



Commentary

Black history is America's history

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While I was growing up in the late 1970s, I would spend many Saturdays in the basement of the Black Cultural Center at the University of Tennessee, watching movies about Black history with my siblings. We were passing the time while my father, a history professor who fought to establish the Black Studies Department, was busy making his own history. Had it not been for my dad, I would have learned virtually nothing about Black history, outside of slavery, until I was a college student.

Black History Month began as “Negro History Week” in 1926, established by historian Carter G. Woodson with the goal of encouraging the coordinated teaching of the history of Black Americans in the public school systems [1]. Black History Month highlights the innovation, intellect, creativity and perseverance within the Black community. It includes figures like Rebecca Lee Crumpler, who overcame racism and sexism to become the first Black female physician in the U.S., and who moved to Virginia after the Civil War to provide healthcare to the newly freed slaves; Daniel Hale Williams, a physician who, unable to admit patients to Chicago’s segregated hospitals, founded Provident Hospital, the first non-segregated hospital in the U.S., and later performed the first successful cardiac surgery; and Katherine Johnson, who rose above segregation and structural racism to become the “computer” that calculated the flight path to put the first astronauts on the moon. Their accomplishments were more extraordinary because of the perseverance and excellence which allowed them to overcome the constraints of racism on their freedom and opportunities.

Black history is beautifully moving because it is the story of triumph over adversity, determination in the face of uncertainty, and courage and conviction standing down hate and violence. To be Black in the U.S. is to know struggle. It is to fight against structural inequities and indignity. It may be that this constant striving for equity makes Black people all the more committed to the ideals of justice, freedom and equity *for everyone*. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made discrimination illegal not *only* based on race, but *also* based on color, religion, sex, national original and later sexual orientation and gender

identity [2]. When Harold Washington famously became the first Black mayor of Chicago, a journey that would later pave the way for Barack Obama to become the first Black president of the United States, he said that he was going to be “fairer than fair” to all Chicagoans, despite the decades of unfair treatment that Black people and Black communities had suffered under prior administrations.

Black history is America’s history. The narrative of Black people in the U.S. reveals more about who we are as a country—our difficult past, our painstaking movements forward towards justice, and our persistent racial wounds that we refuse to heal—than the sanitized history that children learn in our school systems. The omission of this narrative is not only harmful for Black people, it is harmful and dangerous for the entire country. Without a common foundational understanding of our nation’s racial history, we cannot possibly begin to step progressively into a future of racial reconciliation.

On 1.6.21, White supremacists tried to overthrow the U.S. government in an unsuccessful coup d’état and many remarked that “this is not who we are as a country.” Yet history documents that this is *exactly* who we have always been as a country. A country where White violence, racist rhetoric and revisionist history has oppressed the lives and well-being of Black people for centuries. As one example of many, in the “Black Wall Street Massacre” of 1921, mobs of White people, many of whom were deputized by city officials, attacked the wealthiest Black community in the U.S., destroying the modern-day equivalent of \$33 million in property and killing 39 people in Tulsa, Oklahoma [3]. The massacre was largely omitted from history for 75 years.

Until everyday White people understand their White privilege and how systemic racism *continues* to devalue the lives and potential of Black people in the U.S., we will not meaningfully or sustainably change the status quo. And *that* is why Black history has been erased from U.S. history. The U.S. is at another crossroads in our racial journey. The exponential rise in White terrorism and extremism is now the largest domestic threat to the U.S [4]. Yet voices throughout the country have been clear: “Black Lives Matter.” It is only through wide-eyed clarity of vision and purpose, and commitment to justice and equity that we will rise as a nation and begin to make peace with our racial past. That process begins with truth-telling and a commitment to doing so to our children. Not only during Black History Month, but every month.

Black history is America’s history.

Author contributions

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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