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BLACK HISTORY MONTH CEREMONY

THANK YOU, AND WELCOME TO THE WHITE HOUSE, THE HOME THAT BELONGS TO ALL AMERICANS.

TODAY WE MARK THE 58TH ANNUAL BLACK HISTORY MONTH, A CELEBRATION OF THE PART 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. 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, 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 BLACK AMERICANS WERE LIVING WITH NEITHER.

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. 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 A.S.A.L.H. 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.

DURING THIS BLACK HISTORY MONTH, WE'LL CELEBRATE BLACK CONTRIBUTIONS TO COMMERCE -- CONTRIBUTIONS LIKE THOSE MADE BY GRANVILLE WOODS, WHO HELPED TO ENGINEER ELECTRICAL RAILWAY SYSTEMS. 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 HAVE ACHIEVED SO MUCH IN SPORTS -- THE COURAGEOUS JACKIE ROBINSON, THE GREAT HANK AARON.

WE'LL 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 BY 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 VIET NAM.

I MUST TELL YOU 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. JUST A FEW MOMENTS AGO IN THE OVAL OFFICE, 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 -- 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 SHOULDERS AND FIFTY STARS IN MY HEART.
SPECIAL GREETINGS TO DOROTHY JAMES,
CHAPPIE'S WIFE, WHO'S WITH US TODAY.

THIS MONTH WILL REMIND US MOST OF ALL
OF THE GREAT BLACK STRUGGLE FOR EQUAL
RIGHTS. JUST 13 WEEKS AGO, IT WAS MY
PRIVILEGE TO SIGN INTO LAW A NATIONAL
HOLIDAY MARKING THE BIRTHDAY OF DR. MARTIN
LUTHER KING, JR. "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."

DR. KING SPENT HIS LIFE COMBATTING BIGOTRY SO THAT HIS DREAM MIGHT COME TRUE. AND HE GAVE HIS LIFE TO THAT NOBLE CAUSE. 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 HAS 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, WHO'S BLASTING OFF IN THE SPACE SHUTTLE TOMORROW, ARE TEACHING BLACK CHILDREN -- AND ALL OUR CHILDREN -- TO REACH FOR THE STARS.

MARTIN LUTHER KING AND OTHERS OFTEN SAID THAT BLACK AMERICANS MUST ASSERT A SENSE OF THEIR OWN WORTH. 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. THANK YOU, AND GOD BLESS YOU ALL.

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