

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

“Those who
have no record
of what their
forebears have
accomplished
lose the
inspiration
which comes
from the
teaching of
biography
and history.”



Carter G. Woodson and the Origins of Multiculturalism

Biography

Mr. Daniel Kennedy, Jr. attended primary school on military bases and in the civilian public and private schools. Graduating high school in 1975, from Boone High School, Orlando, Florida, Mr. Kennedy went on to study for the Roman Catholic priesthood at St. Meinrad College, Indiana, and received a BA in philosophy in 1979. He continued to study and received a Masters in Divinity (Mdiv) from St. Meinrad School of Theology in 1984 and has taken various history courses at the University of Central Florida (UCF), Orlando. He was a doctoral candidate at UCF from 2002–2004.

Preface

Mr. Daniel P. Kennedy is a consultant for the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) and created this publication for Black History Month observance. This publication is posted on the Internet at: <https://www.deomi.org>. Additionally, there are various materials on the Web site that support other national observances.

<p>The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be construed to represent the official position of DEOMI, the military Services, or the Department of Defense.</p>

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Carter G. Woodson, Father of Black History Month
by Daniel P. Kennedy Jr.

America! America! The land of the free! The Statue of Liberty stands as a witness to droves of immigrants who sailed passed her from the Old World to the New World seeking a new life. The European settlers saw America to be a place where the commoner could rise above his or her station through economic opportunity reserved for a privileged few. America was a place for some European colonists to practice their religious reforms denied them in the mother country. But this promised land of freedom and treasures, the American dream, was not afforded to all.

This American dream of religious freedom and economic opportunity was denied to the Black African brought over to this continent in slave ships. This arduous trek to America was nothing more than a brutal extraction from the African's way of life, independence, and spirit. This ugly, dark journey from Africa to America was made vivid in the TV mini-series *Roots*, based on Alex Haley's novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. In the film, Kunta Kinte, portrayed by LeVar Burton, was captured in Africa, gagged, blindfolded, and branded like a beast of burden. Kunta is stuffed in a slave ship like a sardine for a three-month journey to the land of opportunity. Kunta is one of the ninety-eight survivors of a total of 140 slaves. Once Kunta's ghoulish journey ended in America, the White slave masters began to strip Kunta Kinte's culture from him symbolized by giving him the American name of Toby. This was the complete devaluation of a human being to strip him of his native identity. The enslavement of the Black African was a process of total subjugation and eradication of any semblance of value as an African even to the point of changing their name. This was how many Black Africans became African Americans in America's early years.

This devaluation of anything Black did not end with slavery in 1865. Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Month, lead the fight to reverse this perpetual devaluation of the Black person in American society. Woodson's life ranged from 1875–1950. His parents were former slaves. Despite such humble beginnings, Carter G. Woodson was a highly educated African American historian who received a PhD in history from Harvard University in 1912. He lived in a time when Jim Crow laws, (e.g., separate facilities based on race, exclusion of service in restaurants and hotels, and segregated schools based on race), were enforced in the South. The Klu Klux Klan burned crosses and lynching was not uncommon. The U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 with its decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* appeared to give it's blessing to racial segregation by its doctrine "separate but equal." The White man and his laws still trampled upon the civil rights of the "worthless" African American. The pervasiveness of this devaluation of the Black American was so deep that fellow educated African Americans perpetuated it as well, and they too would eradicate the African out of Kunta Kinte and call him Toby. It is against this backdrop in history to which Dr. Woodson found himself.

Carter G. Woodson, in combating such degradation and to promote the value of the African American in history, began to publish in 1916 the *Journal of Negro History*. In 1926, he initiated "Negro History Week" and by 1970 it became "Black History Month" which we celebrate today. This is why he is known as the "Father of Black History Month." What is most telling in his work is his book, *The Mis-Education of the*

Negro (1933), in which he renders information about his experiences with some of his fellow “educated Negroes.” He decried that some of his fellow African Americans would not buy goods and services from Black businessmen, because the educated African American was taught that the Black person had no value. Educated African Americans went back to their community ill-equipped to teach each other, for they acquired a disdain for their own; thus, they became “mis-educated.” Dr. Woodson saw the education of the African American practiced in his time as oppressive. He wrote:

...to handicap a student by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one’s aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime.

The education provided to the African American was Euro-centric in which the heroes of history were overwhelmingly White. The African American was given little participation or ownership in his own intellectual pursuits. Dr. Woodson advocated that all race’s contributions of history should be taught:

...that any people should ignore the record of the progress of other races. We would not advocate any such unwise course...We would not learn less of George Washington, “First in War, First in Peace and First in the Hearts of his Countrymen;” but we would learn something also of the three thousand Negro soldiers of the American Revolution who helped make this “Father of Our Country” possible...

Many raised in the 20th century can attest to the Euro-centric White dominated heroes in American history. The only men of African descent mentioned were Dred Scot, the slave, Frederick Douglas, the abolitionist, George Washington Carver, an agriculturalist, and Booker T Washington, the educator. Many were never taught about the Buffalo Soldiers of the West, Black regiments of WWI and WWII, such as the 366th Infantry Regiment, the Tuskegee Airmen of WWII, or the Golden Thirteen of the U.S. Navy. Men such as Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., the first African American of flag rank, and his son Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the first African American general of the U.S. Air Force were rarely mentioned. Black America’s identity of what it meant to be an American was determined by White culture, in which African Americans rose to prominence as entertainers like Sammy Davis Jr., or great sport stars such as Michael Jordan. America was perceived as a “melting pot” and simultaneously White-Anglo culture determined the values of what it means to be an American.

Dr. Woodson noted that another component of the “mis-education” of the African American was the overwhelming tendency to rely on the White man to solve problems or to indicate that the African American cannot help their own. Dr. Woodson believed in self-reliance as a major component of self-respect, making the Black person rise above their situation by their own merit, and developing the African American’s natural gifts whatever they may be. By being self-reliant and self-respecting would the Black race be contributors to American society and solving American problems? The beginning of change for the African American had to start with self-worth.

The value of the African American is not to be found parroting White society. Dr. Woodson wrote:

In this effort to imitate, however, these “educated people” are sincere. They hope to make the Negro conform quickly to the standard of the Whites and thus remove the pretext for the barriers between the races. They do not realize, however, that even if the Negroes do successfully imitate the Whites, nothing new has thereby been accomplished. You simply have a larger number of persons doing what others have been doing. The unusual gifts of the race have not thereby been developed, and an unwilling world, therefore, continues to wonder what the Negro is good for.

Carter G. Woodson lived and wrote in a time when America considered herself to be Anglo-White. African Americans were kept apart from the rest of American society. At best, they were treated as second-class citizens. If African Americans were to be fully accepted in the larger White society, then they would have to be molded into the image of the White. The premise was that the Black man must be assimilated to the White man’s culture.

Today, the image of America is not a monolithic White-only culture but a multicultural pluralistic society. Instead of melting other cultures into the melting pot to form one preferred culture, America has become a tossed salad in which the various other cultures are appreciated for themselves to enhance our country. Now the American dream is open to all persons of various nationalities, races, cultures, and creeds. The world of “separate but equal” of Plessy v. Ferguson was changed in 1954 by the U.S. Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education which laid down the legal groundwork for racial integration in our public school systems. This was the birth of multicultural education. The identity of what an American is has expanded beyond a static Anglo-White culture to an ever changing culturally open-ended democratic society.

One of the first American institutions to put a crack in the “separate but equal” wall was the U.S. Armed Forces in 1948 with Executive Order 9981 as directed by President Harry S. Truman. Our present military is comprised of many persons of varying backgrounds that reflect a pluralistic diverse democratic society. Since we are living in a society that prides itself as all-inclusive, then we must allow for an elastic wide-range of understanding of what it means to be an American. Since that it is the case, the American military has to remain pluralistic and multicultural. The question then becomes how do we allow diversity and multi-cultures to enhance the mission of the military? How does the military which is based upon a principle of assimilation balance the advantages of diversity? How do we create small unit cohesiveness with diversity? What various success models can we bring to the table that exhibits different cultures being successful in the military? What does it mean to be an American in the U.S. Armed Forces?

One of the strengths of having an American multicultural military is that it would be adaptable when the mission is taken overseas. Our military personnel would be more sensitive to indigenous populations. This would create small bridges of communication and trust between Americans and the foreign populous. In many ways our military has had a head start on diversity more so than our civilian population. Problems can arise when American definitions of freedom do not match the understanding of the indigenous persons. What works in the United States may not be practical or desired by the populous we are trying to “liberate.” One of the primary missions of the United States military is to

protect this nation not only by kinetic force, but also by building bridges of trust by modeling the ideal of Woodson's multiculturalism.

References

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