

The Celebration Of Black History Month Is Needed More Than Ever In 2023
(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

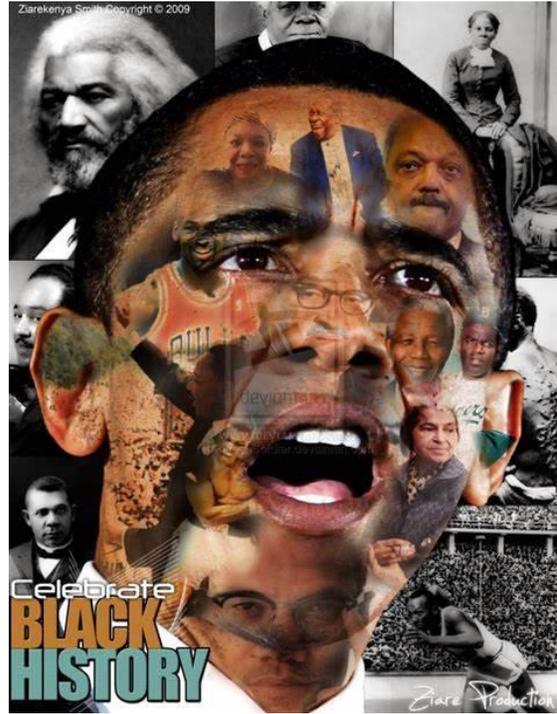
Celebrating Black History Month in 2023 is more important than ever before. There is a movement afoot to ban the teaching in Public Schools of the struggles confronting African-Americans who lived with and worked to overcome slavery, segregation, and various forms of racism throughout U.S. history. Supported by white supremacy groups in a number of states, it has the official backing of many Republican officials such as Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida. Proponents of these bans say that teachers of black history over emphasize the struggles and injustices of the past to the detriment of the greatness of America's story. They add that white students should not be made to feel guilty about events that happened long ago.

It is an understatement to say that such reasoning has no merit, while it is also unconscionable to deny part of our population its place in history. Another real danger is having politicians meddling with standards of public education in order to cater to members of their political base. Finally, any serious historian would testify that such an initiative undermines the value of history itself.

If the study of history has any value at all, it is to provide us with an uncensored story of the people, events and ideas that brought us over time to our present situation. This complex story involves heroes and villains and portrays great, tragic, inspiring, and unfortunate moments and events. Historians like Arnold Toynbee look at a country's actions over time to measure how effectively it dealt with the major issues that needed to be addressed.

For instance, an examination of the institution of slavery in the U.S. would look at how it came about, its evolution as an economic factor in the South, and how slaves were treated as property to be bought and sold without any legal rights as human beings. This examination would review the long struggle to abolish slavery that finally ended with the Civil War. The contributions of black and white individuals who participated in the Underground Railroad to help slaves escape or the Abolitionist Movement would also be recognized. Harriet Tubman, a courageous Black leader of the Underground Railroad, comes immediately to mind.

As a current senior citizen, this writer witnessed aspects of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that deserve to be remembered in the history books rather than excluded by white supremacists. As a rather naive white student, I was shocked during a trip to South Carolina and then Virginia in 1959 and 1960 to see segregation practices at work. Then, in college, an African-American friend told me what it was like for him growing up in the segregated South.



An inspiring moment for me in the summer of 1963 was hearing Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. I was then working for the Charter Committee, Cincinnati's reform third party, writing press releases for several of its candidates running for City Council. On the afternoon of the March on Washington, a large Civil Rights' gathering in our nation's capital, Forest Frank, Charter's Executive Director, invited me into his office to watch this event on television. Soon after I took a seat, the Rev. King began his address to the assembled crowd. From the very beginning of the speech, his soaring rhetoric captured my imagination. His powerful and poetic words touched my heart and convinced me of the importance of the Civil Rights' movement. I instinctively knew that I was listening to and watching a special moment in the life of this country.

Dr. King's words made me realize that I had the opportunity to be part of an important step in advancing Civil Rights in Cincinnati. One of the Charter Committee's Council candidate's that year was Theodore M. Berry. Berry, an African-American, had previously served several terms on Council when that body's elections were determined by Proportional Representation. PR is a voting system that makes it easier for minorities to elect a representative, but in 1957 a Charter Amendment proposal was passed by Cincinnati voters that eliminated PR.

The backers of the ballot initiative to do away with proportional representation waged a racist campaign that said Ted Berry was gaining too much influence on Council, and that the best way to end his career was to eliminate PR as a voting system. The campaign succeeded and Berry lost his seat on Council. The Charter Committee in 1963 was embarked on a major effort to return him to Council under the current system of at-large voting.



Although I was working for Charter to get press coverage for several of its candidates that year, more experienced professionals were handling Theodore Berry's campaign. However, I volunteered to do neighborhood canvassing for him, and I spent two or three weekends that fall going door to door with his flyers. The happy ending to this story is the successful election of Ted Berry that November. Cincinnati again had an African-American member of Council. A few years later this able community leader was appointed by President Johnson to an administrative post focusing on the Administration's War on Poverty programs.

These personal recollections of significant national and local events in recent Black history need to be remembered rather than erased from our collective memory. Dr. King's emergence on the national stage and Theodore Berry's leadership in Cincinnati provide all of us with examples of progress in the unending struggle to overcome racism in this country. With the revitalization of racism and violent hate groups during Trump's Presidency, we need a lot of help from the past to show us that progress can be made when appropriate leaders and organizations emerge to take on the new round of critical issues and problems.

