

The Freedom Medal

**On this, the fifth day of October 2019, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Freedom Medal is awarded to:
Lonnie Bunch**

We stand at a crossroads in our history. This year marks exactly 400 years since American slavery began.

Four hundred years in which black labor has built a nation. Four hundred years in which black minds have nurtured a rich culture of art, literature, and scholarship. And 400 years in which black souls have fought for their natural right to survive and thrive in America.

In 2019, as in 1619, the fight continues. The institutional racism born of enslavement continues to ripple throughout our society—generations of black lives taken by mass incarceration and rising maternal mortality, and generations of black opportunity stolen by racial wealth and income gaps.

What must never be forgotten is that the story of African Americans is the story of all Americans. And few have better told that story than today's Freedom Medal recipient—and my dear friend—Lonnie Bunch.

I've had the honor to know you since your days in Chicago, a city whose history and community you celebrated as president of the Chicago Historical Society. Your pioneering mind and talent for relationship-building were apparent even then.

But it wasn't until we brought the National Museum of African American History and Culture to life that the true magnitude of your foremost skill—storytelling—was understood.

Let me say, there's a reason why President Obama, Oprah, and LeBron all want you as their tour guide!ⁱ

You've said that if you weren't a historian, you'd be a filmmaker.ⁱⁱ You've moved millions with the journeys and histories that you've so meticulously documented—from the early days of slavery to the Jim Crow era to the Black Lives Matter movement.

You have told the story of America as it happened and as it's happening, recognizing the shared struggle of African Americans and celebrating the rich diversity and accomplishments of our community.

You have allowed all of us to see ourselves in ways we never have before, and you've made African-Americans proud of who we are, what we've done, and what we can do.ⁱⁱⁱ You've made us proud, period.

You've captured history and you've made it yourself—as the first African-American Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and in all of the achievements that led you there. I couldn't be prouder to call you a friend and to present you with the 2019 Freedom Medal.

ⁱ Crain's Chicago Business interview
<https://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20170126/ISSUE03/170129894/mini-profile-lonnie-bunch-national-museum-of-african-american-history>

ⁱⁱ Crain's Chicago Business interview

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ⁱⁱⁱ Linda Johnson Rice, quoted in *Jet* <https://www.jetmag.com/news/smithsonian-african-american-museum-photos/>