

# Is Black History month relevant any more?

By Mema Ayi and Demetrius Patterson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

CHICAGO (NNPA)—Actor Morgan Freeman created a small firestorm recently when he told Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes" that he finds Black History Month "ridiculous."

Americans perpetuate racism, Freeman said, by relegating Black history to one month when Black history is American history, he said.

Scholars and historians, including Conrad Worrill, chairman of the National Black United Front, repel the commercialization of the celebration, but agree Black Americans still need February — and every day — to reflect on the accomplishments of Black Americans who contributed countless inventions and innovations into society.

"I don't even know how he could form his mouth to say that," Worrill said. "(Freeman) showed how backwards he is. Obviously, we need Black History Month. People of African ancestry need to know their history more than any other group."

Carter G. Woodson's 1926 creation of Negro History Week — expanded 50 years later expanded to the entire month of February — grew out of a need for recognition of the achievements of Black Americans.

Woodson chose February because many prominent Black figures had birthdays during the short month, said WVON-AM/1450

morning drive host Cliff Kelley.

Negro History Week turned into Black History Month in 1976 when Blacks became more interested in their heritage after Alex Haley's miniseries "Roots" aired.

Though only 28 days, many believe the annual celebration is still necessary.

"We need it because unfortunately the people who write history for the country have a different version of history than we have," Kelley said. "You know the old saying 'history is his story?' We as African-Americans have been written out of it."

Without Black History Month, many wouldn't know that mostly slaves built the nation's capitol or that the Union Army would not have won the Civil War without African-Americans in its regiments. Many may not even realize that some "misguided" Blacks even fought on the Confederates side during the Civil War, Kelley said.

Many WVON on-air personalities, including Kelley, are bombarded with requests to appear at special forums and events in February. Kelley said he's more than happy to oblige as long as it's informing and educating the masses.

"Black History Month is really needed, however, because unfortunately, many of our young people, and some of our older ones, think their history begins and ends with slavery," Kelly said.

Northwestern University's Darlene Hine said Black history is vital to American history.

"No one believes that a month is sufficient enough to fully explore the lives and experiences of African-Americans," said Hine, professor of African-American and African-American Women's History.

"But it is absolutely essential for the country to continue teaching and training scholars to explore, invest and write about the contributions of people of African-American descent have made to the creation of American civilization."

State Rep. David Miller, D-Calumet City, said Freeman was right to say Black history should be recognized year round, but added the importance and necessity of Black History Month has not diminished since Woodson's Negro History Week 80 years ago.

"We've shaped America. To put special emphasis on this month is not an excuse not to celebrate the legacy 365 days a year," Miller said. "It's the way in which we can continue to remind youth of our legacy."

The appreciation of the contributions of Black Americans should not end on Feb. 28, Miller said.

Hine agreed the study of Black history should be a yearlong pursuit, but Black History Month is one way to give Black people

a sense of ownership of their past.

"A part of Black history is about establishing (Black) contributions and getting the larger society to recognize those contributions," she said. "All Black people want is some respect."

Worrill acknowledged that Freeman was correct to say Black history should be a part of American history every day, but the actor's comments were not made in historical context, he said. "Obviously, we need to continue the struggle to recapture the African mind, the African spirit and African traditions," he added.

Worrill, while sticking to the notion that the four-week-long celebration is important to Black Americans, said he is disappointed that capitalists are profiting from Black History Month.

"One of our problems is corporate intrusion," Worrill said. "Corporations are putting their spins on our history."

The challenge for Black Americans, Hine said, is to reach beyond the corporate pursuit for dollars and to concentrate on intellectual pursuits.

Bernard Williams, director of marketing for Malcolm X College, agrees.

"Our salvation is through education and literature," he said.

Mema Ayi and Demetrius Patterson write for the Chicago Defender.

## Republicans

(Continued from Page 4)

that downgraded the strength of class action suits seeking lost wages and overtime pay, a proposal opposed by the NAACP, and a bill that prevented the elimination of \$14 billion in funds to Medicaid over a five year period, supported by the NAACP. In the House, the lawmakers were graded, in part, on the successful vote to stop the elimination of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, supported by the NAACP, and a successful amendment to increase funding for fair housing programs, supported by the group.

At the leadership level, there was also a stark difference between Democratic and Republican voting.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a potential presi-

dential candidate, maintained his F-rating, falling from a 9 percent support level at the end of the 108th Congress to 5 percent. Senate Majority Whip Mitch McConnell of Kentucky mirrored Frist's voting pattern.

On the House side, former Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, who got an F with 23 percent in the 108th Congress, maintained his F, with his support for the NAACP positions falling to 13 percent during the 109th Congress. Likewise, House Majority Whip Roy Blunt's, R-Mo., support for the NAACP dwindled from 30 percent to 17 percent over that same period. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., who votes only in case of a tie, received a grade of I for incomplete.

Leading Democrats in the House were far more sup-

portive.

Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California and House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland both maintained A's. Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid got an A and Democratic Whip Dick Durbin of Illinois got an A.

Two states had House and Senate delegations with all A's: Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Six states had House and Senate delegations that earned all F's: Alaska, Idaho, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and Wyoming. Without Bennie Thompson, who got an A, Mississippi would have joined the all-F group. Almost one-third of the state is Black, and it has the largest number of Black elected officials in the nation.

In an attempt to attract

Black voters, Republicans have been saying many of the right things.

"Some Republicans gave up on winning the African-American vote, looking the other way or trying to benefit politically from racial polarization," Mehlman said at the annual NAACP Convention last July. "I am here today as the Republican chairman to tell you we were wrong."

Many say Republicans are still wrong. Walters, the political science professor, points to statements made by President Bush in his State of the Union address.

"He said, 'A hopeful society depends upon a court that delivers equal justice under the law.' And with respect to the Katrina disaster, he said, 'We must work for

the day when all Americans are protected by justice, equal in hope and rich in opportunity,'" Walters recounts. "The Republican Party has taken almost every opportunity to go against these kinds of principles."

Hilary Shelton, director of the NAACP's Washington bureau, emphasizes the non-partisanship nature of the NAACP, and was reluctant to attack the GOP directly.

"We are extremely disappointed that the full Congress does not demonstrate a stronger commitment to a comprehensive civil rights agenda that protects all Americans' civil rights, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, national origin or religious affiliation," Shelton said. "Congress has the chance, and frankly — the obligation

— to strengthen and advance America's civil rights laws."

The answer is in voting and voter education programs, Shelton said.

"We will continue to preach to registered voters, educate them on the issues, engage them in our political process," Shelton said. "We must be engaged in the process in between election days." And Republicans must deliver more than rhetoric if they are to reach Blacks successfully, Walters said.

"What is the basis of any party's appeal to any voter? It is the extent to which they believe in that party's vote," he explained. "And there is a very simple answer to the question that we get all the time: When will Blacks vote Republican? It is when they have a reason to."

## Clingman

(Continued from Page 13)

unethical; I know they are liars; I know they are gouging us for every cent we have. You know that, too. So what are you willing to do about it? That's the question for those of us who suffer from their acts of piracy.

That's my take on it. That will be my little insignificant way of fighting back. But you know what? It may be insignificant to them, but to me it's a tremendous step; it's great for my psyche; it's more than just complaining. And if more of us take a similar action against this behemoth, our collective act of slinging millions of small stones at this giant will have the same effect that David's one small stone had on Goliath.

The ball is in your court. Why would you stand still and do nothing when someone is picking your pocket and you know it? That's what's going on with Exxon and others, and they are doing it to you. Don't stand still and act as though their picking your pocket is all right. Do something! I know what I am going to do. No more Exxon Mobil fill-ups for me. I will give my few dollars to one of the other thieves. We do have choices you know. Try it; it should be a lot of fun, if nothing else. Use excessive restraint to decrease Exxon's excessive profits.

James E. Clingman is an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati's African-American Studies Department.

## Death Penalty

(Continued from Page 6)

considered more humane than the electric chair, firing squad, gas chamber or hanging. Over the years, however, studies have shown that the drug combination used in many states may not adequately sedate inmates before administration of the final medicine that causes their heart to stop.

The Supreme Court last considered a related case in 2004. An Alabama death row inmate had claimed that his damaged veins would require prison doctors to cut deep into his flesh to deliver the chemicals. He won the right to pursue his claim in a limited ruling by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and still is pressing his case.

O'Connor retired last week and was replaced by Justice Samuel Alito, whose first case was the death penalty appeal from Missouri. He broke ranks with the court's conservatives, Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, who voted to allow the execution of Michael Taylor. They were outvoted by Alito and the court's more liberal members.

"It's a reasonable, cautionary vote. It doesn't necessarily indicate leanings toward death penalty defendants," said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, which opposes capital punishment. "But at least he's going to be his own person."