



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrea Stewart-Cousins

## Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins' Prepared Remarks On Black History Month

ANDREA STEWART-COUSINS February 4, 2020

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Every year, I am proud to honor African-American culture and history during this special month, not only because I am African-American, but because it shines a spotlight on American history.

Over the last few months our state and country reeled following the horrific acts of anti-Semitism— some unfortunately by African-Americans.

I was repeatedly asked at menorah lightings, why there was not more emphasis on the shared experiences of the Black and Jewish communities in the struggle for justice.

Of course, I knew of Dr. King's 1965 march in Selma where he, linked arm-in-arm with Rabbi Heschel, forcing the nation to acknowledge the exclusion of Black Americans from the equality promised in the Constitution.

I was also acutely aware of the critical involvement of the Jewish community in the founding of the NAACP, which happened right here in NY. I also knew of Dr. King's unequivocal and outspoken support of the Jewish people as he rebuked Hitler.

Dr. King famously said, “We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was “illegal.” It was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers.”

Sadly, It was that shared oppression, dehumanization, and marginalization that brought together so many Blacks and Jews in the struggle to make America and the world recall and condemn injustice and inequality.

So with that thought I asked my friend, and Jewish Senator Shelley Mayer – whose district is intertwined with mine if she would work with me on an educational project.

She agreed and because it’s an educational endeavor, we engaged one of the schools where we share constituents. When the meeting with the school took place, I was amazed that there was a discussion about whether there should be a Black history month at all!

Some argued that it was insulting, that it relegated the accomplishments of Blacks to one month and the information was often redundant. Same names, same stories.

In the end, we assured everyone that, although we are initiating this program during Black History Month, we plan to share the project long after the month of February is over because it’s that important. And so are the achievements of Blacks in America!

I’m personally grateful for Dr. Carter G Woodson’s insistence on setting aside February (the birth month of Fredrick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln) to emphasize the accomplishments of Black people, especially given the classification of Blacks as 3/5 of a person in our nation’s founding documents.

This thinking allowed for the systematic exclusion or appropriation of Black contributions. We are still battling this thinking in 2020.

As a nation, we should be told or reminded that Blacks invented many of the things we use every day.

Garrett Morgan invented the traffic light,  
Fredrick Jones invented refrigerated trucks,  
Sarah Boone the ironing board,  
Dr. Patricia Bath groundbreaking cataract treatment to name a few.

We should hear the names Sojourner, Harriet, Ida, Shirley, Marcus, Bayard, Martin, Malcolm and Frederick (who, sadly Mr. President, is no longer alive).

Today, in a world teeming with information, it must be hard for this new generation to imagine a time in America when black people were forbidden to read or just a little more than 50 years ago, attend school with whites in the South.

It's hard to imagine a time when Black families were separated and sold off to work for other people's profits. Black history month forces us to be reminded of these not too distant historic realities.

Black history also gives context to what we are seeing today— children separated and caged at our borders, inter-generational poverty and the over incarceration of black and brown bodies

Black History Month serves as a reminder that our stories are not always rooted in pain but that the story of African-Americans in America is also one of perseverance, ingenuity, strength, and resilience.

We celebrate Black History because Black activism has helped pave the way for other minorities to have equal opportunities here in the America.

Black history is American History. Its lessons can, and should, be learned daily.

When thinking about why it is important to celebrate Black History Month, I am reminded of a quote by Alexis de Tocqueville: "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults."

And the African American community has helped repair those faults.

As we recognize Black History Month, I hope that we keep celebrating, learning, and advancing our march towards justice for all, as we echo the resolve of our Jewish brothers and sisters in declaring "never again."