



Chairman Blunt's Opening Statement
Hearing to Review S. 959, Smithsonian American Women's History
Museum Act; and S. 1267, National Museum of the American Latino Act
November 17, 2020

I thank my colleagues for attending today's hearing and we welcome our witnesses, Mr. Lonnie Bunch, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution; Mrs. Jane Abraham, former Chairman of the Congressional Commission to Study the Potential for a National Women's History Museum; Ms. Eva Longoria Bastón, Actor, Activist and Member of Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Museum of the American Latino, Ms. CiCi Rojas, Chairman of the Latino Coalition; and Mr. Danny Vargas, Chairman of Friends of the National Museum of the American Latino, thank you all for joining us. We will also hear from Senators Collins, Cornyn, and Menendez for statements on their bills following Committee member statements.

This is Secretary Bunch's second appearance before the Senate Rules Committee and we are grateful to have him here with us. Secretary Bunch was appointed Secretary of the Smithsonian in June 2019 and what a first year it has been.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the institution to close all of its 19 museums' doors for the first time on March 14 of this year. The Smithsonian responded to this unprecedented crisis by boosting its already considerable digital resources. In May of this year the Smithsonian launched Smithsonian Cares, a new website that aggregates the Smithsonian's many online resources. In addition to Smithsonian Cares, the Smithsonian also offers its Learning Lab, an online tool created specifically for distance learning that allows teachers to create their own interactive learning experiences and a tailored curriculum. The Learning Lab was undoubtedly a valuable tool for the nation's educators as the Learning Lab saw a 500% increase in online traffic between March 2019 and March 2020.

Congress established the Smithsonian in 1846 through a bequest by British scientist James Smithson, who generously left his estate to the United States government to found "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge."

Now, almost 175 years later, the Smithsonian encompasses 19 museums and galleries, numerous research and educational facilities, the National Zoo, and a growing collection of 155 million objects and specimens.

We are here today to discuss whether the Congress should authorize the addition of two new museums to the Smithsonian's vast portfolio, specifically, a Smithsonian Museum of Women's History and a National Museum of the American Latino.

We truly have an expert witness on new museums here with us today in Secretary Bunch. Prior to becoming Secretary, he served as the founding Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). As the founding Director, Secretary Bunch led the 11-year process of planning and constructing the 400,000 square-foot museum that tells powerful stories from our history.

Like the stories housed in the NMAAHC, there is no question that the vibrant stories of the American woman and the American Latino are crucially important and must be told. Today, Latinos comprise nearly one fifth of the U.S. population, making them the largest ethnic minority in the nation. Similarly, according to the 2010 census, women make up 50.8% of our country's population. Both Hispanics and women have made invaluable contributions to every field, including medicine, music and entertainment, sports, commerce, American innovation, our armed forces, government, and that list is far from complete.

As I'm sure most of us here today know, it takes many, many, years to construct a new museum from authorization to ribbon cutting. In fact, the late Representative John Lewis' bill authorizing the National Museum of African American History and Culture was signed into law by former President Bush in December 2003 and its grand opening ceremony was held in September 2016. That 13 year lapse makes it critical that the Smithsonian gets it right when telling these stories now.

It appears that the Smithsonian under Secretary Bunch's leadership is well aware of the urgency of making sure these narratives are illuminated throughout the institution. In 2021 the Smithsonian is set to open a permanent, 4,500 square foot Latino Gallery, named the 'Molina Gallery', in the National Museum of American History (NMAH) thanks to a \$10 million gift from the Molina family and the Smithsonian's Latino Center continues to work to showcase the Latino experience.

At the direction of the Congressional Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Women's History Museum the Smithsonian launched its American Woman's History Initiative in 2018. The initiative has since raised \$10 million toward the development of exhibitions, programs, educational material, and digital content across the Smithsonian. Additionally, the Smithsonian Women's History Initiative continues to provide programming highlighting narratives of American women, like Her Story: A Century of Women Writers, which highlights 24 famed female writers and is at the National Portrait Gallery until January 2021.

I look forward to hearing Secretary Bunch update us on all of this important work. I also hope for a robust discussion with our outside witnesses on the Smithsonian's efforts to present these narratives to visitors as well as their plans for their prospective museums, should they be authorized.

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