

Smithsonian secretary steps down as Trump attacks persist

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16 September 2026

After more than a year of sustained attacks by the Trump administration, the secretary of the Smithsonian has announced he will step down.

Describing his departure as a retirement rather than a resignation, Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III has informed Smithsonian staff that he will serve out the remainder of the calendar year before moving on to a “new chapter” that will allow him to “continue to protect the integrity of the Smithsonian and to champion the importance of a history that illuminates and celebrates the complex story of our nation.”

Bunch has served as secretary of the Smithsonian since 2019. Prior to his term as secretary, he was the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and associate director for curatorial affairs at the National Museum of American History.

Far-right allies of the Trump administration were quick to celebrate the news of Bunch’s retirement. Republican Congressman Brandon Gill wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that “the days of using America’s museums to teach Americans to hate their own country are coming to an end.” Senator Josh Hawley wrote, “Good riddance. He should return his salary to the American people.” Writing in the *Spectator*, Roger Kimball invoked an anti-communist smear, complaining about Bunch’s “long march” through the Smithsonian.

Despite the right-wing campaign waged against him, Bunch insists that this pressure did not factor in his decision to step down. This seems unlikely. When PBS News asked Bunch about Trump’s criticisms just a week prior to announcing his retirement, Bunch sought to reassure his critics, saying,

The Smithsonian is not a place driven by left-wing crazy people. It's really a place driven by people who love a nation and who basically believe, like I do, that the great strength of a nation is that it's aspirational, and that, for me, Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence is so powerful because it challenges us to live up to certain ideals.

With Bunch stepping down, the Smithsonian’s Board of Regents will appoint a new secretary. Current board members include Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts and Vice President JD Vance, who hold *ex officio* positions, along with three congressional representatives, three senators and nine citizen regents, many of whom are current or former corporate executives.

While the Smithsonian is nominally independent, the Trump administration has already issued directives that would transform the institution into a center for promulgating Trump-approved history.

In Executive Order 14253, issued March 27, 2025 with the title “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” Trump instructed Vance to use his position on the board of regents to “remove improper ideology” from the Smithsonian’s “museums, education and research centers, and the National Zoo.”

The order further instructed the vice president to work with Congress to block the funding of exhibits or programs “that degrade shared American values, divide Americans based on race, or promote programs or ideologies inconsistent with Federal law and policy.” Finally, Trump ordered the Vice President to collaborate with the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader to appoint citizen members to

the board of regents who would be “committed to advancing the policy of this order.”

In May 2025, Trump circumvented Bunch’s authority over the Smithsonian to fire Kim Sajet, the director of the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, on the grounds that Sajet was “a highly partisan person” and a “strong supporter of DEI.”

In July 2026, the Trump administration produced a report titled “Saving America’s Story.” The report alleged that the Smithsonian had undergone an “ideological capture” and committed itself to “extreme political activism.” Among other offenses, the administration accused the Smithsonian of “anti-white activism,” “illegal alien activism,” and a pattern of confronting museum visitors with “materials intended to undermine faith in American institutions and the longstanding shared ideals of the American people.”

Bunch’s retirement will now be seized on as an opportunity for the Trump administration to press forward with its agenda for the Smithsonian. Attacking the institution in this way, Trump is walking through a door opened by the pseudo-left purveyors of middle class identity politics and their own distortions of American history exemplified by the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, a project which Bunch supported and helped to legitimize.

By depicting the United States as uniquely corrupted by the “original sin” of slavery, which supposedly lingers in the country’s “DNA,” the 1619 Project concocted an inverted American exceptionalism that Trump now opposes with his own American exceptionalism, one in which the United States can only be celebrated and the horrors of slavery minimized or erased. While posing as a defender of historical truth, the Trump administration is in reality carrying out a purge of the “un-American” from US history.

Only days after Bunch announced his departure, Trump took to his Truth Social platform to demand that the Smithsonian erect a 30-foot “Colossus statue” of George Washington outside the institution’s National Museum of American History and that the 11-foot bronze statue of Washington displayed at the Trump-sponsored Freedom 250 IndyCar race now be displayed at Flag Hall. That Trump would install his street-race Washington in a Smithsonian museum, plucked from an absurdly inappropriate and unserious commemoration of the United States’ revolutionary

founding, indicates the degraded character the Smithsonian Institution would assume should the president acquire even more power over it.



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