

Prairie View A&M University

Digital Commons @PVAMU

President Emeritus George C. Wright Speeches

Office of the President

2004

The Importance of Afro-American History (Short Version)

George C. Wright

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pvamu.edu/president-emeritus-george-c-wright>

The Importance of Afro-American History (Short Version)

It is indeed great, and so important that we are taking the time to celebrate Black History Month. All Americans need to know more about the role Afro-Americans have played in the development of this country; indeed, when we get to listing Americans—and what they have accomplished—blacks are usually ignored or remembered last, when in fact their heritage and role in this country rivals any ethnic group! The purpose of Black History Month, as I see it, is to enlighten, educate, be educated, raise the level of consciousness about various issues affecting blacks, and to encourage all of us—white as well as black—to dedicate ourselves to going out and making this a better world. I submit to you that if all we do during this month is point out that a black fought in the American Revolution, that a black man was one of the first people to go to the North Pole, and that a black man might have invented the electric light before Edison did, then what we are doing is fine but it really has no lasting value to us. But by pointing out the contributions that blacks have made—against incredible odds—should encourage all of us to strive harder. It should show us that no one is too significant to make changes. Black History Month, in other words, is not

only to honor our dead but to challenge the living to new heights.

Plus, there is another reason why Black History is so important. Blacks need to know that other blacks have endured hardships and did not allow racism to defeat them. We need historical role models. Plus, there is a lot of truth to the statement that he who knows his past is in a position to control his present and future. Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Month, believed that history was a potent and power tool, one that could help liberate blacks. (Discuss here)

Woodson, DuBois, and a host of black scholars and public school teachers were successful in getting their message about Black History across to the general Negro public. Indeed, from the 1920's on, black history was an important part of the overall education in black schools. (Mention when I was in school). But the white public, and even white intellectuals, ridiculed or simply ignored their efforts. Whites simply could not or would not take seriously the efforts of black scholars. Whites brushed off such things as powerful and well developed African kingdoms and the activities of black explorers as pure propaganda. They continued

to exclude blacks from their story on American History because they said that the Negro, whether in Africa or America, had failed to make any contributions in technology, industry, or in any other endeavors that had aided the growth of mankind. And to a large degree this belief is still shared today. That is another reason why Black History Month still needs to be held, even today. (G.W. Wms; Richard Wright, etc.)

Without a doubt, one of the real strengths of Black History is that it presents a challenge to America to live up to its creed. Indeed, right from the beginning, Black History has refused to buy the myths, to romanticize our past in this country, but has fairly depicted our past as a way of bringing about needed changes. Indeed, Black History informs us of many harsh realities, many that go straight to the core of America. This country, despite its claims, has not been the land of the free—if you happened to be black, or brown, or red, or female. Slavery, not freedom as been the norm in America! Slavery existed for 246 years; Freedom only since 1865, or roughly 115 years. (Discuss slavery and that we “endured”!)

Black History takes a critical look at the Founding Fathers and informs us that these men really were concerned about liberty for a limited number of people. These men, to their credit, gave us a blue print for how

we should live, and for the past two hundred years we have been struggling to make that a reality. Black History shows that at no time in our history have Afro-Americans willingly accepted their second-class status but have fought for the demanded changes and racial justice!

An excellent example of this was the early 1900's, the "Nadir" for blacks. They formed the NAACP and other Civil Rights Groups. Pressed for changes on a number of different fronts. The modern-day Civil Rights Movement was conceived during these times.

It is very important to understand that Afro-American History is much more than the struggle by blacks to end racial oppression. It is the story of blacks creating the institutional life that sustained the race during slavery and especially of the black infrastructure that grew up in the late 19th century. Without a doubt, the leading black institution has always been the "Church". But there have been other important institutions: black public schools and colleges; social and welfare institutions. Then I think of black history, I quickly remember the many outstanding black women and men who have made contributions on a number of different levels: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington,

Mary McCloud Bethune: the daughter of an illiterate sharecropper, 1 of 17 children. Ms. Bethune established a college, and formed the national Council of Negro Women. Ms. Bethune became best known for her activities with FDR's New Deal. Finally, I always like to acknowledge the role played by William E.B. DuBois.

Do you remember, however, that for every leader like DuBois, there were thousands of black individuals working without publicity for the race. The Civil Rights Movement of the present is equally Martin Luther King and the black foot soldiers. My best example of a person working steadily is Albert Ernest Meyzeek.

In closing, I want to emphasize the fact that Black History presents a challenge to those of us living in present-day America. To whites, Black History is important because it shows how racism has played a central role in this nation's history and how our leaders have rarely lived up to this country's exalted beliefs. Black History does love America, and by pointing out America's shortcomings, Black History reminds America of what she ought to be. We should all realize that as long as anyone is denied equality, democracy cannot exist. Black History shows that not all whites

have been racist, that many of them paid the ultimate sacrifice for blacks. But Afro-American History also shows that many whites who were not racist but who refused to speak out against racial injustices contributed to racism in America.

Black History is a direct challenge to blacks to succeed. Our forefathers in America, despite incredible odds and abuse, improved their lot and laid the foundation for the things that present-day blacks enjoy. We must, therefore, never use racism as a crutch or an excuse to not continue striving. Black History shows that some things do “go around” that if we ever stop improving ourselves and demanding changes for everyone, then the Negro Revolution can go backwards.

Please allow me to make one final point. I would like to urge all of you to continue educating yourself about Afro-Americans. TV and especially public/education TV, occasionally presents shows that discuss various aspects of black life. Reading magazines, journals, and books, however, are far superior to TV in learning about the black past. I recommend Black Enterprise, The Crisis, and the Journal of Civil Rights. Several good books, a new biography on BTW; a new one on Martin Luther King, and a host of books on slavery. There are several classics by DuBois and Richard

Wright that are invaluable to read again. So although we will celebrate Black History this month, I personally hope that learning more about blacks will become a continuing part of all of our lives.

The Importance of Afro-American History (Short Version)

It is indeed great, and so important that we are taking the time to celebrate Black History Month. All Americans need to know more about the role Afro-Americans have played in the development of this country; indeed, when we get to listing Americans—and what they have accomplished—blacks are usually ignored or remembered last, when in fact their heritage and role in this country rivals any ethnic group! The purpose of Black History Month, as I see it, is to enlighten, educate, be educated, raise the level of consciousness about various issues affecting blacks, and to encourage all of us—white as well as black—to dedicate ourselves to going out and making this a better world. I submit to you that if all we do during this month is point out that a black fought in the American Revolution, that a black man was one of the first people to go to the North Pole, and that a black man might have invented the electric light before Edison did, then what we are doing is fine but it really has no lasting value to us. But by pointing out the contributions that blacks have made—against incredible odds—should encourage all of us to strive harder. It should show us that no one is too significant to make changes. Black History Month, in other words, is not

only to honor our dead but to challenge the living to new heights.

Plus, there is another reason why Black History is so important. Blacks need to know that other blacks have endured hardships and did not allow racism to defeat them. We need historical role models. Plus, there is a lot of truth to the statement that he who knows his past is in a position to control his present and future. Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Month, believed that history was a potent and power tool, one that could help liberate blacks. (Discuss here)

Woodson, DuBois, and a host of black scholars and public school teachers were successful in getting their message about Black History across to the general Negro public. Indeed, from the 1920's on, black history was an important part of the overall education in black schools. (Mention when I was in school). But the white public, and even white intellectuals, ridiculed or simply ignored their efforts. Whites simply could not or would not take seriously the efforts of black scholars. Whites brushed off such things as powerful and well developed African kingdoms and the activities of black explorers as pure propaganda. They continued to exclude blacks from their story on American History

because they said that the Negro, whether in Africa or America, had failed to make any contributions in technology, industry, or in any other endeavors that had aided the growth of mankind. And to a large degree this belief is still shared today. That is another reason why Black History Month still needs to be held, even today. (G.W. Wms; Richard Wright, etc.)

Without a doubt, one of the real strengths of Black History is that it presents a challenge to America to live up to its creed. Indeed, right from the beginning, Black History has refused to buy the myths, to romanticize our past in this country, but has fairly depicted our past as a way of bringing about needed changes. Indeed, Black History informs us of many harsh realities, many that go straight to the core of America. This country, despite its claims, has not been the land of the free—if you happened to be black, or brown, or red, or female. Slavery, not freedom as been the norm in America! Slavery existed for 246 years; Freedom only since 1865, or roughly 115 years. (Discuss slavery and that we “endured”!)

Black History takes a critical look at the Founding Fathers and informs us that these men really were concerned about liberty for a limited number of people. These men, to their credit, gave us a blue print for how we should live, and for the past two hundred years we have been struggling to make that a reality. Black History shows that at no time in our history have Afro-Americans willingly accepted their second-class status but have fought for the demanded changes and racial justice!

An excellent example of this was the early 1900's, the "Nadir" for blacks. They formed the NAACP and other Civil Rights Groups. Pressed for changes on a number of different fronts. The modern-day Civil Rights Movement was conceived during these times.

It is very important to understand that Afro-American History is much more than the struggle by blacks to end racial oppression. It is the story of blacks creating the institutional life that sustained the race during slavery and especially of the black infrastructure that grew up in the late 19th century. Without a doubt, the leading black institution has always been the "Church". But there have been other important institutions: black public schools and colleges; social and welfare institutions.

When I think of black history, I quickly remember the many outstanding black women and men who have made contributions on a number of different levels: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Mary McCloud Bethune: the daughter of an illiterate sharecropper, 1 of 17 children. Ms. Bethune established a college, and formed the national Council of Negro Women. Ms. Bethune became best known for her activities with FDR's New Deal. Finally, I always like to acknowledge the role played by William E.B. DuBois.

Do you remember, however, that for every leader like DuBois, there were thousands of black individuals working without publicity for the race. The Civil Rights Movement of the present is equally Martin Luther King and the black foot soldiers. My best example of a person working steadily is Albert Ernest Meyzeek.

In closing, I want to emphasize the fact that Black History presents a challenge to those of us living in present-day America. To whites, Black History is important because it shows how racism has played a central role in this nation's history and how our leaders have rarely lived up to this country's exalted beliefs. Black History does love America, and by pointing out

America's shortcomings, Black History reminds America of what she ought to be. We should all realize that as long as anyone is denied equality, democracy cannot exist. Black History shows that not all whites have been racist, that many of them paid the ultimate sacrifice for blacks. But Afro-American History also shows that many whites who were not racist but who refused to speak out against racial injustices contributed to racism in America.

Black History is a direct challenge to blacks to succeed. Our forefathers in America, despite incredible odds and abuse, improved their lot and laid the foundation for the things that present-day blacks enjoy. We must, therefore, never use racism as a crutch or an excuse to not continue striving. Black History shows that some things do "go around" that if we ever stop improving ourselves and demanding changes for everyone, then the Negro Revolution can go backwards.

Please allow me to make one final point. I would like to urge all of you to continue educating yourself about Afro-Americans. TV and especially public/education TV, occasionally presents shows that discuss various aspects of black life. Reading magazines, journals, and books, however, are far

superior to TV in learning about the black past. I recommend Black Enterprise, The Crisis, and the Journal of Civil Rights. Several good books, a new biography on BTW; a new one on Martin Luther King, and a host of books on slavery. There are several classics by DuBois and Richard Wright that are invaluable to read again. So although we will celebrate Black History this month, I personally hope that learning more about blacks will become a continuing part of all of our lives.

Celebrating Black History Month during February has been occurring in the United States for more than 80 years. Personally, I have been attending Black History Month programs for more than four decades. This first started when I was in elementary school and this continued as long as I attended all-black schools (though when I transferred to predominantly white schools this was not celebrated. Since 1972, and continuing down to the present, I have given presentations each year for Black History Month.

I am beginning to worry if some people have been exposed to so many Black History Programs for so long that they take these programs for granted, as just another ritual they are required to endure either at work, school, or church. Also, there are some people who make sarcastic remarks saying that if an emphasis on Black History was so important, it would not be relegated to one month only-the shortest month in the year-but would be a natural part of our emphasis on American history. There are some people who believe that as we have become integrated into the larger society, that an emphasis on our black past could actually have a negative effect. Indeed, there are even some whites, who consider themselves committed to ending racial injustices, who wonder why do we need to sing the praise of black heroes? They point out that there is no “White History Month Program.” (There is, in fact White History Month: the rest of the year! We just do not call it that!)

Are these programs necessary? What do we learn about black people, or white people, from this month's emphasis on blacks? What should we get out of these programs? Indeed, **“Is There Still A Need for Black History Month?”**

The Scripture

While I am not a minister, I do know that there are times when a scripture from the Bible can be highly relevant and that is the case regarding the position I want to make today. Isaiah Chapter 51, Verse 1 says the following: “Hearken to me ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.”

To me, Isaiah 51 is saying that it is important for us to remember our past, from where we have come from. Knowing our past will help us have admiration for the accomplishments of those who came before us knowing our past will help us in our current struggles; knowing the past will also be a road map to the future.

Historical Background

Look unto the rock means that we will be mindful of our past. Why did the celebration of Black History Month start early in the last Century?? This was the “Nadir Period” for black Americans, a time when race relations had reached rock bottom and they were relegated to second class citizenship. During this time they had no rights that whites needed to respect. Carter G. Woodson and other black scholars, ministers, and others hoped that an emphasis on the black past (one with a proud Africa), would lead to an end of the harsh racial prejudice and stereotypical views that abounded, indeed, were even espoused in the White House under Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and above all Woodrow Wilson. There were “scholarly books” called The Negro A Beast: another book was titled, The Negro a Menace to American Society. A third book was called The Passing of the Great Race that argued that if something was not done to eliminate blacks from society they would destroy the white race.

If you understand the context of American society when Black History Month started then you can see it had the dual aim of educating both blacks and whites to the positive contributions blacks had made to democracy in American society. The black teachers, ministers, and leaders putting on programs went to great length to discuss examples of outstanding black accomplishments against incredible odds.

They pointed out how blacks had endured and actually thrived during slavery. They noted that despite having nothing but the clothes on their backs when freed from slavery, blacks had created communities of their own that had schools, churches, and social service agencies. Black businessmen and women were lauded for what they accomplished. I could go on and on. A key point: this emphasis on black achievement proved to be very positive to blacks and led to them having a positive attitude toward their past and themselves. From the 1910 forward, virtually all black institutions devoted time to the celebration. But, for white society as a whole, Black History Month made no impact on them at that time.

As a young person in the 1950s and 1960s who was “made” to attend Black History Programs, I did not realize that I was taking part in such an important tradition. Sure, I was glad to be out of class in an assembly, and I probably enjoyed the singing and was probably bored with the speeches. I do know that when I was required to learn a speech for a Black History Month program, I was not very happy about that. But, I did learn about black heroes. I read a great deal about Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Mary Church Terrell, and others. I learned about what black people had endured. It gave me a real sense of pride in being a black person, even at an early age.

I learned that black people had contributed greatly to the growth of America. Blacks fought in all of this nation's wars, from the American Revolutionary War, through the Civil War, and in World War I and World War II. Black people such as George Washington Carver and Dr. Daniel Hale Williams made significant discoveries that had bettered the lives of all people. I was proud of the accomplishments of so many black athletes. In short, as a young person, I came away from Black History Month Programs with a sense that my race was the equal to all other races. And that blacks had made remarkable accomplishments despite incredible odds. As Booker T. Washington said, "do not judge me by where I am but by how far I had to come to get where I am."

I started giving presentations during the time when ideas such as Black Power and Black is Beautiful were abounding. That was both good and bad. It was also the time of the Vietnam War, when young people were questioning what this country stood for. The same was true for Black History Month Programs. This was a very important time for us-black folks but a rather puzzling time for whites. In our quest to highlight the accomplishments of many black radicals, we all too often did so in a way that suggested that Black History and the struggle would be better off if whites were not involved. That to me went much too far: when reading about blacks I encountered numerous whites who had made accomplishments that benefited Afro-Americans.

For instance: how many of you know the name Nathan Margold? He was the one who laid out the blueprint that first Charles Henry Houston and then Thurgood Marshall followed that led to the Brown decision and public school desegregation. So for me, an important aspect of giving presentations was to discuss the role of whites in the black struggle.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

But clearly the most important figure of this era was Martin Luther King, Jr. All of you know the story of MLK and I will not take your time recounting most of it. In a relatively short period of time, 1956-1968, King became the moving force of the Civil Rights Movement, the inspirational leader of the struggle for racial justice. We should also keep in mind that King worked for and stood for more than civil rights for Afro-Americans. He was the preeminent voice in the quest for human rights during this era. By doing so, King reached more blacks, more Americans, more citizens of the world than any other U.S. reform leader in the 20th Century.

While we most often do not view MLK as a “radical”, some of his beliefs most surely were. King consistently believed that some laws should be disobeyed. To King, there was a moral responsibility to obey just laws as well as to disobey unjust ones.

A living unshakable faith in God was at the core of King’s philosophy. Without his faith in God, King could not have used nonviolence as a political method. King stressed the point that only through loving your enemies could a person know God and experience the beauty of his holiness.

At the intellectual and emotional center of MLK’s vision was the absolute insistence that this country live up to the standards set forth by the Declaration of Independence. In this regard, I believe that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were rather similar in their beliefs.

Finally, MLK truly believed that an education could set a person free. He loved to read and think.

I started off by asking should we continue the Celebration of Black History Month? My answer is simple but resounding “yes.” “But why? First, because every generation needs to know about the struggles and accomplishments of the past and of how in their lives they have benefited from the deeds from the deeds of others. Far too often, people who have “made it” do not give enough or any credit to those who came before them and paved the way. None of us would have the things we enjoy today had not others long ago demanded changes. The jobs I have had- indeed the fact that I have three college degrees-would not have happened had not black people collectively worked for changes. This presents us with a challenge: what are we doing today?

An emphasis on Black History Month has some lessons for whites: their commitment to equality is essential. As I said previously, there have always been whites who were dedicated and involved in the black struggle for change. Indeed, if I had the time, I could mention whites involved in the Anti-Slavery Movement in the 1830s to the whites working with the NAACP in the 1950s. A key point for whites from Black History Month: it is when “good whites” turn their back that racial problems occur.” As I have said on numerous occasions, it would be good if all whites could be a minority for a period of time. Since that is impossible in this country, then Black History Month at least helps them view the world through black eyes.

But clearly Black History Month has yet another important lesson for blacks and that is why it is still needed today. Blacks need to know that we must struggle to make progress. We need to always do our best. It is a crime for us to not take advantage or to be appreciative of what other black people have done. We need to end all forms of destructive behavior. And you know where we need to start: by having self-respect, by quit using the “N” word. Let me mention what I used to observe years ago when I lived in Austin and would go to a barber shop every two weeks. One of the barbers and several of his customers used the “N” word just like the Smurfs used “smurf” in every sentence. Again, I will repeat: Black folk we need to quit using the “N” word’ just think about how our fore-fathers and fore-mothers had to endure insults of which this was a major part.

Conclusion

Black History Month tells me that positive changes can occur. That you control your own destiny. That you will not be limited except by your own lack of vision.

A key point: you can find numerous examples to prove whatever position you advocate regarding the continued existence of racism. Colin Powell: Racial Profiling; the “lynching” of a black man in Jasper, Texas. I can argue of these things from both positions.

There are, at least in my view, two black Americas. There has been tremendous progress for some blacks and yet many blacks seem to live in a world that has not changed from the 1950s. I know some black people have “poverty of the spirit.” (Mention the Eddie Murphy monologue).

The events of Spring 1990 at the University at Texas speak to both a continuation of racism and yet that things have changed:

- A. My personal life, where I was awarded an endowed professorship and UT's highest teaching award.
- B. The Round Up Incident.
- C. The responses of students, both black and white.
- D. Demonstrations, and the shouting down of the President.
- E. Lesson for Blacks: cannot dwell on an incident or allow one incident to set back progress.
- F. Lesson for Whites: Racial problems do still exist.
- G. Lesson for me: I need to be even more forceful in denouncing the racism of whites and the often insensitive, narrow view of blacks. We need to discuss race more, not less.
- H. Final Point: My experiences, while enlightening, does not speak for all black Americans. There is a lot more anger among blacks than I had realized.