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Symposium: The End of "Black" History?



By Jamie Glazov
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As the month of February passed by, so too did Black History Month – the occasion for Black Americans to focus attention on the contributions that Black Americans have made to America and to civilization. This month of study is meant, arguably, to counter the many myths that have distorted Black History.

Today we gather at Frontpage Symposium to scrutinize the meaning and purpose of Black History Month. And we focus on two basic questions: (1) What exactly is the objective and meaning of this month? (2) Has it outlived its purpose?

To discuss these themes with us today, we are joined by three distinguished guests:

Ron Christie, the former Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director (eventually Acting Director) for USA Freedom Corps. He also served as Vice President Cheney's Deputy Domestic Policy advisor. He is the author of the new book *Black in the White House*.



John McWhorter, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. He is the author of the new book *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*. This book is a sequel to his New York Times best-seller, *Losing the Race*.

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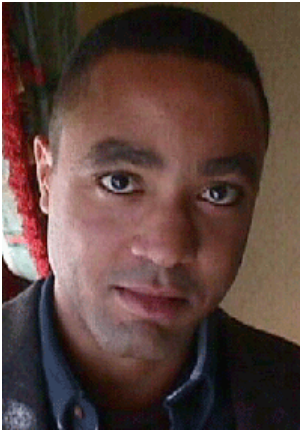
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and

Carol Swain, professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of the highly acclaimed *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress*. Her most recent books include *The New White Nationalism in America: Its Challenge to Integration* and *Contemporary Voices of White Nationalism*.



FP: Ron Christie, John McWhorter and Carol Swain, welcome to Frontpage Symposium.

Let's start with a general theme and see where the discussion goes.

Overall, Black History Month was apparently an effort to fill the void of Black history, or African history, getting ignored in American education. And it is true, of course, that at one time Blacks and their achievements were missing from history books. When Black history was discussed, it was done so through the eyes of white people, etc. So there is obviously much to be said for having the history of Blacks told and also through the eyes of Blacks themselves.

Black History Month was an attempt to go in this direction and February was chosen (first it was a week) to coincide with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass (Feb 14) and Abraham Lincoln (Feb 12).

So let's start with this question: what were the objectives of Black History Month and how do you think they have been met with their outcomes?

John McWhorter?

McWhorter: I think it's clear that Black History Month has succeeded beyond Dr. Woodson's wildest dreams. Today, a certain type is given to claiming that black history is suppressed or all but absent from history books, that America has yet to "acknowledge" slavery, that Africa is thought of as a dark continent full of "primitives" with bones in their noses. These things were all true before the 1970s, in the world of I Love Lucy and hula hoops and having to call the operator to make a long distance phone call.

But since then, it has changed, and deeply. Are all whites walking encyclopedias

about black history? Of course not. But then most blacks aren't either, and in general it is a well known problem that most Americans know little about history at all. More to the point, legions of scholars are engaged in serious research about the black experience, and a great many of them are white. We also have various films that treat black history subjects -- which remain easily consultable, because of modern technology, as videos and DVDs. The mainstream media bend over backwards to give attention to signature work on black history -- currently, notice the massive coverage of Taylor Branch's final instalment of his Civil Rights history trilogy, despite its being a massive and dense book that few will be inclined to read all the way through. Or, we must note the attention paid to Henry Louis Gates' project tracing African roots through DNA -- major media outlets would barely have sniffed at that project in, say, 1965.

In the end, however, I do question one thing -- the idea that a people must know their history in order to feel "whole." Woodson was given to saying that, and it's a mantra in the black community. But is it true? Chinese-Americans, from the ones my own age that I have met over the years, are often not exactly fountains of wisdom on Chinese history. And yet we do not consider them to have an identity problem -- and the fact they were voluntary immigrants, if you think about it, has no logical bearing on this particular issue (as opposed to, say, scholarly performance).

I mention this because I suggest that it might temper any temptation to suppose that black Americans, since we are not typically walking encyclopedias on black history, will remain always "broken" on that score. There will come a time when we might consider the job to have been done -- that because of Woodson's work and the general sea change in race relations in America since the sixties, black history is taught and "on the vine" about as much as it should or could be in a vast, multiethnic, and anti-intellectual society.

And yes, I indeed would count myself as one of the people who feels that way.

FP: Thank you Mr. McWhorter.

Carol Swain?

Swain: The celebration of Black History Month has become a worldwide event in nations where the U.S. government maintains a presence. By all respects, the celebration has been a phenomenal success. The strategies, tactics, and moral justification for the black civil rights movement have served as an inspiration for downtrodden people around the world. In the U.S., however, the celebration has become obligatory, though limited to acceptable, politically correct black speakers. Few institutions offer major speaking opportunities to blacks labelled as conservatives or those who refuse to follow the status quo. As a consequence, students are, more often than not, fed by a steady stream of speakers who offer anger and bitterness rather than pride and optimism about black accomplishments and the work that blacks must do for themselves. The time has come to change the mantra and the messengers.

As a people, African Americans should recognize and accept that black history and white history are aspects of the same and should be presented as a whole. The highlights of the black experience and the contributions of black leaders can easily be integrated into mainstream curricular courses on University campuses. Although blacks may forever celebrate Black History Month, it stands in need of a definite revamping to conform to the needs of the times. Despite the presence of Afro-American Studies Programs at private and state institutions, many students are woefully ignorant of such leaders as Booker T. Washington and the contemporary, Robert L. Woodson who have preached self-determination and individual responsibility as the path to racial betterment, but are still considered experts on Dubois. Changes need to be made in the thought patterns of both whites and blacks who engage in a co-dependency relationship when it comes to social problems and their solutions.

Let's work towards writing a new racial history in America. In my lifetime, I would like to see blacks stop attributing their current problems to slavery and white people end their denial of the inhumanity of what was done in slavery and the Jim Crow era that followed. I would also like to witness a national apology for slavery issued from Washington, D.C. that acknowledges the collective wrong that the nation did to itself and to its black inhabitants. In fact, I would like to stand next to President George W. Bush when he signs the joint resolution in a special Rose Garden ceremony. Such a noble gesture could prove to be a healing balm for our nation's race relations.

Although opponents will often argue that an apology would open the door to legal

claims for monetary reparations, it would actually do no such thing. To begin with, the very legality of slavery before passage of the 13th Amendment would make a claim in tort proceedings highly dubious. Then there is the problem of the statute of limitations having long expired. An additional impediment would be the absence of a living wrongdoer to prosecute. Legal precedent is against it. There is little chance that an apology would trigger the legal liability its opponents claim. Let's face it; the Republican Party would reap the most from initiating the action. An official apology would offer them an opportunity to reclaim the mantle of the party of Lincoln by forging a new relationship with African Americans, one not clouded by the spectacle of Willie Horton, Trent Lott, or the Bush Administration's handling of Hurricane Katrina. I write these words as an Independent who is fully frustrated with the political agendas and priorities of the major political parties and their leading candidates.

FP: There is no shortage of bold and controversial statements in this symposium so far. Ron Christie what do you make of Mr. McWhorter's and Ms. Swain's comments? And kindly tell us your own views of Black History Month.

Christie: Thank you for the opportunity to join you for this very interesting debate. My colleagues have both raised very interesting points - let me first start with Carol's assertion that the United States should issue an apology for the horrors inflicted by slavery. This has been an interesting topic of discussion in Washington, D.C and around the country for quite some time now.

I agree 100% with Dr. Swain that I would like to see a new racial history written in this country where Americans of all colors do not look to the past in order to lay blame or attribute previous injustices for their current state of affairs. I look for an American in which we remove the hyphens that distinguish us -that is, African-Americans, Asian-Americans and other groups will one day revel in the fact that we are ALL Americans and no longer need to place our ethnicity before us first. In order for that day to occur, however, I'm not sure that issuing a national apology for the horrors of slavery is the proper of course of action.

Slavery is a dark and horrific part of the history of the United States of America. Recognizing the atrocities committed here in the United States in our past is very important. At the same time, I wonder to whom an apology should be issued: to me, my parents, my grandparents? This debate might inflame old passions and do more to drive us apart rather than bring us together as a country. We all need to recognize that diversity is the strength and fabric of America and that our strength derives from our diversity.

Instead, I would prefer to see the resources of the United States geared toward educating our children, providing a safety net for our neediest citizens and working to eliminate the trafficking of human beings around the world which still persists in many countries.

I also agree with John's point that one is not "broken" if they do not know every aspect of the history of the ethnicity in which they share. My parents and grandparents have shared with me many of the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow practices across the American South in decades past. We have also marvelled at the accomplishments following periods of Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights era.

At the same time, my parents ensured that I had a strong historical background about other significant events in American history. I would like to ensure our children today are taught about how the United States of America has arrived to where we are at the dawn of the 21st Century - both with the accomplishments and setbacks we have all encountered as American citizens along the way.

McWhorter: Carol is quite right that too often, what goes under the title "black history" is an almost obsessive investigation of how racism has affected black lives. The real message is "Anything that may seem to stem from some inherent inferiority of black people is really due to racism, often in ways that are not apparent on the surface." Black success is genuflected to, but only that -- because showing how we triumphed is beside the point. These courses and departments are also founded upon a basic idea that being black must remain always a "problem" -- the idea of making peace with an imperfect America and just being a human being is considered benighted, and maybe even, of course, underlyingly racist.

However, I am not completely sure that students and others are denied "conservative" voices on race in February. I base that on my own experience -- I am known as "conservative" (although I am actually not in a any true sense) and yet am regularly invited to do panels and speaking gigs as "another voice". I think that perhaps over the past five years or so, the "Soul Patrol" does not have the

power it used to. Academia is its strongest bastion, and yet there are cracks lately, that I slip through fairly often.

As to the apology about slavery that Carol suggests, I would have trouble going that way. This is for the simple reason that the apology would not be accepted or considered meaningful by the very people who motivate us to suggest an apology. It would quickly become fashionable -- for example on black talk radio, courses on Race and The Law, and so on -- to say "They think they can treat us like animals for centuries and then just say 'I'm sorry'?" As far as I'm concerned, Affirmative Action, Martin Luther King day, the defense of the Voting Rights Act by WHITE politicians and lawyers today, and countless other things inconceivable 40 years ago constitute "apology" enough, and maybe we could work on getting more black people to understand that.

Swain: Gentlemen, I am pleased to report that in a recent article in the Black Commentator.Com (March 2, 2006), Harvard University Professor Martin Kilson includes John and me with such conservative luminaries as Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Walter Williams, Robert Woodson, and Alan Keyes. According to Kilson, in our role as water boys and water girls for the right-wing Republicans, we carry on the ideological tradition of Booker T. Washington who preached self-help and self-determination for black people, whereas he and the civil rights cadre of leaders carry the positive legacy of W.E.B. DuBois. The latter figure has been almost canonized by black elites to the neglect of the former. Let me be the first to say that I could not be more flattered by the attention. I am an admirer of many of the men listed and consider myself doubly honored by having been the only woman castigated by Professor Kilson.

Since we right-wing conservatives need to stick together for maximum impact, I appeal to Ron to use his black influence in the White House, and to John his at the Manhattan Institute, to join with me in support of the national apology for slavery. The apology should be championed by the Bush Administration. It is a no-brainer, win-win for the Republican Party. It is the morally correct thing to do and could set in motion a series of events that would at minimum weaken the allegiance that many blacks have with the Democratic Party.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 states "to every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." I contend that this is the season to make history by having the Republican Party take the lead on this issue. Republicans would benefit the most because of its association with racist politicians and policies that are often insensitive to the needs of minorities and working people.

Ron, the apology does not preclude the Republicans and the Democrats working on issues such as education, housing, immigration, and human trafficking. In fact, it would give them more credibility on a host of domestic and international issues.

The apology I envision would be offered to the descendants of all persons adversely affected by slavery and its Jim Crow legacy. The apology would not place blame on individual whites and it should not be avoided because of what the Black Caucus, Jesse Jackson, Julian Bond, or the black intellectual elites on University campuses might say. The apology is not for them.

The apology is for the people and for the cleansing and healing of the nation. It makes no sense to offer the apology exclusively to blacks since some blacks participated in the practice while some whites were staunch opponents. One source reported that in 1860, roughly 3,000 free blacks held almost 20,000 slaves. You can bet that these slaves were not all family members. The bottom line is that slavery was a national crime that all our ancestors participated in, including American Indian tribes, such as the Cherokee.

The apology would be meaningful to many ordinary black Americans who have no interest whatsoever in reparations. All they want is an acknowledgement of the injustice that was done to the weakest of the weak. John, I beg to disagree with you about affirmative action, Martin Luther King Day, and the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s being apology enough for slavery and the Jim Crow Legacy. There is something healing about having one of the greatest nations of the world join other great nations in acknowledging a collective wrong that was allowed to continue far too long.

One final point for John on the unrelated matter of the frequency of black invitations to college and university campuses, perhaps, the cracks that you see are related to the platform provided by the Manhattan Institute. My experience tells me that it is extremely difficult to get any conservatives invited for university-wide speaking engagements and that black conservatives within academia find themselves isolated and devalued. It is the nature of the beast. The Soul Patrol

does not operate alone. The problem lies with the values and missions of the institutions as a whole.

Comrades, these are my thoughts on this matter. As a black Independent, I have no home notwithstanding Professor Kilson's desire to force me into the black conservative camp. By choice, I am an intellectual nomad who owes her existence and stature to the beneficence of the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob. I close by appealing to my brethren and sisters of all races to join me in the pursuit of the national apology for slavery and then help me and help others to work towards a lasting racial reconciliation that takes the black agenda away from knee-jerk liberal causes and demands and pushes it towards social and moral internal rehabilitation within. Many of the problems, if not all, that masquerade as being about race are really about social class and culture.

Christie: Christie: I agree with Carol's quote from *Ecclesiastes 3:1* that "to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven." I believe that the season and the time for a national apology for slavery is far behind us. I could understand the use for such an apology immediately following the formal end of slavery to those individuals who suffered unspeakable horrors from the individuals who inflicted such cruel mental and physical punishment.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, however, I fail to see why the Republican Party, for political purpose, should issue an apology for slavery because, to use your words, "Republicans would benefit the most because of its association with racist politicians and policies that are often insensitive to the needs of minorities and working people." Does Carol mean to suggest that only Republican policies and politicians have been racist in days past? A review of recent history shows the strong resistance to passage of landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act came not from the Republican Party, but Southern Democrats. Republicans were the ones who championed passage of this landmark legislation while Democrats employed diversionary tactics such as the filibuster in the Senate to derail civil rights legislation.

Rather than apologize for wrongs inflicted in the past, Republicans must do a better job of discussing how their policies and values are best suited to moving America forward regardless of skin color, religion or ethnic identification. In the Spring of 2006, minority homeownership is at the highest levels in American history, Black and Hispanic students are narrowing the gap in mathematics and reading at the 4th and 8th grades while the unemployment rate is lower on average than the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s as millions of new jobs have been created since 2003. All of these policies were brought about with a Republican controlled Congress and Republican President George W. Bush occupying the Oval Office.

I believe the season and the time for issuing a national apology for slavery have long since passed us by. I look forward to working with Americans of all colors, religions and political affiliation to advocate policies which will recognize that the strength of America is our diversity and our diversity in America is our strength. An apology for slavery is a look to the past – I believe we need to re-focus our efforts on advocating policies that will bring about meaningful results in peoples lives moving forward.

FP: Ron Christie, John McWhorter and Carol Swain, thank you for joining Frontpage Symposium.

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