

BLACK HISTORY MONTH and the American Experience

Civil Rights Activists Urge Look Forward

Worry about focus on past

(AP) - Civil rights advocates say that the recent death of Coretta Scott King underscores a growing concern: As the movement's iconic leaders fade into history, much of the focus is on honoring the past rather than pushing for equality today.

"We should be very respectful of and encouraged by - the substantial progress that has been made. But in no way, shape or form should we conclude that the civil rights mission is complete," said Bruce Gordon, president of the NAACP.

There's a sense among advocates that modern activism is being overshadowed by a near-constant string of commemorations for bygone victories: the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education in 2004 and, last year, the 40 years since the historic march from Selma, Ala., to Montgomery, Ala., to win voting rights for African-Americans.

Inevitably, such remembrances intensify in the first months of each year with the mid-January holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr. that his widow fought to win and with Black History Month. In addition, each time an important civil rights figure dies - be it Rosa Parks, Ossie Davis or now Coretta Scott King - it renews the focus on the movement's history.

Some advocates are concerned about that eagerness to look back.



The late Coretta Scott King, the wife of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., with former president Jimmy Carter. As icons of the civil rights movement pass into history, activists worry about a lack of progress for the future.

"Part of that over-focusing on history and not looking at current realities of racial discrimination is another form of denial," said Barbara Arnwine, executive director of the Lawyers' Committee on Civil Rights Under Law. "Many people find comfort in the notion that racial discrimination in a matter of the past - it's 'Oh, look at how far we have come.'"

Ronald Walters, a professor of political science at the University of Maryland, said he's also "suspicious of commemorations."

"In some quarters, there's a feeling that the movement has passed its course," he said. "That's the reaction

of the younger generation mostly - the post-civil rights generation."

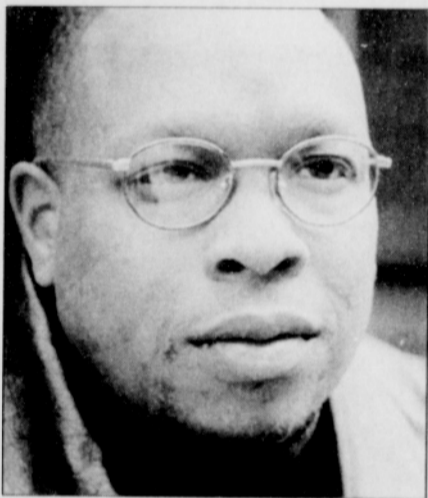
Advocates note that it doesn't take much searching to find social justice battles left to fight. Hurricane Katrina unveiled stark racial disparities in New Orleans, and blacks still have more than double the rates of infant mortality, unemployment and poverty as whites, said Gordon, who took the leadership post at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People last year.

That King's death occurred on the same day that Samuel Alito - whose nomination many civil rights advocates bitterly opposed - was confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court illustrated that the work of Coretta Scott King and her husband is not over, said Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Council on Civil Rights.

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Black History Month Raises Issues

Realities of today lost in sanitized past



Mark Anthony Neal



Jim Tyson

The observance of Black History Month is less edgy today than in the past, partly because Americans' collective memory of racially charged historical events has become a sanitized, feel-good version of the Civil Rights movement, according to Duke University experts in black culture and American history.

And, as Americans consider the significance of Black History Month, they need to recognize that the simple dynamic of black and white no longer reflects the complicated racial makeup of American society, added a Duke sociologist.

Historian Tim Tyson said Americans remember the Civil Rights era as a "self-congratulatory fable that is soothing, moving and politically acceptable," but bears "no resemblance to what actually happened."

He said Martin Luther King's radical message of economic and political justice has been replaced in the popular memory with an image of Dr. King as "an innocuous black Santa Claus, genial and vacant, a man who wanted us to be nice to one another."

Tyson, a visiting professor and scholar at Duke and a professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is the author of "Blood Done Sign My Name," a memoir about a 1970 lynching in Tyson's hometown of Oxford, N.C.

Mark Anthony Neal, associate professor of black popular culture at Duke, said that Black History Month has become watered down over the years. Chain stores decorate with Black History Month-themed posters, publishers put out books on African-American subjects and high-profile black speakers

are in high demand for a short space of time in February, he noted.

"Black History Month has become part of the marketing of the idea of multiculturalism and pluralism in the United States," Neal said. "It's a selling point, not necessarily a lived reality."

Duke sociology research professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva said Americans need to not only acknowledge the real struggles and conflict of the Civil Rights era, but face up to the racial realities of today.

"First, we must acknowledge that blacks, despite the advances made in the 1960s and 1970s, lag still well behind whites in almost all social indicators," said Duke sociology research professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who specializes in the study of racial stratification in the United States.

"Second, we must also realize that the face of the nation has become increasingly more brown."

The bulk of this new Latino population is fast joining the ranks of the working poor and, thus, socially, economically and symbolically becoming "black-like," Bonilla-Silva said. But a small segment of the Latino population - usually Latinos with lighter skin - are treated as "honorary whites" by white America, and are more accepted and assimilated, he said.

"The historical black-white divide may remain, but it may become more complex and even add a little bit of gray in the middle," he said. "Thus, in this year's Black History Month celebration, we may want to take account of both the new 'black-like,' as well as the 'honorary white,' segments of the Latino population, and examine the role they will play in the future of America."

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