

The Association of Black Psychologists Response to the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington

We recently celebrated the 50 year anniversary of the landmark 1963 March on Washington which was commemorated by a series of events and observances paying homage to the historic movement etched in the annals of history by Dr. Martin Luther King's timeless *I Have A Dream* speech. Its organizers, Asa Phillip Randolph of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters Union, and Bayard Rustin, a social activist and a progenitor of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, demanded fair employment and equal housing conditions during the March. Since the historic March, progress has been made in order to ensure the civil and equal rights of Blacks in the United States through the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other critical freedom legislation.

Notwithstanding, America's efforts at righting its historical legacy of wrongs have fallen short of their promise. Amid much dissension and moral decay, the pillars upon which past legislation has stood have since crumbled and given way to de jure and de facto forms of prejudice, disenfranchisement and dehumanization. With the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and brother Malcolm X, the COINTELPRO undermining of the Black Panther Party movement, the bombing of the MOVE Organization in Philadelphia and the more recent Stand Your Ground practices and policies, to mention a few, it has become evident that the United States' "post-March agenda" has been less than reconciliatory. While communities were desegregated in the wake of the initial March, the profiling of young Black men and women as thugs within these neighborhoods continues and has left Black families wondering how to keep their children safe.

As a community of healers and advocates of social justice, the ABPsi recognizes the double consciousness of an America that desperately wishes to rid itself of its guilt and blood stained past, but that continues to carry out its manifest destiny toward capitalistic and individualistic gains. America's rhetoric and lip service, paid to disenfranchised groups, has left many to wonder whether W. E. DuBois' prophetic commentary on the United States that "The problem of the twentieth [and arguably the twenty-first] century is the problem of the color line," will remain in perpetuity.

The March on Washington holds meaning and resonates with us on various levels. As such, in creating this piece, it was salient to include a compilation of reflections that mirrors the diverse membership of ABPsi. We asked ABPsi founders, elders, early and mid-career professionals and student members to share brief reflections about the significance of the March. As you read the reflections, we ask that you consider what the March means for yourself and how you can play a part in honoring the legacy and fulfilling the deferred dream of those that marched before us.

Reflections from ABPsi members

Dr. Wade W. Nobles, ABPsi Founder, Past President and Elder:

I had just turned 18 when the March on Washington asked America to rise up to be a place of human worth and value. In response, the incomparable disease of America killed the dreamer. Culminating in the recent killings of Oscar Grant and Travon Martin, for the last fifty years, America's only response to reneging on Dr. King's check has been to sanitize America's story and respond to our constant call for justice with negation and nullification. The 50th anniversary of the March on Washington should be celebrated by America as a 'dream deferred.' We, as Black psychologists, should see this moment as a reminder that the struggle continues and the need for healing remains.

Ms. Gabrielle Johnson, ABPsi Student Member:

When reflecting on the March on Washington, my feelings are best described as bitter-sweet. I am very blessed and fortunate to be obtaining the benefits of attending graduate school from all of the work my people have put forth to get me here. However, I find that...much still needs to be done [in order to attain] equal rights.

Dr. Lawrence James, ABPsi Professional Member:

Psychologically, the March on Washington was a physical manifestation of African Spirit (Soul) and African thought collectively expressed in action. If viewed and discussed properly, the March's long term impact is another example of what African people can do when acting authentically in their own self-interest which is the support of the collective - powerful, moving and game changing.

Dr. Joseph White, ABPsi Founder and Elder:

I was a 30-year-old clinical psychology professor and practitioner in Long Beach, California [at the time of the March]... I was confused about who I was and what direction my career would take. I was, of course, taught Euro-American perspectives on psychology as I moved through America's educational system and was at a stage where I was beginning to doubt both Euro-American psychology and America itself. As I watched the famous I Have a Dream speech on black and white TV, I can remember starting to move through the pre-encounter, encounter and immersion and emersion stages of Black identity development. William Cross and others had not yet developed their theories of Black identity development, so I couldn't label what I was experiencing, but I knew I was moving from one perspective to another... I subsequently rejected the deficit deficiency models characterizing Black folks in Euro-American psychology and committed myself to developing a Black psychological organization, an accurate theory of Black psychologists and also became a social activist.

Dr. Jennifer R. Jones, ABPsi Early Career Professional Member:

The March on Washington brought America one step closer to equality. I am a proud Black woman who just earned a doctorate in psychology because I stand on my ancestors' shoulders who marched, fought and died for the semblance of equality we have today.

Dr. Afi Samella Berry Abdullah, ABPsi Elder:

Fifty years have passed since the March on Washington. We reflect on those who stood their ground and marched. We reflect on those who gave their lives in the ongoing fight for freedom and equality. We acknowledge that the struggle for justice and fairness has not been won and that our children's lives are not valued.... The backlash from our ongoing and forever struggle is monstrous. A Luta Continua.! The struggle continues! Our leaders did not die in vain.

Dr. Marva Robinson, ABPsi Early Career Professional Member:

The March on Washington symbolized true collectivism...and [the March] was successful due to the collective effort and support of students, clergy, politicians and the Community. It represented the true power we have as a people when we stand together and move as one... nothing can hold us back when we march forward as one.

Dr. Thomas Parham, ABPsi Past President:

The question for those of us in ABPsi is how do we not allow Dr. King's legacy to be frozen in time, and instead realize the full promise of his dream's possibility and potential? Dr. King reminds us: 'The measure of a man (or woman) is not where they stand in times of comfort and convenience but where they stand in times of challenge and controversy.' The question for us is where will ABPsi stand in these times of challenge and controversy?...Indeed, Dr. King was clear that a nation that spends more money on military hardware and weapons of mass destruction than it does on programs to education children and feed the homeless and hungry has its priorities misaligned.

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