

COMMENTARY

Whose black history should Blacks believe and why?

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I, like many Black high school students in the early 1960s, learned about Africa watching Tarzan; about Egypt watching the "Ten Commandments" and about American slavery watching "Gone With the Wind."

I believed the claims of many eminent historians that Blacks contributed little or nothing to history. By the 1970s I knew better, however. Thanks to the work of Carter G. Woodson, the pioneer Black historian and educator, who 50 years earlier initiated what was then called Negro History Week, and other Black and White scholars, the contributions of Africans to world history and African-Americans to U.S. history have been permanently rescued from oblivion.

Black abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, educators Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. DuBois, activists, Marcus Garvey and A. Phillip Randolph, writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston and modern day civil rights champions Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. have finally claimed

their place in many history texts. The problem is they are still too often compartmentalized into separate and unequal chapters, such as civil rights, or slavery.

This gives the false impression that Black contributions are little more than a sideshow to the real workings of history.

This is nonsense.

Black inventors, explorers, scientists, architects and trade unionists were major players in the development of American industry.

Black abolitionists, religious and civil rights leaders had profound influence on law, politics and ethics in America.

Our artists, writers and musicians gave America and the world its most original and distinctive culture and art forms.

Some Afro-centrists don't help matters. They claim that Blacks made all the major contributions to world civilizations. They revel in the past grandeur of African kingdoms, and empires and ignore the rich contributions that Blacks made to American history.

By distorting history to score racial brownie points, Black and White ideologues have left

many Blacks and non-Blacks wondering just whose Black history to believe?

The following highlight just how much there is still to be learned about African-American contributions to this country's history.

• Stephen Spielberg's film "Amistad" was a powerful reminder that the issue of slavery deeply influenced, law, politics, religion and racial relations in 19th Century America, and continues to fuel racial strife today.

• The works of 19th and 20th century Black American classical composers such as Florence Price, Ulysses Key and William Grant Still are played more frequently in concert halls and are recognized as a major part of classical music's development in America.

• A team of Howard University researchers currently examining a slave burial ground at a construction site in New York discovered that Blacks in the North had developed a highly complex network of organizations, secret societies and rituals to survive.

• In a recent interview the new Federal Communications Commission chairman, William Kennard, an African-American, listed

several well-known buildings that his father and pioneer Black architect Paul Williams designed in Los Angeles and nationally.

Thoughtful Black and non-Black scholars should step up the effort to uncover even more of these rich nuggets of history.

Publishers should stop dumping Black contributions into deserted corners of textbooks.

School administrators and teachers should weave Black achievements throughout all classroom curricula. Public officials should honor Black achievements in history throughout the entire year.

And corporations should promote Black contributions not just on courtesy calendars, writing pads, and other small budget items to materials to all Americans.

Celebrating Black history as American history can boost the pride and self-esteem of young people of all colors, and show them they can achieve against all odds.

This is the best way to answer the question "Whose Black history we should believe?"

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Assassination of the Black Male Image."

Black media: Catch up or get left in the wind

Todd Burroughs
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Ever notice how often Black people talk about how once we learn how to play the game, the rules change?

It's a truism, whether we're talking about corporate America or the Presidential Cabinet.

The rules of the mass media are currently changing.

First, there may no longer be a "mass media." Cable, VCRs and the World Wide Web have changed mass communication forever. They are not only here to stay, but growing in power.

Second, print media is either slowly dying or transforming into something else. Something almost three-dimensional and accessible by millions worldwide on the Information Superhighway. Something combining text with moving pictures, graphics and sound.

Third (and this is most important): No one is safe.

That includes the Black media. What will happen to Black-owned media when Microsoft powerhouse Bill Gates decides he wants to set up 200 Black Websites to do the job of both Black newspapers and Black news-talk radio?

What if he gets the traditional major Black media advertisers? If Whites can start Vibe and Source magazines, national agenda-setting publications on Black youth culture, why not other media, particularly in a post-print media environment?

Change is painful, but necessary. Why? Because future news consumers are different.

Please Note: According to the Freedom Forum, a media studies group, a third of all Americans under 30 listed the late-night talk show monologue as their favorite news source in a survey conducted within the past five years. And note again: Newsweek reported last year that half of America's 34 million Blacks are now under 30.

The Black media are great at organizing "Million" marches, reporting on local church and NAACP news, fighting for the right of Mumia Abu-Jamal to speak freely and printing a never-ending amount of "What Black People Need To Do" Op-Ed manifestos.

What they need to do now is simple:

• Local Black newspapers need to combine editorial and advertising forces. We need the power (and protection) of the Black newspaper chains of old. Merge, merge, merge!

• Seek the Web. Print and broadcast from there.

• Report information that folks find vital to their present and future, and hire reporters who can provide this information.

Ebony writes endlessly about celebrities when we need it to write seriously about how welfare reform is wounding our poor.

Emergence has not in its nearly 10-year history had a full-time feature reporting staff covering Congress and the White House (even though the publication has been headquartered in D.C. for most of this decade!). So for the most part we get newspaper-style features (mostly from people who work full-time somewhere else) as cover stories instead of hard-hitting investigative magazine journalism.

Why do we have to read Time, Newsweek, White-owned hip-hop magazines or Henry Louis Gates' articles in The New Yorker for detailed, critical magazine articles on Black leaders and movements? Too little of such writing is in either publication.

Local and national Black talk radio does a great job — when its producers care enough to schedule guests and adequately prepare its hosts for interviews. But to be honest, it's often long on caller rhetoric and short on informed dialogue. We need national documentaries and analytical news reports, not just interviews.

The future was yesterday. If enough Black media merge, creating Black-owned, multi-media print-broadcast-Web conglomerates, the above suggestions can be implemented.

We can either prepare now, or eventually get swept away by new tides. There may always be a need for the Black press, but that doesn't necessarily mean it'll be Black-owned. For the public of tomorrow will judge its media by the usefulness of its content, not the racial purity of its ownership.

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A VOICE FROM THE HILL

GOP scraping for scraps on Clinton

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Even if you've been trying to avoid it, you can't help being splattered with the news of the allegations against President Clinton over an alleged affair with a young intern.

Media outlets have been literally tripping over each other to see who can report the latest hot news tip or rumor concerning the President's troubles. However, in spite of a river of newspaper print and mountain of rhetoric from all types of pundits, all we have to date are allegations and circumstances that might have produced a climate to make the charges true.

Only time will tell whether or not the independent counsel is on a politically motivated fishing expedition or if he and his Republican colleagues are able to bomb the President's career. It is hard to imagine that there are many people who don't see the "long trunk of an elephant" stirring this "pot of confusion."

Let me make it plain - the Republicans have been after Bill Clinton since he defeated George Bush. The only aspect of the President's life that hasn't been investigated is the type of toothpaste he and his family use. The GOP controls both the House and the Senate, but it needs to control the White House in order to really get its program rolling.

So, what is really going on here? So-called conservatives and a few others are railing about the President's lack of integrity and morality. Apparently, some of these folks haven't done even basic research on the behavior of some of the nation's most esteemed personalities. Among them are George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

In spite of the indiscretions of these great Americans, I have yet to read or hear of anyone calling for buildings to be renamed or of any historical writings which indicate that there was a movement to have any of them impeached.

In the case of Bill Clinton, it didn't take long to hear the word impeachment bandied about with reckless abandon. Regular readers

of this column know that I am not a big fan of some of the things that the President has allowed to occur during his watch.

In spite of that, it seems a bit of a reach to go from inappropriate behavior between consenting adults to removal from the nation's highest office. Perjury and obstruction of justice are two different matters. If it is proven that the President violated the law, he should get the same punishment that any other citizen would receive.

The most disgusting aspect of this whole sordid mess is that it diverts attention from things that are certainly more important. While too many focus on the President's alleged love of young interns, young African-American males are being targeted for slots in prison or underemployment. Frankly, the President will be all right. I'm not so sure I can offer the same forecast for many of our youth.

This Republican-led assault on the President must be evaluated for what it is — cheap, partisan politics. The GOP really doesn't have a candidate it can put forward in the next presidential election. So, its major work is to take the luster off Clinton while hopefully soiling Vice President Al Gore. Thus, it would win by default.

What is really interesting is to watch the two segments of the Republican Party go after each other. The right wing of the party puts forth a message that scares most sensible people. Carrying the banner for that side is Pat Buchanan. Right wing money is heavily invested in the GOP.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are moderates like Jack Kemp. This side has a softer presentation but the same bite with less money.

It appears that we are dealing with a party that thirsts for complete power and is frustrated that it doesn't have it. Isn't it ironic that advocates of morality and family values are engaging in behavior that is the opposite of both?

George Wilson is a veteran Capitol Hill correspondent for the American Urban Radio Network.