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Why Black History Month Matters

Some call it outdated, even racist. But many African-American leaders say the month is necessary.

By Jillian Blume

Some people say Black History Month is outdated. The event has drawn criticism from Morgan Freeman and the Nation of Islam, among others. But still, many leaders in the African-American community say that Black History Month is an opportunity to educate and to celebrate.

For those people who think Black History Month is passé, Charles Steele, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), has these words, delivered in a recent speech to the Spokane Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP):

"Many blacks think they have arrived and do not need to hear or tell the story of the past. We have not arrived. We need to get back on the civil rights train so blacks, whites and all folk will live in freedom. Because we refuse to admit where we came from and misrepresent our history, we are bleeding internally. Blacks and whites need to be re-educated because the education system is still enslaved."

Stefanie Brown, national director of the NAACP Youth and College Division, believes the history of African-Americans is the history of America. She calls black history "an American story of people who have been able to overcome so many bare years to succeed today. The African-American experience in this country really illustrates why America is such a great country today. There have been so many people who have worked hard to make it what it is today."

Today's challenges are more subtle, but no less serious

In the '60s, the African-American struggle was explosive. The community faced the threat of violence and the denial of essential rights. Today, the obstacles faced by the black community are more subtle but no less serious, according to Mike Morial, president of the National Urban League.

"It's no longer about fighting against de jure segregation," Morial explains. "We have equality of rules more now than ever before, but we don't have a level playing field from an economic standpoint. We have to focus on the fact that race has been a factor, particularly in the shaping of America. It has shaped so much of our life—where we live and the distribution of resources. And you don't confront it by ignoring it."

Julian Bond, chairman of the board of the NAACP, said in his speech to that organization's 97th convention that we haven't yet achieved an America where race doesn't matter. "Those who say that 'race is history' have it exactly backward—history is race. [The word] 'America,' scrambled, spells 'I am race,'" he declared. "America is race—from its symbolism to its substance, from its founding by slaveholders to its rending by civil war, from Johnnie Reb to Jim Crow, from the Ku Klux Klan to Katrina. Those who engage in declarations and denials to the contrary do not serve our country well."

Excluded from history?

Wyatt Tee Walker, former president of the Negro Heritage Library, notes that history textbooks often leave out the achievements of African-Americans, which makes it impossible to learn about—and be inspired by—the past. "That's the reason there was the Negro Heritage Library," he remembers. "We saw that defect in the public and private educational system. Our whole mission was to create a set of books that told the correct story of the African-Americans in history who were not included in the other history books." (Full disclosure: In the mid-1960s, my father was vice president of the Negro Heritage Library and worked with Walker.)

Mark Morial concurs. "There's a long history of people saying African-Americans have made no contributions to this country. Many people know about George Washington Carver, but how many people know about Charles Drew, a black man who invented the blood bank? Or know that a black man invented the gas mask and the traffic light, that a black man invented the shoe lasting machine? They know Paul Revere, they know Thomas Edison. But you're not going to pick up a book and read about Charles Drew."

"We need to stress our common humanity"

Remembering history and celebrating past achievements can facilitate the shaping of plans for the future. "Your previous struggles will make you stronger for the struggles that are ahead," says Walker. "We've got to find a way to reconcile ourselves to living in a community, one group with the other. ... This means reaching, educating and moving large enough groups of people of both races to stir the conscience of the nation."

Black History Month reaches those large groups and opens the door to a national dialogue. We may be arguing, but we're talking. And that's a step toward understanding.

"I think we need to underscore and stress our common humanity, and maybe we'll forget all the differences that we have," says Walker. "We're more alike than we are different."

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