

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH: A TIME TO REMEMBER,  
A TIME OF REDEDICATION**

JAMES L. SOLOMON, JR.

*This is a speech that James Solomon gave on September 6, 1983 to the University of South Carolina at Lancaster for the Black History Month activities sponsored by the Black Awareness Group (BAG) at USC-Lancaster.*

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you the students and faculty of the University of South Carolina at Lancaster, your parents, friends, and other members of the Lancaster Community, some of my thoughts regarding Black History Month.

I am pleased to see that a cross-section of the community is in attendance today because I believe that the value of observing a Black History Month is enhanced when it becomes an experience in human relations for both blacks and whites. This day and indeed this month by their inherent emphasis cause us to think more about the black experience in America, affords us the opportunity to emphasize some of the positive aspects of this experience, and provides each of us black and white the opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the very foundation of the American dream.

That self evident truth so nobly expressed by our founding fathers:

That all men [and women too] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.<sup>1</sup>

So then Black History Month for All Americans is a time to remember, a time to dream and a time to rededicate ourselves to the concept of brotherhood, fair play, and equity for Blacks in our respective community.

*First Let Us Remember*

We should remember that America was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose. This purpose is set forth not only in the historical documents through which the birth of this nation was proclaimed as in the statements, “all men are created equal” and “Governments

---

<sup>1</sup>“The Declaration of Independence: The Want, Will, and Hopes of the People.” 4 July 1776, Independence Hall Association, <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>.

[deriving their just powers from the] consent of the governed.”<sup>2</sup> but also in the will and the soul of its people as exemplifies by such statements as:

“Give me liberty or give me death” and “We shall Overcome.”

These were not meant to be empty, meaningless words, they were meant to convey to all the world the very purpose for the existence of America.

Former President Lyndon B. Johnson put it this way in a speech before a joint session of the Congress [on] March 15, 1965. President Johnson said in speaking of such words that “Those words promised to every citizen that he shall share in the dignity of man. This dignity cannot be found in a man’s possession. It cannot be found in his power or in his position. It really rests on his right to be treated as a man equal in opportunity to all others. It says that he shall have freedom. He shall choose his leaders, educate his children, and provide for his family according to his ability and his merit as a human being. To apply any other test, to deny a man his hopes because of his color or race is to deny America.”

But we know through history and through our own experiences that Blacks have been denied and are being denied the opportunity to share fully in the American dream.

We all know about slavery, segregation, the separate but equal doctrine. We all know that Black Americans have only in our generation begun to share again in the American dream. Black History Month emphasizes this to all of us black and white because being human, blacks as well as whites have a tendency to forget and thereby to lose the value of the lessons that only history can teach.

We should also remember - that Black Americans have a proud heritage of notable achievement. For many Americans, Black and White have a scant knowledge of this fact. This ignorance is easily explained. The standard texts on the history of America and the Western World, the very sources from which we have drawn our knowledge of Man and Society, have consistently excluded the contributions of Blacks. I believe that this omission has been a significant factor in the perpetuation of racism in America and the distortion of Black self-esteem.

Black History Month gives us an opportunity to emphasize this omission and to point to some of the remarkable achievements that have been made by Blacks. By so doing, we strengthen the confidence and self assurance of Black Americans and establish for all Americans that blacks have historical roots deep within the soil of Western Civilization.

We should remember that Blacks have made noticeable achievements in the arts, education, science, government - indeed in every facet of life. And

---

<sup>2</sup>“The Declaration of Independence: The Want, Will, and Hopes of the People.” 4 July 1776, Independence Hall Association, <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>.

in our remembering, we should note the contributions that specific black persons have made in specific areas. By so doing, we permit a comparison of the contributions of blacks with non-blacks. This will help us to understand that knowledge, understanding, bravery, patriotism, intelligence, loyalty, indeed all those qualities by which we judge mankind's progress toward civilization is no respecter of race or sex. Example of such qualities appear throughout history in men and women who are black as well as white.

I have taken this approach in trying to point out why Black History Month is a time to remember because I am not an historian and therefore felt unqualified to present specifics of history in a meaningful way. However, since we are on a campus of the University of South Carolina, I do wish to present a brief sketch of a distinguished professor at the University of South Carolina, Professor Richard T. Greener, who happened to be black.

Professor Greener was the first black graduate of Howard University and the first black faculty member at Carolina. He came to the University in mid-November 1873 as a professor of mental and moral philosophy. While at Carolina, Professor Greener served as acting librarian, and rearranged 27,000 volumes in the library. I am told that the scheme that he used established the basis for the Dewey Decimal System, still used in libraries throughout the country. He earned a law degree and was admitted to the Bar. He also taught courses in Latin, Greek, Mathematics, and Constitutional History. I cite this sketch on Professor Greener for two reasons. First, to demonstrate that one does not have to go far afield to find notable contributions by blacks and second, to emphasize that the contribution of blacks have help to form the fabric of American culture even in South Carolina.

The challenge of remembering during Black History Month is to carry the interest in learning the truth about black history throughout the year. Black History Month is a hollow experience if each one of us does not make the commitment to seek out through study a better understanding of the contributions of blacks toward the advancement of civilization and to manifest this increased understanding through our day to day efforts to improve human relations in our community.

Black History Month also serves as a time to take stock of the progress we have made toward addressing the problems of racism in America.

There is reason to be proud that blacks and whites now serve in the S.C. House of Representatives and the S.C. Senate, that our schools are no longer segregated, that we can assemble ourselves in an observance of black history and black achievements, white and black, without feeling uncomfortable. There is reason to be proud that there are black mayors, business persons, administrators in the corporate world as well as in educational institutions and in government. These are all things that we can be proud of for they lead us to believe that we are finally approaching that day when as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "This nation will rise up, live out the true meaning

of its creed . . . when . . . freedom . . . ring from . . . every state and every city.”<sup>3</sup>

But we must not become complacent we must not become satisfied with the progress we have made for to do so may mean that such progress will cease.

*The Need for Rededication*

Consequently, there is a need in Black American for a rededication of individuals and groups to the principles and ideas that have resulted in the progress we now enjoy.

Author Lerone Bennett, Jr. in his article in the October 1981 issue of Ebony Magazine titled, “The Second Time Around” stated that “during the 1860’s and 70’s some people in America felt that the race problem had been solved forever.” One man who had no doubt said after the Emancipation Proclamation and the enactment of the the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, that “all distinction founded upon race or color have been forever abolished in the United States.” I wonder how he would have felt and what he would have said had he lived to see Jim Crow and the laws of segregation which during the early and middle 1980’s attempted to enslave the minds of whites and blacks alike and in many ways demeaned and disenfranchised blacks in America in a way that slavery never could.

**Acknowledgements.** This text is based on an original document in the James L. Solomon holdings of the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

---

<sup>3</sup>King, Jr., Martin Luther. “I Have a Dream.” 1963. National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>.