

## **February is a special time for nation to recognize indispensable contributions of African Americans**

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The year 2004 marks the 78th anniversary of the celebration of Black History Month.

When Carter G. Woodson launched Negro History Week in 1926 he must have anticipated both the support and the controversy that might surround such a celebration. Woodson, the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now called the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History), is also the founder of the Journal of Negro History. His focus on Negro History Week was designed to bring national attention to the contributions of African Americans throughout the history of the United States. In 1976, the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History was successful in promoting the week into Black History Month.

Woodson surely must have fully understood the philosopher George Santayana who stated that, "Those who forget the past shall be condemned to repeat it." It has also been said, and I don't know who said it first, that Americans have short memories. Remembering is always, by definition, an interaction between forgetting and complete preservation of the past - something that is virtually impossible.

When a people forgets its history, when they think they have nothing to learn from the past, then they will inevitably reap the consequences of their ignorance.

Black History Month aims at preventing such ignorance by calling attention to the contributions of one group of people who made significant contributions to the development of the United States of America.

The second week in February was selected because it marked the birthdays of two men whose work had a major impact on African Americans - President Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass.

Lincoln is called the Great Emancipator, and Douglass is credited with three autobiographies at different stages of his life that document his oratory in the fight for rights of African Americans.

February is also the anniversary of the birth of W.E.B. DuBois, the passage of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, the founding of the NAACP, and the Woolworth lunch

counter sit-in in Greensboro in 1960.

Black History Month offers United States citizens an opportunity to focus on three questions: What do we know? What should we do? What may we hope for?

Do you know that Crispus Attucks was the first man to give his life for this country when he was killed in the Boston Massacre?

Do you know that Benjamin Banneker was leader of the initial surveying of the Federal District, which is now Washington, D.C.?

Do you know that Phyllis Wheatley was America's first published black poet? All three were African Americans who made significant contributions. The contributions of these and countless other African Americans remain hidden like a black hole in the obscure labyrinths of history.

What should we do about this overt attempt to discredit significant contributions made by African Americans? We can use the month of February as a special time for recognition of those contributions and we can work to get those contributions included in the history of this country.

Another historian, Barbara Tuchman, reminded us that history, which should be like a beacon on the bow of a ship, illuminating most clearly where we will go, is instead, because of human frailties, more like a lantern on the stern of a ship showing most clearly only where we have been.

History has a better use: to show us men and women of the past in the crises they faced in life, how they endured, and how they triumphed. That is where we see examples of values we seek within ourselves.

Perhaps the more important question may be, what may we hope for? We hope for a better future.

When you see a wrong, try to right it. When you see intolerance, try to bring about understanding. When you see injustice, try to bring about simple justice.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah was right - we have to DO justice. It is not enough to merely understand it, or to approve of it in an abstract way. We have to DO it. This response keeps us from becoming obsessed with the past.

The United States in 2004 is quite different from what it was in 1926.

Woodson would likely be pleased with the changes. Some among us pass the month of February without notice.

Some among us refuse to acknowledge the need for such attention. Some among us are in denial.

Others pause to remember. Black History Month exists for a reason.

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