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THE BLACK HERITAGE IN AMERICA

Clearly, one of the most significant changes in our country in the last quarter century has been our increasing awareness of the heritage of black Americans. This can be measured in everything from the increasing number of books to the exhibits in museums. One of the duties that gives me the most pleasure in Washington is serving on the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution. Recently, the Smithsonian has taken in the Museum of African Art and made it a part of the Smithsonian. And I am proud to say that Eva Hamlin Miller of Greensboro is on the Board of Trustees of that museum.

This is certainly one measure of our increasing awareness of black culture. But the revolution in our thinking goes far beyond such tangible measures. One only has to think back to the early 1950s and compare the situation then with the present. People then were simply unaware of the historical importance of blacks in our history. There were so many misconceptions that I hesitate to even begin to list them.

First of all, our conception of Africa has changed. The conventional wisdom of the 1950s was that Africa was always

a backward continent, a dark continent, one that had made few contributions to the history of the world. Historians have corrected this mistaken impression. Africa has produced great kingdoms, strong leaders, great wealth, and has made significant cultural contributions to the history of the world.

Africans who were taken as slaves and transported to the New World faced a gigantic adjustment. Alex Haley's book Roots and the television series based on this book have shown that slavery was as good or as bad as the people involved. No one today would defend slavery, and few people would search out anything good to say about this aspect of our past.

Yet during slavery, the black family played a crucial part in preserving traditions from Africa. Herbert Gutman's book on the slave family shows that kinship patterns, recreation, speech, and naming practices all continued African traditions. Other historians have written about contributions to the American Revolution, and the National Portrait Gallery several years ago had an excellent exhibit on the role of blacks in the American Revolution. Historians have also revised our conception of the contribution of blacks in the Civil War, in Reconstruction, as well as in the movements of the 20th century.

When I entered politics in the early 1950s, I would have been hard pressed to walk into a bookstore and find books about black heritage. Today, every bookstore has a shelf dealing with black history.

In the Library of Congress, the music division has preserved countless examples of the black contribution to music. Whether one speaks of spirituals, blues, or jazz, black musicians have made significant contributions.

All of this demonstrates the pluralistic nature of our society. No single group has monopolized the cultural contributions that we are so proud of. All of our component nationalities have added to the wealth of our culture, and black Americans have certainly given us much to be proud of.

At the same time that we become increasingly aware of our ethnic heritage, we are aware that we live in a wider culture that uses formal English to communicate. Southerners, black and white, have often been at a disadvantage when communicating. I, like you, am proud of my southern accent and the idioms that have been preserved. At the same time, I think that all of us would be mistaken to think that we

can function in the modern world without a firm grasp of formal learning. One is certainly judged today not so much by race or the section of the country that we come from as by our ability to express ourselves in clear, precise, and accurate English.

Whether we are talking about Southern black culture in particular, the national contribution of black Americans, or even Southern or American culture in general, our increasing awareness of our past has given us all more pride. This culture is a platform from which to move on to even higher achievements. I think that the cultural awareness of black Southerners has made a tremendous contribution not only to blacks but also to whites. We have a great deal to be proud of, and I am honored to share with you your celebration in this black heritage festival.