



The white man would like to believe
he is responsible for the negro's ills
but he really is largely helpless.

Black History Month, the brainchild of *Dr. Carter G. Woodson*, the second African American to graduate from Harvard University with a Ph.D. (1912), has become fully ensconced in American culture. Begun in 1926 as Negro History Week and expanded to Black History Month in 1976, Black History Month celebrates the contributions and legacy of Africans in America beyond the superficial, sanitized treatments of slavery and Jim Crow so common in mainstream discourse.

Dr. Woodson chose February for the initial commemorative period, Negro History Week, because it corresponded with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809) and Frederick Douglass (February 1818). Backers of the lengthened celebratory period likewise found February appropriate.

[Black History Month](#) is a time set aside to explore the central role of black people in the social, economic, and political framework of the nation; a period of remembrance and reflection.

Dr. Woodson realized the importance of creating substantive content with which to infuse this new celebratory period. He created the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915 (now, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History). That group crafted groundbreaking scholarly publications dedicated to filling the void in standard historical texts and literature.

I salute Dr. Woodson and others whose visionary, heroic leadership helped elevate the dialogue on black history. Still, if I had my druthers, there would be no Black History Month.

Surprised? As an author devoted primarily to narratives of the African American experience, one might suppose that I would relish a whole month devoted, at least nominally, to the history in which I am so willingly immersed. Why, then, this seeming contradiction?

My chief concern lies in continuing to isolate African American history, setting it apart from *American* history. The “Black History” we celebrate is, after all, part and parcel of American history, relevant not just for those of African descent, but for all of us. One cannot fully grasp the American experience without reference to African Americans. To appreciate the Constitution, to understand the Civil War, and to make sense of present-day political realities, requires some

knowledge of the history shaped through the interactions of African Americans with the dominant culture and with others. Tortuous and painful though it may be, it is, in the end, *our* history.

Black History Month survives in large part because of neglect and obstinacy. Standard curricula overlook and shortchange the pivotal contributions of African Americans and other “minorities” and, by design or default, dilute history for all learners. Textbooks too often advance prettified fantasies masquerading as history, skimming over the difficult, painful episodes from which we have yet to recover. They marginalize the contributions of African Americans and other people of color. Though this has begun to change, the change has been incremental and, some would assert, glacial.

When we begin to teach the peoples’ history—that is, the history of *all the people*—in an integrated and balanced way, we will no longer need Black History Month. That day has not yet arrived, but it is a day whose arrival I hope to hasten.