

# Historical Significance of Black History Month

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The Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History has designated the entire month of February for the 52<sup>nd</sup> annual national observance of Black History Month. As activities are organized and initiated on our campus and throughout the country, it seems only proper to reflect upon the historical legacy and significance of Black History Month.

Black History Month was a product of the effort and dedication of Black scholars and Freedom Fighters who sought to confront the contradiction of being Black in "Democratic America." In 1926, Negro History Week was established as a reaction to American racism and as an attempt to defend Black humanity. It is difficult to recapture the climate and trauma of this era. However, it is important to recall that from 1890 through 1925 a Black American was lynched every 2½ days. Within the public and private sector, Black folk were continually dehumanized and relegated to the position of non-citizens and often defined as unwanted aliens!

The white academic and intellectual community was no different than the bulk of mainstream America. Peoples of African descent and especially "American Negroes" were classed as "a race unable to subordinate emotion to reason" and "negligible factors within the development of world civilization." Professor John W. Burgess, the founder of Columbia University's graduate school of political science and an important figure in American scholarship, amply advocated the "working definition" of Afro-Americans and people



Carter G. Woodson sketch by Ali Warren.  
Courtesy of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

of African descent throughout the world: "The claim that there is nothing in the color of the skin. . . is a great sophism. A black skin means membership in a race of men which has never. . . created any civilization of any kind."<sup>1</sup> A response to this climate and situation was generated by the talented Black scholar, Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson. In 1933, Dr. Woodson characterized the American educational community by indicating that "the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system has justified slavery, peonage, segregation and lynching."<sup>2</sup>

As the Director of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Dr. Woodson led the struggle to institutionalize Negro History Week and what was then called Negro history. As a Harvard-trained Ph.D. and a former Dean of Howard University, Woodson "dropped out" of mainstream

academia to devote his life to the scientific study of the Black community in America, Africa and throughout the world. According to the noted Black historian John Henrick Clarke, "Woodson believed that there was no such thing as 'Negro History,' in Woodson's view, that what was called 'Negro History' was only a missing segment of world history."<sup>3</sup> The bulk of Dr. Woodson's life was committed to restoring this "missing segment."

Carter Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916 and the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1937. Largely through his efforts, Negro History Week was established in 1926. With Woodson's direction and the many contributions of other Black thinkers, scholars and

Freedom Fighters, Negro History Week was initiated on a serious platform. Meetings, exhibitions, or lectures were geared toward analyzing or exposing contradictions confronting the Black community. The intention was not to initiate one week's study of Afro-American history. Instead, the observance portrayed the climax of a scientific study of Black people throughout the year. Over the years, Negro History Week has undergone a redefinition of terminology. Today this national observance has been expanded to encompass the entire month of February, referred to as Black History Month. This redefinition of terminology is a positive exercise in self-definition and possibly a reflection of political growth.

The toil, spirit, and creative beauty of the masses must dominate and dictate any historical affirmation of a people. Black History Month should not be the unconditional celebration of "great Negro contributions" to the American mainstream. It is important to record Black achievement in the sciences, humanities, the business world, athletic arenas, or any other area of endeavor. However, we must realize that Black folk in America (individually and/or collectively) have never received their just rewards for any contribution to America. Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, the first formally trained Black historian, realized this contention when he elegantly stated in 1903, "Your country? How come it's yours? Before the pilgrims landed, we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours. . . . Our song, our toil our cheer. . . Would America have been America without her Negro people?"<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, some feel that the only "relevant" Black History is a list of "great Negroes" who have received white credibility or recognition. The would must acknowledge the creative beauty and genius of those vast numbers of Black folk who have fought the day-to-day struggle of survival. A serious look must be directed toward the substance of the collective cultural and political experience of Black people. Survival skills and the collective ingenuity of the masses of Black Americans must take priority over an "elite list of great Negroes."

History is a potent and powerful tool. A significant portion of the struggle for Black liberation must take place within the intellectual arena. We must understand that the world is controlled by ideas. Dr. Woodson sufficiently supports this position when he indicated that,

If you can control a man's thinking you do not have

to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself with what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you can make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one.<sup>5</sup>

Whether we realize it or not, Black people face a significant challenge. The eminent Africanist, Dr. Chancellor Williams, warns us that,

Africans in America cannot generally understand themselves better until, like other ethnic groups in this country, we develop an almost passionate desire for a knowledge of our history with its triumphs and failures. This move toward self-redemption will demand integration within the race, first of all, before trying to integrate with just about everybody else except ourselves. In short, any minority group that fails to develop a position of strength through unity will fail to achieve real equality on any fronts.<sup>6</sup>

The survival, restoration, and the continued growth of the Black community is within the "hands" and destiny of Black people. This is nothing surprising nor revolutionary; the protection and advancement of any ethnic and/or racial group is the primary responsibility of the respective constituents of each group. White ethnics (and particularly Jews) realize this fundamental reality of America; it is only Blacks who are programmed to look continually beyond their community for direction, ideology, recognition, support, philosophy, and organization. The examples of this phenomena are too numerous to mention. Essentially, Black people have tried to plead, beg, or intimidate various white groups better to rule or serve their community. This foolishness must stop if we are to survive as a race.

The historian and journalist, Lerone Bennett, has characterized this confrontation as the "Challenge of Blackness." Bennett suggests that "it is necessary" for the Black world "to develop a new frame of reference which transcends the limits of white concepts. . . and maintain a total intellectual offensive against the false universality of white concepts."<sup>7</sup> The scholarship and

conceptualization of reality has been dominated by a "small minority of white men who live in Europe and North America."<sup>8</sup> This intellectual paradigm has been "Europe-centered, white-centered, property- and place-centered."<sup>9</sup> Bennett and other Black thinkers believe that there can be "no more desperate and dangerous task than. . . trying to see with our own eyes."<sup>10</sup>

History is not an abstraction or an "old coat" to be hung away in some closet. Regrettably, some of us fail to realize the necessity of employing history to formulate political strategies and social ideologies, or to understand the substance of a people. John Henrick Clarke captures this reality when he states,

History is a clock that people use to tell their time of day. It is a compass they use to find themselves on the map of human geography. It tells them where they are, and what they are. Most important, an understanding of history tells a people where they still must go, and what they still must be.<sup>11</sup>

Black history must be used as a tool of analysis and a vital reservoir of spiritual and intellectual power; anything less will hinder the survival of Black people.

Black History Month takes on a paramount significance as we approach the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Propaganda and an all-out assault upon Black minds have and will continue to dominate the post-Bicentennial era. A collection of "Black relics" (e.g., Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carve, Phyllis [*sic*] Wheatley, etc.) will be periodically rescued from the "closet chambers" of American history, "dusted off," and paraded about to project the image of "Negro loyalty," "Negro progress," and "Negro commitment" to the promised land of American democracy! The genuine essence of Black History Month challenges the mammoth gap between the rhetoric of American institutions and the reality of Black oppression. Black History Month should be the reaffirmation of struggle,

determination, and creativity. This observance must be a testimony to those Black pioneers who struggled to affirm the humanity of African people and a challenge to the present generation to protect and preserve Black humanity.

A man understands history when he understands that history does not permit men the luxury of escaping their inheritance, when he understands that he is not only responsible for his own acts but also for the meaning those acts take on in a certain social context, when he understands that he is not only what he has done but what his parents have done when he understands that history requires him to answer not only for his own life but also for the lives of the men and women and children who share his situation and his destiny.<sup>12</sup>

Let us strive to recapture the original legacy of Black History Month.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, reprint (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 718-719.

<sup>2</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1933), xxxii.

<sup>3</sup> John Henrick Clarke, "Why Black History," *Encore*, February 2, 1976, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier Books, Inc., 1967), 189-190.

<sup>5</sup> Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Chancellor Williams, *Black Books Bulletin*, Vol 1, No. 4, 1973, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Lerone Bennett, *The Challenge of Blackness* (Johnson Publishing, Inc., 1972), 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, "Why Black History," 48.

<sup>12</sup> Bennett, *The Challenge of Blackness*, 203.

