, that there is not a single way to understand the African American experience, and I think in some ways, that ambiguity is in his work. And some of that ambiguity is definitely traced to an Ellison, to a Langston Hughes, it's traced to living in Chicago. You see it all the time. And so I think that like a good artist, he dipped into the reservoir of his community and the

people he met, and then reshaped that into the sort of photographic outpit that we love.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, they were storytellers, right? And so he realized that usually one image doesn't tell a story. It conveys a point, but it doesn't tell the whole story. And I think that what he learned from, especially Ellison, who was really concerned about sort of how do you shape a narrative, how do you shape a community's view of itself ? I can see how that would inform what Gordon Parks did and what Langston Hughes–– Langston Hughes had the joy of discovery, right?

01:22:10:10

LONNIE BUNCH:

I mean, his writing is trying to help him understand the array of Black life, right? Whether it's the urban experience, whether it's the musical experience. So that notion of improvisation and tapping your toes to a culture is also something you see in Gordon Parks' work.

01:22:31:15

LONNIE BUNCH:

I think what Gordon Parks does is he really captures that ambiguity, right? He captures that sense that it's not the Jim Crow South so you don't have the kind of violence that you have in the Jim Crow South, but you have another violence; the violence of segregation, the violence of poverty. And so in a way,

what I think he does is he––he punctures the myth of the northern promised land. He makes you understand that it is a different experience, but it's an experience that has as much pain, as much loss, as much sorrow as you do in the Jim Crow South.

The Learning Tree

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LONNIE BUNCH:

You know, I had seen bits and pieces of *The Learning Tree* (1969) over the years, but I literally sat down and watched with a woman named Sandra Sharpe who was in the piece who was a friend of mine in LA. And I remember just being taken by the simple way he looked at the way he was treated or mistreated. And what I thought was so powerful was that for many people who thought that a kind of rural landscape, a place like Kansas, you know, wouldn't be ripe with pain. It was. And as somebody growing up in Jersey, growing up in an Italian town, you know, it really resonated with me because I thought of all those moments when discrimination hit me in the face and I didn't expect it to.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And so, I thought that was really one of the most powerful pieces I saw because there are very few pieces to this day that are really coming of age

pieces that really talk both about the challenge of adolescence and the challenge of racism and the challenge of what racism does to many people in your own community. I thought that was really very powerful and one of my favorite films.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

It was––I can't think of many other films that gave me the complexity of this–– of a community like that and I thought framing it through, basically, as coming of age really made it accessible to many of us. So I thought it was one of the stronger pieces he did. Yes, looking at it today––in fact I looked at it the other night just to see and yeah, it could use a little subtlety, but in 1969, America needed to be less subtle.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I mean what a talented––I mean really it's almost embarrassing his riches. I mean, his first film is really good and you find yourself thinking, "What a talent. Isn't it enough just to be a good photographer?" Isn't--he's very special.

Shaft

01:25:18:18

LONNIE BUNCH:

I, to this day, have a poster of *Shaft* (1971) in my office, right? And I used to hold––I used to have it when I was in the museum behind the door so that when people gave me grief, I opened the door so they could see Shaft. So, for me it was going to see the movie and being immediately taken––one of the things that offends me is when people say that it's a Black Exploitation movie because I don't think it is. I think what it is is one of the richest documents of the challenge of urban life, and there's nothing wrong with having heroes.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And to me, the story of *Shaft* gave me––I think I first saw it as, you know, a 17 year old kid or something and I remember thinking that's what I want to be. I want to be able to sort of control my own destiny, to take care of myself, to have somebody love me. And so for me this was a great counter to all the other images that I saw of Blacks even in film in 1970, '71. So it was really something that for a teenager was really a model of what was possible. I never could be Shaft, but I knew that you didn't have to be Uncle Tom either.

01:26:31:03

LONNIE BUNCH:

I think you wanted that Shaft look. And what you wanted to do was have the theme music, right? So, we used to always joke that one of the things that I needed as director of a museum here was my own theme music and I said, "I already got it, it's called the theme from Shaft."

01:26:50:02

LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, look at the way he walks. First of all, you see the environment, right? You get a sense of that urban tough, but you see the confidence in his walk and the pace of it. There's a sort of pace that is sort of saying I can strive through just about everything. And, you know, with that coat he just looked, you know, as we used to say in the old days, he looked bad as hell. And so for me I think we all wanted to be Shaft.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

It's interesting. What I always thought––I never thought about Gordon as Shaft, but what I did think about was what Shaft really symbolized to me was artistic freedom. That he was able to be his own person; dress the way he wanted, love the way he wanted, and in a way, that is Gordon Parks, right? To be able to say, I want to express myself in a variety of formats, in a variety of platforms, but I want to also ask myself all the time, "Who am I? Am I true to myself, am I true to my community?" And that's what you get from Shaft. So, it's interesting to think about Gordon as Shaft. I don't know how Gordon would look in that leather coat, though. But I could see intellectually.

Gordon Parks' legacy

01:28:11:02

LONNIE BUNCH:

You know, who I think carried it was John Singleton with *Boyz n the Hood* and some of his other work because––not because it was urban, but that it was about individuals and families and trying to sort of figure out how do you survive in an environment that's not conducive to survival. So, I always thought that John Singleton's work was very much in keeping with that. Um, I also think that in some ways that Ava DuVernay's work, which is this sense of trying to understand Black life, but to explode it and to make it bigger than what it really is. And so, I think those are two people that I see as sort of standing on the shoulders of Gordon Parks.

Gordon Parks' relevance today

01:29:04:21

LONNIE BUNCH:

Oh, I think that in a way the work of people like Gordon Parks inspired new generations to recognize the power of the image itself, and that in a way the challenge now is because of social media and the like, the question becomes, did the images stand out or do they blur together? And I think the best photographers harken back to Gordon Parks and make sure they're telling a narrative story, make sure the image is very powerful. And so, I think that what Parks reminds us is that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, but that vigilance only comes from a visual way of understanding what we're

experiencing and what needs to be confronted, and I think contemporary photographers are really standing on his shoulders when they do that.

Museum opening

01:30:00:05

LONNIE BUNCH:

It was almost harder to open the museum than to build it. You know, figuring out who gets to speak; is it President Obama, President Bush, the Chief Justice of the United States, John Lewis? I think there are two things: One is that John Lewis spoke first, and talked about how this museum was the fulfilment of the Civil Rights Movement. I'm moved, just about crying and he sits down and he's done, so he's comfortable. He raises his feet, he's blocking me in and then they call me and I'm like, "Congressman." He won't move. So I gotta climb over, I'm thinking I'm gonna fall on my face, that's all people are gonna see.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

And as I walk past President Obama and President Bush, I got really scared, right? And as I walk towards the podium, I heard people calling my name. And I real––I'm Lonnie Bunch III and I realize that they were calling my dad and my grandfather, that they were in essence reminding people that there are people who are famous only to their family, but their names still need to be known and once that hit me, my nervousness went away. And I thought it

was an amazing day to see those thousands of people. In fact, maybe the most amazing thing was after it was over to have people come up to me and talk about what the museum meant to them, what that day meant. And so, it was, without a doubt, one of the best days of my life. One of the scariest days, but one of the best days.

Informal conversations with President Obama

01:31:33:22

LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, he--he knew how important it was for this museum to open under his tenure, so he used to always say to me, "Are you sure a brother's gonna get to cut the ribbon?" That's what he said to me all the time. But what he said was: This is the quintessential American story, and that this is the story of everybody that was on that stage regardless of race, regardless of age. And in some ways he always told me that the most important thing we did was now realize that as long as there's an America, this museum will have a chance to help people understand themselves in a fuller, richer, more diverse way.

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