

What Black History Month Means to Me

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

To forget or fail to remember...our ancestors, the struggles of our people and the achievement of our ancestors is to create a holocaust of memory in which a whole people dies and disappears from the history of humanity. – Dr. Maulana Karenga

There have been many objections to the celebration of Black History Month – coming from Blacks and Whites alike. Many Blacks have complained that this time was set aside because February is the shortest (and perhaps coldest) month of the year.

In reality, however, Negro History Week was the brainchild of the great African American historian, Carter G. Woodson, in 1926. He chose the second week of the month because Frederick Douglass was born on February 14, 1818, and “the great liberator,” Abraham Lincoln, was born on February 12, 1809. (Contrary to President Trump’s assertion in 2017 that Frederick Douglass was “doing a great job,” he actually did a great job back in the 19th Century. This year, 2018, people are celebrating his 200th birthday.) The week-long celebration evolved into a month-long celebration.

Many Blacks also contend that Black History Month should be celebrated every day, and not just one month out of the year. However, we celebrate Mother’s Day once a year. This does not mean that we only love our mothers one day out of the year. Setting aside a special time of remembrance dishonors no one.

Some years ago, the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson and I had a minor disagreement over the celebration of Black History Month. He seemed to believe that setting aside this special month sort of ghettoized Black history. I, on the other hand, stated that I never pass up a chance to educate people about Black history, which more often than not involves correcting the popular historical record. Dr. Tyson seemed to agree with my point.

For me, Black History Month is not a time for mourning and self-pity. On the contrary, it is a time for celebration and honoring great people of African descent and monumental Black achievements.

In the winter 2016 (volume 6, number 1) issue of *The Human Prospect*, African American humanist and associate editor of the journal, Patrick Inniss, interviewed Quintard Taylor, founder of the history site BlackPast.org. Inniss noted that the old TV western *Rawhide* “was set in the railhead city of Sedalia, Missouri, where the cattle drive ended.” (p. 3) He added, however, that though the show featured Whites, Latinos and Asians, no Blacks appeared in the beginning. (Incidentally, some Whites that see Blacks in Westerns today believe that this amounts to a distortion of history and a cowardly deference to “political correctness.”)

Taylor helped to correct the historical record:

...African Americans were at one point the majority of cowboys in Texas (the 1850s) and in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s they participated in almost every cattle drive to the north. Even earlier in the 1850s, they were involved in cattle drives to New Orleans....It is ironic that *Rawhide* prides itself on introducing the first black characters into its TV series, but it is apparently unaware of the fact that without black Texas cowboys in the 1860s to 1880s there would not have been trail drives to the north which are the premise of the show. (ibid.) (For more information visit: <http://www.blackpast.org/aaw/african-american-history-american-west>.)

Black History Month is also a great time to introduce people to the tremendous roles that African Americans have played in U.S. wars. Indeed, Blacks fought in the American Revolution (about 5,000) and in every war in which the U.S. has been involved. For example, Black soldiers fought with Teddy Roosevelt on San Juan Hill.

During Black History Month, we can learn more about the contributions of African Americans to musical genres such as Rock and Roll, jazz, ragtime, disco and so on. Many White scholars and historians continue to focus obsessively on the White musicians that came to contribute to the genres.

Black History Month offers us a great opportunity to learn about Blacks and non-theism and Black LGBTQI people. In the introduction to my first book, *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, I pointed out that many Black scholars ignore or downplay the roles of “black deists, humanists, agnostics, freethinkers, rationalists, atheists, etc., and how their intellectual freedom enhanced their

effectiveness as leaders and thinkers....” (p. 9) Similarly, many Black scholars ignore or downplay the sexual orientation of such great Black LGBTQI people as James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Bayard Rustin (incidentally, all humanists) and others.

Last but not least, Black humanist activist Donald R. Wright of Houston has called for Black non-theists to come out, be recognized and celebrate their non-theistic life stance on the last Sunday of every February. This is something all non-theists should support.

Black History Month isn't going anywhere, and as long as White supremacy exists, that is as it should be. So, let's all embrace and celebrate it.