

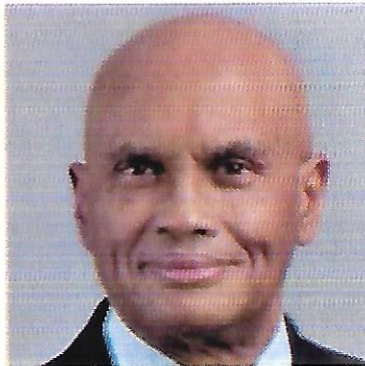
*Association for the Study of African-American Life and History
ASALH*

The St. Petersburg Branch (Organizing)



1875-1950

Dr. Carter G Woodson – ASALH Founder



Richard Joseph PhD - Keynote Speaker

***2015 Inaugural Black History Month Celebration
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America From Selma to Ferguson: Reflections of a Scholar-Activist

It is a great honor and privilege to deliver this address to celebrate the inauguration of the St. Petersburg chapter of the Association for the Study of African-American Life and History and the centenary of the creation of ASALH by Carter G. Woodson and Jesse E. Morland.

I began the 21st day of February 2015, as I do most days, by reading the *New York Times*. I was greeted by a hortatory op ed article - “What Would Malcom X Think? – written by the black leader’s daughter, Ilyasah Shabazz, published on the 50th anniversary of her father’s death. It prompted me to go online and download the editorial published by the same newspaper the day after Malcolm X was slayed:

I will quote a few excerpts:

*“The life and death of Malcolm X provides **a discordant but typical theme** for the times in which we live. He was a **case history**, as well as an extraordinary and **twisted man**, turning many true **gifts to evil purpose**.*

*Malcolm X had the ingredients for leadership, but **his ruthless and fanatical belief in violence** not only set him apart from the **responsible leaders** of the civil rights movement and the overwhelming majority of Negroes. It also **marked him for notoriety, and for a violent end**.*

*Malcolm X’s life was **strangely and pitifully wasted**. But this was because he did not seek to fit into society or into the life of his own people. He could not even come to terms with his fellow black extremists. The world he saw through those horn-rimmed glasses of his was **distorted and dark**. But he made it darker still with **his exaltation of fanaticism**.*

*Yesterday someone came **out of that darkness that he spawned, and killed him**. The murder of Malcolm X ... could easily touch off a **war of vengeance of the kind he himself fomented**. It will take alertness and vigilance on the part of the police, especially in view of the ease with which lethal weapons are available, to make sure that violence is avoided.”*

Malcolm X was portrayed by *The Times* as the author of the violence that killed him, a view held by many Americans of the dominant racial and political groups at the time. *The Times* was wrong then about Malcolm and wrong about violence and racism in America.

I had hosted the black leader at Dartmouth College to speak on January 26, 1965, less than a month before his death. Two days after his visit, I wrote a column, “Toward Self Respect”, published in the College newspaper. Here are a few excerpts:

“I believe that Malcolm X came the closest of any leader so far in detecting **the true pulse** of the Movement, but then veered off course...”

“I ... believe there has to be a nationalist Black Revolution in America, of Black people regaining **a sense of dignity** in themselves, in their color, in their features, in their culture...and in their humanity. There

has to be a humanization of the Negro, a realization that he can **create his own destiny** through the exercise of his mind, his labor, and his community of expression with other Black men..."

"A recent Rockefeller study revealed that no more than a dozen Negroes in New York own businesses which hire more than 10 people..." "Just as the nations of the world are respecting the African nations as nations in the world arena, so also will White persons of the United States have to respect their fellow Negro citizens, when Negroes have so asserted their present economic, human, and cultural resources to make the **Black society of Americans**, a society to be proud of."

"I am not a separatist...I am a nationalist Negro in the broadest sense of the word nationalist: a feeling for the need of a particular group of people **to assert themselves and gain expression as a group**. I am a Negro American who believes that until the slave mentality of the Negro has been replaced with a free, independent, nationalistic mentality, then any hope for an American society of equal Black and White men is self-deluding".

The death of Malcolm took place shortly before the historic Selma to Montgomery march in support of the Voting Rights Act. Together with a fellow Dartmouth student activist, James Bopp, I traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, to take part in volunteer efforts to assist the marchers and conduct voter registration drives. I will now read a few excerpts from my speech commemorating the birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr, at Dartmouth on January 15, 1980, just a few months after I had returned to join the faculty after nine years studying and teaching in Europe and Africa.

"At the time of the March from Selma...the expectation was widespread that it would take only one spark to set loose a wave of unprecedented violence in the South. [I then described hand-delivering a message to Dr. King at an encampment outside Montgomery where Harry Belafonte and others were entertaining the marchers] "I saw a car driving off with him....and waved the car to a halt, and told Dr. King about the message through the window...As I walked back to my post, I could not help thinking of how vulnerable Dr. King had been at that moment to anyone carrying, not a genuine message as I was, but a weapon." [I then described observing the final march through the streets of Montgomery] "As I watched them going by, I saw from close up the face of Brother Martin...I saw absolute courage, the courage needed to walk unarmed into the valley of the shadow of death, where from any corner, any tree, , any window a shot could ring out – and it would be all over for his mortal existence."

Here is a further excerpt from that talk of 25 years ago:

"I never fully understood the tragedy of the Black experience in the United States until I spent a few months, the summer of 1967, in Ruleville, Sunflower county, smack in the Mississippi Delta...There, for over a century before the Emancipation Proclamation, Black men, women and children had produced the cotton which stood at the center of an economic complex, beginning with the slave ships along the west coast of Africa, to the plantations of the southern states, to the mills of northern England, which had generated the massive capital that led to the expansion of industrial power in the European and North American world. But what did I see in 1967? Wherever you look for miles in any direction were the large plantations owned by Whites, like Senator James Eastland. And the Blacks? Shacks, Shacks, wooden shacks along dirt roads with pictures of Jesus Christ and John Kennedy pinned up on the wall."

Last Saturday, my wife and I went to see the movie, *Selma*. I did so because of this event today. It is not easy for me to sit through cinematic depictions of periods I lived intensively. Who wants to go back there? Who wants to experience again profound feelings of rage, the tensions between the non-violent philosophy of Martin King and the revulsion some of us felt at hearing: "If there is any blood flowing in the street, let it be the blood of those fighting for justice." King without Malcolm did not suffice; nor, I would now add, did the reverse.

There was little in the film that that I didn't already know. What I took away from the screening was first, the raw depiction of violence, integral to slavery and segregation, and the provocation and confrontation of that violence by the Movement. The role of the State, as abettor of racist violence, whose instruments were used to disrupt and undermine the Movement, and – in the person of John Doar of the Justice Department – as the sometimes protector of King and other leaders and activists. But most important part of the experience was seeing a largely white audience, in a predominantly white and affluent American city, riveted by what unfolded on the screen. Had I attended screening of "Twelve Years a Slave", which I will now do, I would most likely have had the same experience.

Through these films, Americans are being brought face-to-face with how their country was constructed, how much of its wealth was acquired, how the benefits and privileges they take for granted were procured through the subjugation and denigration of various peoples and, in particular, enslaved Africans. Dr. Eric Williams, leader of the nationalist movement in my native Trinidad and Tobago, wrote the classic study at Oxford University, *Capitalism and Slavery*, so that basic understanding was an essential part of the intellectual legacy transmitted to me. Anyone who watches *Selma* will unavoidably think of Trayvon Martin, or Michael Brown in Ferguson or Eric Garner, and many others brutalized or killed in such encounters.

But we have to go further than the use of lethal force against Blacks and other minorities by police officers. Two weeks ago, a three-day Summit was held at the White House on Countering Violent Extremism. *Countering Violent Extremism* (CVE) is replacing Counter-Terrorism as a construct for what many people would call Countering Islamic Extremism. *Selma* shows in the rawest possible way how the violent extremism experienced by Blacks in the United States was confronted (and occasionally *countered*) in the 1960s. There is an unbroken line of continuity for centuries in the extreme violence – systemic atrocities - which African peoples have undergone in the United States. If you don't grasp that, you cannot begin to understand Malcolm X, or Fannie Lou Hamer, or any of our great political activists who walked again, and again, through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and usually without any protection.

From the time a small group of my fellow students met Malcolm X on January 26, striding out of the small plane in West Lebanon, NH, then sitting with him in a restaurant on the main street of Hanover as a white customer vehemently abused him, and being alone with him on stage in Dartmouth's main auditorium, the overriding concern was violence, of violent death. The rupture among the Black Muslims was at a height, and Malcolm had recently returned from the Middle East where his pacific experience and message contrasted with the heightened anxiety of American security agencies. Many Americans did not understand Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and other leading civil rights activists because they

were insulated from the systematic violence of so-called “race relations” in America. Recently, the project of Bryan Stevenson to erect markers at the site of almost 4,000 lynchings is just one of many necessary steps to bring to American consciousness this pernicious aspect and pervasive aspect of the shaping of the African-American reality in America. The violence visited on Mexican Americans is also drawing appropriate attention.

The great disconnect between American awareness and the reality of racial terror can be seen in former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani comment that President Obama did not love his country. According to Giuliani, Obama is “unemotional except on subjects where he gets emotional. Not the slaughtering of Christians, not the slaughtering of the Jews, not the slaughtering of the Syrians, but Ferguson”. I don’t think that Giuliani is redeemable but, judging from the emotion in the audience as it viewed *Selma*, or the response the audience at the Oscars last weekend to John Legend and Commons rendition of “Glory”, I think many Americans of all generations, classes, and ethnicities are prepared to confront the depths of “Black Lives Matters”, “Hands-Up, Don’t Shoot” , and “I Can’t Breathe”.

I see a major role for ASALH and many other civic organizations to play. If you haven’t done so, I suggest that you read the article by “Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations” published in *The Atlantic* in June 2014. I hope he will produce a compressed version of his article so it would be read by more people. I have never been enthused by the call for reparations because I was never convinced that it was achievable. Ta-Nehisi hasn’t changed my feelings about that policy objective, but he convinced me that we need a radical strategy to overcome black marginalization, black poverty, and the social pathologies of black ghettos (though he rejects the concept). After his searing discussion of how racism and violence constitute “a crime that implicates American people themselves”, and quotes the black householder that black people “are so far behind now” “because of **then**”, Ta-Nehisi states: “I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as – if not more than – the specific answers that might be produced”, I disagree with that line of thought.

Without specific answers, a lot of consciousness raising, protesting, and demonstrating could result in empty outcomes. We have seen this with the Occupy Movement which was strong on emotion, on criticism, even on analysis, but weak on policy suggestions. That came across very clearly in *Selma* as King saw the golden opportunity of focusing on the Voting Rights Bill. But I also saw the eventual frustration of achieving voting rights without a plan for reversing the economic disempowerment of rural Blacks in Mississippi. My response was to organize an Economic Cooperative, as first step. As much as Mrs. Hamer liked this idea, and recognized the need to address the economic consequences of Jim Crow, she couldn’t let me pass up the opportunity to continue my studies at Oxford. I am here today as an Africanist scholar-activist, and not an Americanist scholar-activist, because Mrs. Hamer convinced me to return to Oxford University.

We have to think beyond the damning history, and the chants of marchers. According to Ilyasah Shabazz, her father “would be the first to say that slogans aren’t action. They amount to nothing but a complaint filed against a system that does not care.” The Foreign Minister of Germany, Wolfgang Schäuble, similarly declared with regard to the demands of the left-wing Greek for major changes in the

austerity program to which previous governments had agreed; "Being in government is a date with reality, and reality is often not as nice as a dream." (NYT 2/22/15).

Selma and Ferguson are **dates with reality**. The former produced a Voting Rights bill that transformed local and state governments throughout the U.S. and eventually led, as Barack Obama admitted, to his own election as President of the United States. What can the Fergusons of America lead to? I will make some suggestions drawn from the 50 years since I stood alongside Malcom X on a stage in Hanover, New Hampshire, or in the 48 years since I spent many an evening chatting with Mrs. Hamer on her porch in Ruleville, or travelled down many a back road with Perry Hamer in Sunflower County.

The so-called American "Conversation on Race" needs to parse the threads, and racism and violence in police enforcement are a few of them. In 1967, when I wanted to devote myself fulltime to Freedom Work in Mississippi, Mrs. Hamer prevailed on me to return to Oxford and continue my studies as a Rhodes Scholar. In 1970, when I wanted to stay on in the U.S. and work fulltime on peace and justice issues, my wife, Jennifer, told me that she would not return to England with our first son, Mark, to enable me to do so. Following the massacre at Kent State on May 4, 1970, I had joined students at UCLA protesting the presence of police in response to a demonstration on campus. I was plucked from the protesters and subjected to a barrage of racial invective by the LAPD while being forced to walk on tiptoes to the paddy wagon while thumbs were forced into handcuffs and my own thumbs wrenched upward.

Rap Brown said that "racism is as American as apple-pie". Well racism and violence are deeply embedded in the DNA of America. That is what Malcolm taught us. And he, as Martin, and Stokely, and Fannie Lou, and John Lewis and so many others taught us not to be afraid.

But there are other threads to the race and violence awakening in America. I cannot give justice to them here, but I can indicate where attention should be directed.

First, you cannot have half of your incarcerated population consisting of people of one ethnic group which represents 14% of your population. Next to capital punishment, incarceration is the greatest sustained domestic exercise of state power. The civil rights movement, affirmative action, and many other social efforts have created communities of deprivation, again often defined by color and race. The French and other Europeans are discovering, belatedly, that ghettos of immigrants, and heavily consisting of Muslims, are powder kegs that will explode in one form or another.

Second, we cannot disregard the great transformation we are all going through as a result of revolutionary changes in the global economy. There should be training workshops conducted all over the U.S. on the "Global Economy and African-Americans" and they should be designed by economists like Michael Spence of Stanford University and Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University. Structural shifts in the global economy are creating winners, losers, and strugglers in American society. Social, and political activists need to understand those dynamics and the increasing economic marginalizing of millions of African-Americans can be reversed.

Third, we need to be bold in confronting socio-cultural empowerment and disempowerment. I have had the opportunity to live in many countries, experience different cultures, and experience how people are empowered or disempowered by their societies and cultures. I was not a diligent student as a boy in Trinidad. I was too rebellious and favored being a truant over a school work. But I was subjected to insistent socio-cultural nurturing, no different – though less arduous – than what Korean and other Asian children undergo. We are learning how early in life children’s intellectual capacities are formed and how children of educated persons put their children on an up-escalator from interactions in the cradle. Other countries have carried out massive cultural upliftment of their populations. French governments decided that one French language should replace the hodgepodge of dialects and made it happen. The Nordics and Dutch decided that their populations should be fully capable in English and achieved it in a few generations. The Chinese are carrying out one of the most massive transformations of a people ever envisaged. The proficiency of an increasing number of Chinese in English, without ever leaving China, is extraordinary to behold. That observation applies to many other areas of skills acquisition.

The upliftment of African-Americans today, and the breaking of the shackles of social pathologies, will require a massive investment in education, job training, entrepreneurial, and socio-cultural initiatives. Obvious to everyone here, is that such activities must involve the designing and implementation by African-Americans themselves. I congratulate ASALH on its centenary and the St. Petersburg chapter for their inauguration. As the first American president known to be of African ancestry enters his final years in office, we have to consolidate what has been achieved during his tenure and before and prepare to meet the challenges that persist.