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5 on 45: Celebrating black history in the Trump era

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

PERRY: Hi I'm Andre Perry, Rubenstein Fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program, and I'm going to talk to you today about when black history isn't relegated to a single month.

Last year, Vice President Mike Pence commemorated the start of Black History Month by acknowledging Abraham Lincoln, a white man, for submitting the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. Pence's snubbing of black people happened on the same day President Donald Trump talked as if abolitionist, writer and civil rights leader Frederick Douglass was still alive—he died in 1895. Later that same month, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos said historically black colleges and universities were pioneers of school choice (Colleges back then were segregated of course). It was a sign of things to come.

By Pence's standard, Trump made black history in his first year as president by waging an assault on voting rights through his now-defunct voting fraud commission, calling white supremacists "fine people" after the Charlottesville march, and, more recently, disparaging Haiti, El Salvador and African countries as "shithole countries."

We should all be appalled at the administration's ignorance around race but we should be not surprised. Racism is taught, and when history is told from the point of view of the white people, you might well believe, like failed U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore does, that slavery was good for black people.

The flagrant ignorance and blatant racism of the Trump administration makes clearer what black celebrities such as Morgan Freeman and Stacy Dash mean when they say, "I don't want Black History Month." It's obvious that black history is needed all year long. But white history as we know it can no longer be the standard in a multicultural society which is supposed to maximize the potential of all of its members.

The late, great historian Carter G. Woodson started Negro History Week in 1926 with the hopes that black people would be proud of their heritage and that mainstream America would recognize the contributions of its black residents. While millions of students across the country now study the influences of black people and culture in what has evolved into Black History Month, Trump proves regularly that Woodson's ultimate goal of integrating black history into our core curriculums fell far short of national acceptance.

The danger in relegating black history to a month is that it becomes horribly contained to a month. Ask your child, colleague, or friend to say a few brief words about Carter G. Woodson, sing the first few lines of The Black National Anthem, or identify five African countries during the rest of the months, and there's a strong possibility you'll think you're talking to a version of Trump. Black contributions to society are not being recognized in the pantheon of American history. Worse, this lack of recognition is reflected in national policy, racial inequities in compensation, and the discounting of black leadership. Unequal pay is a blatant, empirical sign of a devaluation of worth.

You obviously can't pin the blame on the devaluation of black people on Black History Month. As a young person, I remember learning about renowned surgeon Ben Carson and how he became the first to successfully separate twins at the head in a Black History Month event. I listened to Carson with great admiration and pride at another such event when he narrated with great aplomb the exact steps along the neural pathway from a touch of the finger to the brain and back again. It's a shtick I would hear many times, with the same reaction.

But when Carson, as U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, referred to slaves as immigrants last year during a departmental junket with employees, he proved there's nothing wrong with Black History Month. Carson, too, could not detach the white-centric history he learned in school from his own brain.

No wonder, when he probably also studied those whitewashed stories of Christopher Columbus "discovering" America, which are buttressed by tales of how the Pilgrims supposedly sat down with the Indians for a delightful supper. When slavery is covered in history class, the teaching of black benign servitude too often goes along

with ideas that the Ku Klux Klan is a Christian organization exhibiting principles like loving thy neighbor. We have statues of Confederate heroes, i.e. racist traitors, littered throughout the U.S., particularly in the South. And of course, Abraham Lincoln didn't have a racist bone in his body.

The misrepresenting of colonization, slavery, and racists is behind the racism and ignorance of Trump and people like him, not Black History Month.

I'm indebted to the people, places, and traditions I've been introduced to in February. I have received numerous invitations to speak at BHM events, and I will continue to highlight black accomplishments in my writings during February. Calling for mainstream inclusion isn't a charge to end Black History Month. In fact, we can use it to introduce more recent history and fresh faces.

For instance, if there is a book by a black author you must read this month, take in "Stamped from the Beginning" by Ibram X. Kendi, winner of the 2016 National Book Award for nonfiction. Kendi's book provides a thorough reading of U.S. history from the perspective of black people. He moves forward Woodson's legacy, along with other notable historians who are still alive such as James D. Anderson, Robin Kelly, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Blair Kelly, and Paula Giddings. There are people who continue to write outside of white standards, to our collective benefit. But to reap the social fruits of their labor we must remove the standard of white-centric history.

Getting to a place where we can make history more inclusive is not easy. In fact, it's a thoroughly radical endeavor that first requires society to acknowledge that history is not an impartial narration of events as they occurred. It is, rather, the story as told by the people who are telling it. Retelling our history requires acknowledging that the American identity is rooted in a false narrative that makes the exhortation to Make America Great Again an oxymoron.

Removing racist history books will be harder than shuttling Confederate monuments to the backs of museums. Neither important act is about erasing history — it's about making it. Woodson wanted to see black history infused in American history

because they're one and the same. But he also wanted the idolatry of whiteness removed from America's site.

This essay was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.