

What is black history month?

[History](#)



Surprisingly, the answer to that seemingly simple question would have a multitude of different answers, varying in degrees from full support to total outrage, depending on who was asked. The extreme fluctuation in emotional reaction to what appears on the outside to be a month long celebration of heritage lies in the different opinions of some very complex issues. Arguments over the benefits versus harm, and the definition of black history itself are at the core of this heated debate.

The month long focus on the history of Black Americans, known as Black History Month, was brought to life by Dr. Carter G. Woodson. Dr. Woodson, “one of the first black Americans to receive a Ph. D. from Harvard university” (Gearing Up For Black History Month, 2007), was disturbed in the lack of knowledge and availability of Black History in America of any kind. Woodson felt strongly about this lack of history for an entire ethnic group and felt the need to create a forum that would, “highlight the contributions of black Americans to our nation and the world.

His goal was to bring to light the “hidden history and culture” of the American people, and through this special observance, help all Americans to appreciate their ethnic roots and develop a mutual respect among the races.” (Gearing Up for Black History Month, 2008) He chose the second week in February because of its association with two great men who had a great impact on the destiny of African Americans: Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist, Frederick Douglas. Today it is even more fitting that this remembrance be

observed in February, as it holds many great achievements for Black Americans including; the birth of a great civil rights leader W. E. B. DuBois, the

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month that the 15th amendment was passed allowing black's to vote, the acceptance of the first black senator, and the death of militant leader Malcolm X, naming just a few. (Infoplease, 2009) From the beginning, Woodson's motivation in launching Negro History Week was an, " initiative to bring national attention to the contributions of black people throughout American history. " (" Black History Month", 2000)

Prior to that time Black history had been relatively unexplored except for the representation of blacks as slaves or in low and insignificant social positions. (Wikipedia, 2009). However, even from its inception as Negro History Week, this period of remembrance has been a source of contention. Annually, this heated debate over the, " continued usefulness and fairness of a designated month dedicated to the history of one race" (Wikipedia, 2009) has broken itself down into three major arguments. The first and most hotly debated topic is mainly that of purpose.

What is the real underlying purpose of this celebration? One side proposes the benefits of self-identity while the other argues degradation of society. Those who argue on the side of identity feel strongly that the affects of " historical amnesia" is the root of the problem. Their position that the long term affects of slavery on the mentality of the people had a more devastating effect than generally understood. (Pitre, 2002) Black History serves the purpose of helping African Americans understand themselves by looking at the uniqueness and origin of their history in relation to the development of world history.

Black history would encourage Black Americans to embrace their personal identity as opposed to self-negating one's self (Karenga, 1982). (Pitre, 2002)

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Connecting with their larger past will give Black Americans the ability to see themselves as part of a repeating cycle of world history that is everchanging and full of opportunity for freedom and productivity. (Pitre, 2002) It is this great power for healing found in our histories that is so indispensable. For history is the substance and mirror of a people's humanity in others' eyes as well as in their own eyes.

It is then, not only what they have done, but also a reflection of who they are, what they can do, and equally important what they can become as a result of the past which reveals their possibilities (Karenga, 1982, 69). (Pitre, 2002) With the desire to let Black Americans have the opportunity to see themselves in a better, broader light and thus inspire all Americans to achieve to become better, proponents of Black History Month encourage schools and educators to enlighten the minds of America's youth by learning about American history through another ethnic perspective.

The aim of a multicultural education is not just an "appreciation for cultural diversity" (Pitre, 2002) but also a more compassionate perspective that will lead to a more equitable America. It is important to note, however, that in a quest for real multiculturalism, learning about Black history is not merely a recitation of a handful of accomplished Black Americans. It is much more than a compilation of inspiring stories, and more of a frank and honest look at the often horrifying realities of the past. It is by looking at history in an unbiased way that truths can be taught, and real lessons learned.

For example, one Southern high school committed to multicultural program fought back against the tendency to use a watered down method of inviting speakers with limited knowledge of Black American history or who teach

history within the acceptable set framework of the dominant culture. Instead, the high school students chose a non-traditional, Islamic speaker to share historic facts and how they related to the struggles of Black Americans today. The result was outstanding. The reaction of the students was an emotional self-realization that resulted in a life-changing experience. (Pitre, 2002)

However, this opportunity to candidly look at the past and see the effects it has had on the present appears to be the root of the problem for those that oppose the observance of Black History Month. Among some of the most ardent fears is the supposition that teaching students the realities of history will color both Europe and the U. S. as bad actors on the world stage. They accuse Black American scholars of having the intention of rewriting history. Disturbingly, at the same time they proffer the weak argument that taking time out for multicultural education takes time away from basic work skills education.

(Pitre, 2002) Furthermore, they strongly suggest that teaching Blacks about the “ historical injustices perpetrated against them” (Pitre, 2002) will inspire vengeance against Whites. Any program or curriculum that induces people of African descent to group themselves in opposition to White policies must be squashed in the name of our mutual safety as White people (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, 7). (Pitre, 2002). In addition to these arguments are the attacks that the honoring of Black History Month is nothing more than an opportunity for a marketing device.

Unfortunately, this is perfectly illustrated in a flyer encouraging the observance of Black History Month: A community is only as strong as the
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traditions that hold it together. Procter & Gamble products such as Tide, Bounce and Downy have been a part of the traditions celebrated by African-American families for generations. (Black History Month: Reminds Us of Our Common Experiences and Hopes, 2005) Furthermore, this heated debate over the beneficial versus detrimental perspectives on Black History Month is often subsequently followed by the controversial question of, “ What is Black History?

” In one historians point of view, Black History should be understood as Black History that focuses on Black people, their identity, their culture, their social life, their psychology, and the way they have used these ethnic, group, and personal attributes to make history in America and to contribute to histories, countries, and peoples elsewhere on the globe. (Wright, 2002) This very important ideal holds that as Blacks uncover and reveal the truth of their history awareness of White people in American history will also be enlightened.

By motivating Black historians to present the truth in a scholarly manner and thus provide the moral guidelines for Black political behavior in America, the racism that scarred the country and the attitudes and beliefs of its people can begin to heal. (Wright, 2002) This ever-present problem of seeking identity through the looking glass of the past is not just an American issue. In the United Kingdom, with large communities of many different ethnic groups the struggle to celebrate Black History Month sheds light on this question of identity in a much clearer way.

In an effort to teach Black History and keep school programs alive, they have confronted the issue that their traditional teaching of Black History month

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focusing on Caribbean Black History is “ failing to connect with the new migrant communities such as the Somalis. The compelling questions are about making sense of a world whose problems seem dominated by historic questions of identity. ”(Hunt, 2006) This search for identity runs deep. As Black Americans struggle to find an acceptable way to identify themselves today and build a stronger foundation for the future, the debate will go on.

However, there are still some basic issues with name identity that appear to add to the confusion. For instance, just the identification as Blacks, Black Americans, African Americans, Afro Americans or the orthographical capitalization of the letter “ B” as in black Americans, has caused a strain on the black American community. The suggestion by some black historians that all black Americans are African American became a popular reference even though most Blacks disagreed and saw themselves only as Black Americans, and not identifying themselves in relation to Africa at all.

(Wright, 2002) Obviously identity is an important part of viewing not only the past, but more importantly, the future. Perhaps this is the reason there is so much disagreement and conjecture. Moreover, it is also obvious that until agreements and decisions can be made, the unity that is necessary to achieve the identity so desperately sought after will remain elusive. Regardless of the debate that forges on, and will one day find a resolution; it seems clear that whether it is black history or white history, it is all American history. References

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