

# ‘Protest Is the Highest Form of Patriotism’

A conversation with Lonnie Bunch, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, about the long tradition of black protest

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The protests against police brutality that have swept the country in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd have gone on for weeks. Although there is a long tradition of black protest against police

misconduct, the strength of the outcry, the diversity of the protesters, and the sheer volume of demonstrations have illustrated a profound shift in public opinion about the existence of racial discrimination in policing, and what may be necessary to address the problem.

In the interest of learning more about what this moment might mean, I recently spoke with Lonnie Bunch, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, at an AtlanticLIVE event. What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation, which was broadcast live on Tuesday.

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**Adam Serwer:** Since George Floyd was killed by a police officer in Minnesota on May 25, we've seen weeks of protests. Why do you think this is happening now?

**Lonnie Bunch:** I've always shown that protest is the highest form of patriotism. It's where people demand a country live up to its stated ideals. And I think the pain that came with the murder of George Floyd—but with a long history of this pain—I think people said, *I'm tired of mourning. Let me do something besides mourn. Let me challenge a country to live up to its stated ideals.* And I think that's what you're seeing in the protests.

**Serwer:** Some activists and black leaders have said that this moment feels different from, you know, previous protests. Obviously there have been outcries against police brutality before—I'm thinking of Ferguson, Baltimore. Do you agree that this moment is different? And why or

why not?

**Bunch:** I think there's some parts of this that are different, but let's be honest: This is part of the long arc. What's clear is that this is part of an arc that says that, as long as America has viewed itself as a democracy, it's also been a place of racism, of systematic racism, and discrimination. So for me, this is something that I've seen many times before, through the eyes of the past. What's different this time is that, one, you're seeing such a diversity of people around the world clamoring for America to do better, clamoring for the struggle against police violence to be taken seriously. But you're also seeing, I think, people who I've never heard speak before. I see police officers, some members of police departments, and police chiefs raising questions about, we can do better, we can do differently. So I am hopeful, but I'm not sure I'm optimistic, because we've seen this happen, time and time again.

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AtlanticLIVE: How Did We Get Here?

Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie Bunch spoke with *Atlantic* staff writer Adam Serwer about this moment in history, and how protests can influence policy and create a more equitable America.

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**Serwer:** So a few political commentators have compared the situation that we're seeing today to the riots and uprisings that we saw in 1968. Do you see a parallel, or do you think this moment is different?

**Bunch:** Well, I think that there's no doubt that as a result of the long,

hot summers of the 1960s, what you see is America asking fundamental questions about the African American experience. You see the birth of black-studies programs. You see movies and books that are written about the African American experience. And you see legislation that leads to important changes—Civil Rights Act of '64 down to the Fair Housing Act of '68. So you do see that there was a time of angst and change. And I think there are some parallels. But yet, I have not seen the concrete product yet that I saw coming out of 1968. And the one thing that worries me about the parallel with 1968 is that, when all was said and done, what is really one of the strongest legacies of 1968 is the kind of law-and-order notion that Richard Nixon campaigned with that led to, I would argue, the kind of mass incarceration that we see today.

*[ Read: How did we get here? ]*

**Serwer:** There's a long history of black protest associated with police brutality, as you mentioned. Why has this historically been such a flash point for conflict?

**Bunch:** Well in some ways, the police, both officially and extralegally, have always been used to help control the African American community. If you look at the period of enslavement, you see that violence was one of the ways that you control this enslaved population. And that begins to then be transferred to the extralegal police and then the formal police, as a way to control this community. And this community has always been the source of labor in the prison system. It's been the sort of area where you see time and time again, the

excessive police violence, whether it is in the 19th century, into the 20th century. So this is a long history of people recognizing that the police, instead of protecting the black community, often are the part of the country that attacks the black community. So I think in ways, for me, part of this is a long struggle that has led to everything from reforms in policing to oversight committees, but the reality is that for African Americans, whether it's the 19th century or today, the police has always been something that one is more fearful of than appreciates. And I think every black man in America either had the conversation with his parents about how to avoid being a victim of the police, or has at some point run afoul of the criminal-justice system.

**Serwer:** How, historically, have police responded to black protest, and how does the president's response factor in?

**Bunch:** I think that usually black protests are seen as challenging the system, and the police are there to protect the system. And so I think that what you hope is that political leadership from the White House, through Congress, or at the local level, will recognize that law and order does not necessarily mean break the back of the black community. Law and order does not necessarily mean that it is the African Americans that bear the burden of this. What you really hope to see is that this is about fundamental change in policing, but also fundamental change in racial attitudes. That this is really about a broader notion of forcing a country to confront racism in all of its permutations and thinking very strategically, creatively, but candidly, boldly, about *How do you affect that kind of permanent change?*

**Serwer:** The protests have obviously been largely focused on police, but in your view, are they about something larger? Or is it that the context in which these police protests are happening is related to a bigger issue of systemic racism in our society?

**Bunch:** I think what's important is that right now the lens is on police, and rightly so. But if you step back, the aperture is bigger than that. It is really about systematic racism throughout, not just the police department, but many parts of the American system. It's also about saying that we have to revisit economic considerations, we have to look at how we ensure that the country really models the diversity it says it accepts. In many ways for me, I hope this changes the way the police do their business, but more importantly, what I hope it does is allow us to revisit and say, how do we help America, as Langston Hughes said, be America? How do we help a country live up to its stated ideals of fairness?

**Serwer:** When you look at the history of black protests, from the march in Selma to the sit-ins, how have black protests historically shifted the conversation or affected public policy?

**Bunch:** For me, protest is really important. I think it is protest that helps to hold cities, politicians, governments accountable. And so I am very interested in recognizing that historically, protests, whether it is the NAACP protesting against lynching, helping to create movements of black women and white women to push for anti-lynching legislation which unfortunately didn't pass. But nonetheless, I see these moments as the moments where America has been changed and can continue to

be changed. So for me, I would always argue that protest, especially African American protest, has really helped the country change. It's helped the country redefine citizenship. It's raised fundamental questions about economic fairness.

*[ Ta-Nehisi Coates: The case for reparations ]*

**Serwer:** So the president recently changed his plans to hold a rally on Juneteenth in Tulsa—which is of course the site of the Tulsa massacre in 1921—after there was a big backlash to his decision. As you mentioned earlier, you've seen a lot of examples of these protests. Are you seeing a wider awareness of the reality of black history specifically? The Tulsa massacre is one example, but are you seeing a larger awareness among white Americans or among Americans who are not black about the specifics of black history and the sort of nature of the oppression that black Americans have historically faced?

**Bunch:** What I hope comes out of this is a desire to understand and embrace our history. I think it's crucially important that, often, America is a place that's ahistorical or selectively ahistorical, and that it would be crucial to help people understand how the African American experience has shaped not just the black community, but shaped the American experience. It's a quintessential American story.

At a certain point my hope is that history gives people the kind of inspiration to challenge and to change, and it helps people understand that change comes from strategic activity, and it comes from resiliency, and it doesn't come without loss. So my hope is that people will

understand the role that African Americans have played and to dip into that reservoir of history, and to use that reservoir to help push change.

**Serwer:** You're one of the most prominent museum historians in the country, and we've seen a tremendous amount of media from these protests, from videos to photos. How do these images shape the public perception in response to the protests, and also, ultimately, our public memory of them?

**Bunch:** First of all, it's really important to recognize what a visual culture we are. And so therefore the notion of being able to see handedly the killing and murder of George Floyd was unbelievably powerful, because we have known these things have happened before, and we've seen things like the beating of Rodney King in the 1990s, but to now be able to both see it and to share it via social media, I think that really is something that gets people to understand that this is not just a single action or a single moment. And so I think that for me, it's important to recognize that part of the job of museums, for example, is to collect this moment. To make sure that this history, that the visual history of this, is collected so that we can tell the story now, but I would argue is going to be a crucial story to understand in 50 years. And so I think it's the visual aspects of this that make this real, that make it concrete for so many people. We can tell so many stories about the murder of African Americans, about discrimination, but to see it in live action, really, I think, is part of how a country is transformed.

**Serwer:** An audience member asks: Historically, how has respectability



politics been used against protesters and movements? What's the relationship between "civility" and racial-justice movements?

**Bunch:** I think that for a lot of people, we celebrate nonviolent protest. And I think that's what we want to see. And in fact, so many of the protesters today are nonviolent. But we also have to realize that protest takes a variety of forms. Sometimes we think of the long, hot summers in the 1960s and the urban unrest. And people said, *Well, how dare they break the law. How dare they loot.* Well, that kind of protest is really one of the few ways the voiceless feel they have power. And while I am opposed to violent protests personally, I understand that frustration sometimes pushes you over the edge. I think what's important for us to recognize is, let us not turn attention towards looting in a way that takes away what is the power of these protests, which are protests that want us to remember the murder of George Floyd. Protests that want to challenge the country to be better. And so, what I want to make sure is that while we acknowledge and are concerned about the looting, that the looting does not take center stage and move us away from what this really is, which is a clarion call for America to change. A clarion call for this to finally be that tipping point, that helps America live up to what it says it is.

**Serwer:** Do you think that this moment is going to lead to lasting change? Are you hopeful about where America goes from here?

**Bunch:** I'm hopeful, but not optimistic. I'm hopeful because as a student of history, I think about how African Americans dreamed of a world that no one believed existed. Dreamed of a world where there

wasn't slavery. That African Americans struggled to find ways to make segregation something that they could still find lives and happiness and family in, and yet found ways to challenge America to change that notion of segregation. So I look at this as African Americans as a people who believe in the resiliency and the possibility of change. So on the one hand, I'm hopeful. But because I've seen great leaps forward, but then those leaps stopped, I'm not sure how profound, how transformative, the change would be. I want to be proven wrong. I want to be able to say that this is the moment that the country made that great leap forward. But at this stage, again, I'm hopeful. I see some optimistic signs. But we've been here before.

**Serwer:** Secretary Bunch, thank you so much for joining us.

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