

The Great Force of History

Lonnie G. Bunch III

If I were to compile a list of intellectuals who have influenced the way I see the world, James Baldwin would be near the top. I spent my freshman year at Howard University immersing myself in his works including *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and *Giovanni's Room* (1956). His eloquent writing, his incisive critique of race and its relationship to American society, and his profound wisdom all made a giant impact on my thinking as a young man. It continues to do so today.

In my career as a historian, educator, and museum professional, I've always been guided by an ethos Baldwin concisely summarized when he wrote, "History ... does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do."¹

As we celebrate his 100th birthday, Baldwin's wisdom is as salient today as it was during his lifetime. What happened long ago continues to reverberate, shaping our current reality. The legacies of slavery and Jim Crow are still made manifest in the systemic racism and social inequities preventing us from reaching our full potential as a nation. And yet, we are told that we need not learn about that history, that our children should not read about it in their school libraries, that they should be shielded from knowing about ugly truths lest carefully constructed myths be scrutinized, questioned, and discarded.

All history is by nature revisionist, since new information and details can give new context to what happened in the past. But that contrasts with bad faith efforts to rewrite history to fit a certain narrative. Attempts to do so are nothing new, but they have accelerated in the past few years, a backlash to traditionally marginalized people demanding a more accurate telling of history. According to the UCLA School of Law's Critical Race Studies Program, at the time of this writing there have been over 800 efforts to ban information about race and systemic racism at the federal, state, and local levels since 2020.² These have included bans in school libraries of books by Black authors and subjects as well as restricting the teaching of African American studies.

After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Baldwin recognized how critical it was for the USA to reckon with its tortured racial legacy. In a July 1968 interview with *Esquire* magazine, he issued a stark warning, noting "All that can

save you now is your confrontation with your own history ... which is not your past, but your present.... Your history has led you to this moment, and you can only begin to change yourself by looking at what you are doing in the name of your history.”³ The events of the past few years prove our collective task as a nation is no less urgent today.

Through his writing, like Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois before him, Baldwin laid bare the “color line” too often rendered invisible. In so doing, he implored society to look itself in the mirror before it was too late. To me, he was the embodiment of the truths that history can be a weapon in the fight for equality and freedom, and that there is nothing more powerful than a people, than a nation, steeped in its history. As we celebrate his birthday and the legacy he left us, I hope we heed his advice and honestly interrogate our history so we can secure a brighter shared future.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt” (1965), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1999), pp. 722–3.
- 2 These numbers, from April 11, 2024, have been sourced from the “CRT Forward” Initiative, hosted by the UCLA School of Law Critical Race Studies Program, <https://crt-forward.law.ucla.edu/>.
- 3 James Baldwin, “How Can We Get the Black People to Cool It?,” interview in *Esquire* (July 1968), p. 116.

Works Cited

- Baldwin, James, “The White Man’s Guilt” (1965), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1999), pp. 722–7.
- “How Can We Get the Black People to Cool It?,” interview in *Esquire* (July 1968), pp. 48–53, 116.
- CRT Forward Initiative, UCLA School of Law Critical Race Studies Program, <https://crt-forward.law.ucla.edu/>.

Contributor’s Biography

Lonnie G. Bunch III is the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian. As Secretary, he oversees 21 museums, 21 libraries, the National Zoo, numerous research centers, and several education units and centers. Bunch was the founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. He chronicled the creation of the museum in his book, *A Fool’s Errand: Building the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama and Trump* (2019), and is the first historian to be Secretary of the Institution. In 2021, he received France’s highest award, the Legion of Honor.