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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 2, 1984

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT CEREMONY
HONORING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

The East Room

3:14 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you and welcome to the White House, the house that belongs to all of us.

Today, we mark the 58th annual Black History Month, a celebration of the part that black Americans have played in building our great country. The story of black Americans is one of valor in the face of hardship. The first blacks were brought to America against their will, kidnapped by the thousands from their homelands and, when they reached our country, they encountered prejudice and servitude.

Until only a few decades ago, black Americans lived lives that were separate and unequal. Most were taught in segregated schools. Too many could find only poor jobs, toiling for low wages. Blacks were barred from hotels and restaurants and made to use separate facilities and even forced to drink at separate water fountains.

In a nation that proclaimed liberty and justice for all, too many Americans were living with neither. I remember some years ago, before we were freed from that kind of custom, a friend of mine telling me of having to tell his small son who couldn't understand why on a hot day he could not drink from the fountain and how his little son was crying. And hearing that story, I made up my mind then that anything I could ever do to help in seeing that no parent in this country ever again would have to tell a child they were denied something because of some difference in their complexion.

And I think all of us are resolved and we've made marvelous strides in seeing that that isn't going to happen again in this land. In the 1920's Carter G. Woodson, a great black educator, came to realize that if black Americans were to regain their dignity they would have to begin by regaining their past. And he founded the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History. And in 1926, he launched the first Black History Month.

In the years since, the ASALH and annual Black History Months have enriched our country by fostering a sense of pride among black Americans and by teaching all of us about black contributions to American life. And just yesterday, the U.S. Postal Service issued a Carter G. Woodson stamp as part of their Black Heritage Series. (Applause.)

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We'll remember great black lawyers like Charles Hamilton Houston and William H. Hastie. We'll honor black physicians like Dr. Daniel Hale Williams who performed the first open-heart surgery in the world in 1893 and physicians like Dr. Charles Drew who discovered a method of storing blood plasma that enabled it to be used in emergencies.

This month we'll honor the black Americans who achieved so much in sports: the courageous Jackie Robinson, the great Hank Aaron. Here again I interject a personal note. I was a sports announcer, broadcasting major league baseball. And at that time, shamefully enough, I didn't have a Jackie Robinson or a Hank Aaron or a Willie Mays or any of the others to talk about.

And there were some of us in the sports world at that time that editorialized and campaigned that that should be changed. And, thank God, it has been. We celebrate the black musicians who combined elements of African and Western music to produce something completely new and distinctly American -- jazz. And as we remember that Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton and so many other black musicians began their careers playing in hotels where they were forbidden to take a room, we'll promise never to allow such injustice again.

This Black History Month will remind Americans that again and again blacks have taken up arms to defend our country with their courage and, in thousands of cases, their lives. In the Revolutionary War, some 5,000 black Americans joined the fight for independence. The first American to die in that war was named Crispus Attucks; he was black.

In this century, thousands of black Americans fought in World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam. I tell you,

MORE

that this Black History Month brings back a personal memory. During World War II I narrated a film about black pilots trained at Tuskegee Institute. I remember how impressed I was by the skill and bravery of those fliers.

One of those brave men was Chappie James, who went on to become a great aviator and the first black four-star general in the Air Force. And a few months ago in the Oval Office, I had the privilege -- I should say -- moments ago -- I had the privilege of presenting Tuskegee officials with a grant to help build the Chappie James Center for Aerospace Science and Health Education on the Tuskegee campus. (Applause.)

It is a fitting monument to a true patriot. Hero in two wars, fighter against discrimination, champion of equal opportunity, believer in personal responsibility. Chappie wore four stars on his shoulder and fifty stars in my heart. This man, who did fight discrimination, and who had the bitter memories of that, has still left words, and written words, about his love for this land, for this country that should inspire every American who can read those words.

This month will remind us most of all of the great black struggle for equal rights. And, just 13 weeks ago, it was my privilege to sign into law a national holiday marking the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Applause.)

"I have a dream," Dr. King said, "that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

He spent his life combatting bigotry so that his dream might come true. And he gave his life to that noble cause. So this month, let us rededicate ourselves to that great dream of brotherhood.

The theme of Black History Month this year is "Black Americans and the Struggle for Excellence in Education." Our country's come a long way since the days when men and women were jailed for teaching blacks to read. Today black Americans are in virtually every school and university in the country, and they're breaking new ground in every field of endeavor. And black Americans, like astronauts Guy Bluford and Ronald McNair,

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who's blasting off in a Space Shuttle tomorrow, are teaching black children -- and all our children -- to really reach for the stars.

Martin Luther King and others often said that black Americans must assert a sense of their own worth. Well, this Black History Month will remind all of us that the story of black Americans adds up to just that: a truly majestic sense of worth.

I've got one more little story I just have to tell -- (Laughter.) -- dates back to World War II -- or, I'm sorry, back to Vietnam. In a warehouse there, a shipment of ammunition, a Captain with his platoon in there stacking this ammunition. And the platoon was typical of our military. They were black, brown and white.

And suddenly, a box of grenades was dropped, rolling all over the floor. And the Captain ordered everyone out immediately. And they fled. And then they waited -- and no explosion -- nothing had happened. So the Captain told them all to wait. And he went back inside.

And then he gingerly picked up a grenade, and with scotch tape tied down the pin so that it couldn't fire -- did it to a few more -- and then called the platoon inside and told them what he had done and showed them how to do it -- and to do this to stop what could have been a terrible disaster.

He had behaved in the highest tradition of an officer of our armed forces. He did the dirty job that had to be done to make sure it could be done before he called his men in to do it. And I will regret forever -- I know that story, but I don't have his name -- the Captain was black.

And, as I say, no officer has ever shown more faithfulness to the principles that should govern all officers in the military.

So, again, I thank all of you for being here. God bless you all.

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