



## Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Attorney General Eric Holder at the Department of Justice African American History Month Program

Wednesday, February 18, 2009

Every year, in February, we attempt to recognize and to appreciate black history. It is a worthwhile endeavor for the contributions of African Americans to this great nation are numerous and significant. Even as we fight a war against terrorism, deal with the reality of electing an African American as our President for the first time and deal with the other significant issues of the day, the need to confront our racial past, and our racial present, and to understand the history of African people in this country, endures. One cannot truly understand America without understanding the historical experience of black people in this nation. Simply put, to get to the heart of this country one must examine its racial soul.

Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards. Though race related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussion, and though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation, we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about race. It is an issue we have never been at ease with and given our nation's history this is in some ways understandable. And yet, if we are to make progress in this area we must feel comfortable enough with one another, and tolerant enough of each other, to have frank conversations about the racial matters that continue to divide us. But we must do more- and we in this room bear a special responsibility. Through its work and through its example this Department of Justice, as long as I am here, must - and will - lead the nation to the "new birth of freedom" so long ago promised by our greatest President. This is our duty and our solemn obligation.

We commemorated five years ago, the 50th anniversary of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. And though the world in which we now live is fundamentally different than that which existed then, this nation has still not come to grips with its racial past nor has it been willing to contemplate, in a truly meaningful way, the diverse future it is fated to have. To our detriment, this is typical of the way in which this nation deals with issues of race. And so I would suggest that we use February of every year to not only commemorate black history but also to foster a period of dialogue among the races. This is admittedly an artificial device to generate discussion that should come more naturally, but our history is such that we must find ways to force ourselves to confront that which we have become expert at avoiding.

As a nation we have done a pretty good job in melding the races in the workplace. We work with one another, lunch together and, when the event is at the workplace during work hours or shortly thereafter, we socialize with one another fairly well, irrespective of race. And yet even this interaction operates within certain limitations. We know, by "American instinct" and by learned behavior, that certain subjects are off limits and that to explore them risks, at best embarrassment, and, at worst, the questioning of one's character. And outside the workplace the situation is even more bleak in that there is almost no significant interaction between us. On Saturdays and Sundays America in the year 2009 does not, in some ways, differ significantly from the country that existed some fifty years ago. This is truly sad. Given all that we as a nation went through during the civil rights struggle it is hard for me to accept that the result of those efforts was to create an America that is more prosperous, more positively race conscious and yet is voluntarily socially segregated.

As a nation we should use Black History month as a means to deal with this continuing problem. By creating what will admittedly be, at first, artificial opportunities to engage one another we can hasten the day when the

dream of individual, character based, acceptance can actually be realized. To respect one another we must have a basic understanding of one another. And so we should use events such as this to not only learn more about the facts of black history but also to learn more about each other. This will be, at first, a process that is both awkward and painful but the rewards are potentially great. The alternative is to allow to continue the polite, restrained mixing that now passes as meaningful interaction but that accomplishes little. Imagine if you will situations where people- regardless of their skin color- could confront racial issues freely and without fear. The potential of this country, that is becoming increasingly diverse, would be greatly enhanced. I fear however, that we are taking steps that, rather than advancing us as a nation are actually dividing us even further. We still speak too much of "them" and not "us". There can, for instance, be very legitimate debate about the question of affirmative action. This debate can, and should, be nuanced, principled and spirited. But the conversation that we now engage in as a nation on this and other racial subjects is too often simplistic and left to those on the extremes who are not hesitant to use these issues to advance nothing more than their own, narrow self interest. Our history has demonstrated that the vast majority of Americans are uncomfortable with, and would like to not have to deal with, racial matters and that is why those, black or white, elected or self-appointed, who promise relief in easy, quick solutions, no matter how divisive, are embraced. We are then free to retreat to our race protected cocoons where much is comfortable and where progress is not really made. If we allow this attitude to persist in the face of the most significant demographic changes that this nation has ever confronted- and remember, there will be no majority race in America in about fifty years- the coming diversity that could be such a powerful, positive force will, instead, become a reason for stagnation and polarization. We cannot allow this to happen and one way to prevent such an unwelcome outcome is to engage one another more routinely- and to do so now.

As I indicated before, the artificial device that is Black History month is a perfect vehicle for the beginnings of such a dialogue. And so I urge all of you to use the opportunity of this month to talk with your friends and co-workers on the other side of the divide about racial matters. In this way we can hasten the day when we truly become one America.

It is also clear that if we are to better understand one another the study of black history is essential because the history of black America and the history of this nation are inextricably tied to each other. It is for this reason that the study of black history is important to everyone- black or white. For example, the history of the United States in the nineteenth century revolves around a resolution of the question of how America was going to deal with its black inhabitants. The great debates of that era and the war that was ultimately fought are all centered around the issue of, initially, slavery and then the reconstruction of the vanquished region. A dominant domestic issue throughout the twentieth century was, again, America's treatment of its black citizens. The civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's changed America in truly fundamental ways. Americans of all colors were forced to examine basic beliefs and long held views. Even so, most people, who are not conversant with history, still do not really comprehend the way in which that movement transformed America. In racial terms the country that existed before the civil rights struggle is almost unrecognizable to us today. Separate public facilities, separate entrances, poll taxes, legal discrimination, forced labor, in essence an American apartheid, all were part of an America that the movement destroyed. To attend her state's taxpayer supported college in 1963 my late sister in law had to be escorted to class by United States Marshals and past the state's governor, George Wallace. That frightening reality seems almost unthinkable to us now. The civil rights movement made America, if not perfect, better.

In addition, the other major social movements of the latter half of the twentieth century- feminism, the nation's treatment of other minority groups, even the anti-war effort- were all tied in some way to the spirit that was set free by the quest for African American equality. Those other movements may have occurred in the absence of the civil rights struggle but the fight for black equality came first and helped to shape the way in which other groups of people came to think of themselves and to raise their desire for equal treatment. Further, many of the tactics that were used by these other groups were developed in the civil rights movement.

And today the link between the black experience and this country is still evident. While the problems that continue to afflict the black community may be more severe, they are an indication of where the rest of the nation may be if corrective measures are not taken. Our inner cities are still too conversant with crime but the level of fear generated by that crime, now found in once quiet, and now electronically padlocked suburbs is alarming and further demonstrates that our past, present and future are linked. It is not safe for this nation to assume that the

unaddressed social problems in the poorest parts of our country can be isolated and will not ultimately affect the larger society.

Black history is extremely important because it is American history. Given this, it is in some ways sad that there is a need for a black history month. Though we are all enlarged by our study and knowledge of the roles played by blacks in American history, and though there is a crying need for all of us to know and acknowledge the contributions of black America, a black history month is a testament to the problem that has afflicted blacks throughout our stay in this country. Black history is given a separate, and clearly not equal, treatment by our society in general and by our educational institutions in particular. As a former American history major I am struck by the fact that such a major part of our national story has been divorced from the whole. In law, culture, science, athletics, industry and other fields, knowledge of the roles played by blacks is critical to an understanding of the American experiment. For too long we have been too willing to segregate the study of black history. There is clearly a need at present for a device that focuses the attention of the country on the study of the history of its black citizens. But we must endeavor to integrate black history into our culture and into our curriculums in ways in which it has never occurred before so that the study of black history, and a recognition of the contributions of black Americans, become commonplace. Until that time, Black History Month must remain an important, vital concept. But we have to recognize that until black history is included in the standard curriculum in our schools and becomes a regular part of all our lives, it will be viewed as a novelty, relatively unimportant and not as weighty as so called "real" American history.

I, like many in my generation, have been fortunate in my life and have had a great number of wonderful opportunities. Some may consider me to be a part of black history. But we do a great disservice to the concept of black history recognition if we fail to understand that any success that I have had, cannot be viewed in isolation. I stood, and stand, on the shoulders of many other black Americans. Admittedly, the identities of some of these people, through the passage of time, have become lost to us- the men, and women, who labored long in fields, who were later legally and systemically discriminated against, who were lynched by the hundreds in the century just past and those others who have been too long denied the fruits of our great American culture. The names of too many of these people, these heroes and heroines, are lost to us. But the names of others of these people should strike a resonant chord in the historical ear of all in our nation: Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Walter White, Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Charles Drew, Paul Robeson, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Vivian Malone, Rosa Parks, Marion Anderson, Emmitt Till. These are just some of the people who should be generally recognized and are just some of the people to whom all of us, black and white, owe such a debt of gratitude. It is on their broad shoulders that I stand as I hope that others will some day stand on my more narrow ones.

Black history is a subject worthy of study by all our nation's people. Blacks have played a unique, productive role in the development of America. Perhaps the greatest strength of the United States is the diversity of its people and to truly understand this country one must have knowledge of its constituent parts. But an unstudied, not discussed and ultimately misunderstood diversity can become a divisive force. An appreciation of the unique black past, acquired through the study of black history, will help lead to understanding and true compassion in the present, where it is still so sorely needed, and to a future where all of our people are truly valued.

Thank you.

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