



**National
Urban League**

**To Be Equal #6
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Black History Month: Now More Than Ever**

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"There is no more powerful force than a people steeped in their history. And there is no higher cause than honoring our struggle and ancestors by remembering." Lonnie Bunch, founding director, National Museum of African American History and Culture

Ever since the 2009 election of Barack Obama as America's first Black President and the 100th anniversary of the National Urban League in 2010, the perennial debate about the need for Black History Month has intensified. Some have questioned the need for a special month to recognize the many unknown and unsung achievements of African Americans. With Obama as President, the logic goes, we have now achieved Dr. King's dream of a non-racial America where everyone is judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. I wish it were so.

Last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and the passage of the Voting Rights Act. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act and the repeal of the Poll Tax. But unfortunately, the suppression of voting rights and other instances of racial discrimination remain. All one needs to do is look at the glaring disparities between Blacks and whites in income, employment, incarceration rates, educational achievement and health status to see that race still matters in America. Income inequality and equal opportunity are still part of the unfinished business of American democracy.

In 1926, after centuries of Blacks being excluded, not only from the mainstream of American life, but also from the textbooks in our schools, the African American historian, Carter G. Woodson, did a service to all Americans when he created Negro History Week, which was expanded to Black History Month in 1976. Woodson's vision was one of unity and inclusion. He said, "What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race, hate and religious prejudice." That is a goal that America is still struggling to achieve.

In fact, legislatures in a number of states, including New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, have passed laws mandating or encouraging teachers to broaden their history courses to include more ethnic, racial and gender diversity. That is why we still recognize March as Women's History Month, May as Jewish American History Month, September 15 to October 15 as Hispanic Heritage Month and February as Black History Month. These celebrations serve a dual purpose: first to build self-esteem among historically oppressed people, and second to remind all Americans that in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, our diversity is our greatest strength.

Black history is American history. While the story and achievements of African Americans are especially celebrated this month, the contributions we have made and the struggles we still face deserve recognition every day of the year. Next year, for the first time, Black History will enter the mainstream when the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture opens on the National Mall in Washington. The Museum describes itself as "a place of meaning, of memory, of reflection, of laughter, and of hope. It should be a beacon that reminds us of what we were; what challenges we still face; and point us towards what we can become."

As we honor those who have made history, we must also recognize that we are history in the making. Through our work, commitment to equality and civic engagement, we can and we must, in the words of President Obama, continue to "right the wrongs of history and make our world anew."

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