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Carter Godwin Woodson:  
Understanding His Intellectual Objectives  
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INTRODUCTION

The legacy of a scholar is the work that he or she leaves behind against which their will can be understood. Carter Godwin Woodson was a scholar devoted to African American themes. He left his themes behind in a number of books, articles, speeches which have influenced a number of other scholars and persons in pursuit of knowledge about black people.

Carter G. Woodson is one of the most significant historians that America has ever produced. He stands alone. Today, he is remembered mostly during the month of February, the month that Americans celebrate Black History Month. His books are read to identify early black leaders and to extract important facts showing the achievements of black people and the origin of their culture. Yet, a pause sometimes comes when Americans are challenged to answer the question: What was the will, the intellectual objective that Woodson bequeath to his people? The search for this legacy can be found in Woodson's own words.

Objective of Education and Scholarship

In the area of education and other areas, Carter G. Woodson often urged black Americans not to follow in the path of their white brethren. His advocacy in this regard was not so much that

white institutions or their traditions had nothing to offer his people, as it was his hope that the "unusual gifts of the race" would be developed, and stand on their own.<sup>1</sup> Carter Woodson wanted the world to know "What the Negro is good for."<sup>2</sup> Woodson urged black people to stand up and to proclaim for themselves who they were, what their objectives were, and how they were going to survive when they executed on their agenda. His hope was that black Americans as a group would launch their ideas and energy to secure for themselves a stake in American, indeed, the world. Thus, Woodson committed his life as a scholar, not as an iconoclast tearing down every aspect of the white race, but to make known the "unusual gifts" of his own.<sup>3</sup>

Woodson believed that one of the most unusual gifts that black people could receive or transfer was the gift of an education tailored to their history, values, customs and traditions. Thus, in 1933 he was concerned about the lack of control blacks possessed over "their education" and how "[t]he education of ... Negroes...the most important thing in the uplift of the Negroe, is almost entirely in the hands of those who have enslaved them and now segregate them."<sup>4</sup> Woodson observed that "[w]ith 'mis-educated Negroes' in control themselves...it is doubtful that the system would be very much different from what it is or that it would rapidly undergo change."<sup>5</sup>

Woodson believe that history, values, customs, and therefore, the security and the amplification of the metaphysics of black people would be effected through proper education and from the unusual gifts from the mind of black scholars. Woodson feared that the day would come when blacks would become so mis-educated that they might be of "no service to themselves and none to the white man."<sup>6</sup>

To understand Carter G. Woodson is to understand the obligation to inspire, revere, and support the black scholar. The essence of Woodson is the act of scholarship, not the status as a scholar. His objective as a scholar was to record the gift of black humanity as identified and projected through the unusual interpretation of the black scholar. His aim was to expose the hidden, clear the blurred, and make visible to the natural eyes for all to see the unusual gifts of black people.<sup>7</sup>

Woodson was fully aware of his own limitations to find, interpret and to write about the very historical contribution seen through his eyes, yet made impossible to disseminate by the written word. Woodson knew that without several black scholars to "tell the story" of black progress, that the real story would not be told. This concern caused Woodson to write that "[t]he failure to record and publish such records accounts for our ignorance of some of the most important family history in America" would be tragic.<sup>8</sup> Woodson viewed the black family as a unusual gift and sharply criticized other black scholars, such as E. Franklin Frazier, who he said had fallen "under the influence

of the unenlightened department of sociology of the University of Chicago."<sup>9</sup> Woodson, even in the face of economic and social issues that tended to break-up black families, sought to preserve the authentic wholesomeness of such families and the people that were produced from those families. The tendency of white writers to accenuate the negative was viewed by Woodson as a misrepresentation of the black family, as a "cloud of slander."<sup>10</sup>

Because the history and the achievements of blacks was excluded from or misrepresented in American and world literature by design or ignorance, Woodson set out to fill this void in 1915 when he established The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. However, Woodson discovered that even "[i]n the Capital of the Nation it has been extremely difficult to bring the educational authorities to the point of taking the study of the Negro seriously," even among the blacks serving on the Board of Education of the District of Columbia.<sup>11</sup> However, Carter Woodson, supported by concerned black scholars, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and a publishing press combined "to the publishing of history."<sup>12</sup>

Woodson was not about the business of publishing popular history, nor in making people important at their asking. The objective of his scholarship and that of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History was to report "the truth and nothing but the truth [t]o fill the channels of information" in order to replace the misinformation about black people.<sup>13</sup> Woodson

spent the bulk of his time, as did other black scholars, searching the past as their guide to the future. He sought out and praised the new breed of historians who were better trained and interested in writing and teaching history as a profession.<sup>14</sup>

What was the will, the intellectual objective that Carter G. Woodson wanted understood? His will was that black people educate themselves about themselves and to produce capable scholars to write about their unusual gifts.

### Objective of Strong and Faithful Black Leaders

Woodson believed that black Americans needed strong leadership from within their community. He knew that the "badges of slavery" lingered and the effects of slavery remained apparent in the black community. Apparently, he also sense, or perhaps observed that some black leaders, anxious to profit as spokesmen for their race, sold out their people in exchange for personal gain. This caused Woodson to write,

"Negro leaders must not only abstain from saying or doing anything to strengthen the hold of the Jim Crow, but they must actually attack the Jim Crow even if it means the loss of position and income. A chosen leader never looks out for himself. Only the superimposed leader takes this position."<sup>15</sup>

Woodson knew that poverty was one of the conditions that drove the poor to materialism, often at the expense of individual

worth and community pride. He did not want black youth, the ranks from which future leaders would emerge, to abandoned their heritage, their history or their moral obligation to assume the role of leader at some future time. Woodson dreaded the thought that "[p]overty in a world of fashions and fads [would drive] so many of our promising young men to sell out."<sup>16</sup>

What was the will, the intellectual objective that Carter G. Woodson wanted understood? His will was that there be an unbroken succession of strong leaders to fight against racism, and leaders who would never sell out their race on a promise that future generations could buy back their liberty.

#### Objective of Making The Fight for Democracy

To my knowledge Carter Woodson was not a politician. He never ran for public office. However, he revered the Democratic state. While critical of the progress of blacks in America during the 1930's - 1940's, Woodson wrote that "[h]istory shows...that the advancement of the Negro toward recognition as a man does not lag far behind that of the underprivileged classes in Europe."<sup>17</sup> It was Woodson's view that black Americans had won their right to participate in the political system by the efforts made to build the economy of the nation as slaves and the significant contributions that 178,975 black troops made "in turning the tide in favor of the Union and Freedom" during the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in the 1940's it took militant demands to upgrade the status of blacks in the military. Woodson called the segregation of the races in the military, "shameful impudence."<sup>19</sup>

Woodson observed and listen to the anger of blacks as they complained about the many political encumbrances to vote. However, Woodson reminded his black brethren, "In making the fight for democracy the Negro himself must be sure that he is sincere. Most Negroes talking about democracy never have a serious thought as to its meaning and its demands."<sup>20</sup> Woodson was equally critical of the reluctance of white people to support black candidates for public office. In 1944 Woodson wondered when, if ever the time would be "ripe for the Negro to assume political leadership in this country".<sup>21</sup>

In 1944 Woodson wrote that it was "conceded that Negroes [held] the balance of power in the pivotal states and [could] determine who shall or shall not be President of the United States."<sup>22</sup> However, because blacks did not vote, or diluted their vote "in return for appointment to three or four insignificant jobs,"<sup>23</sup> the nation moved forward and black people moved backward. Woodson's view was that "proper recognition...would justify the appointment of at least one Negro to a position in the cabinet."<sup>24</sup>

What was the will, the intellectual objective that Carter G. Woodson wanted understood? His will was for blacks to combine their political power as a usual act of living in a democracy, and to learn more about the political fabric of government in order to assume positions of local and national leadership when more doors of opportunity opened.

## Objective of The Importance and Effect of U.S. Foreign Policy

Carter G. Woodson lived through two World Wars. He was fully aware of the importance that foreign policy played on the lives of his people. American foreign policy had carried black citizens to foreign soil to defend America's vital interests. Woodson said, "In order that Negroes in the wars of the future may fight for their own advancement rather than to their detriment, they must so register their will in the Federal Administration as to influence its foreign policy."<sup>25</sup> Woodson looked to Africa as the primary reason that blacks had to become more informed about foreign policy.<sup>26</sup> Woodson understood as early as 1945 the ramifications of apartheid in South Africa. He pointed out that "The so-called representatives of the Natives in the South African Union Parliament through white persons designated for this purpose has turned out be a farce." Woodson continued, "The very fact that a Negro cannot sit in that body means keeping the race in a defenseless position at the mercy of the transducer and the exploiter."<sup>27</sup>

Woodson believed that racism in any nation was reason enough for black Americans to express their concerns about America's foreign policy, should it support the racist policies of other nations. In 1944 Woodson criticized and urged the American government, in furtherance of America's democratic ideals, to criticize England when the policy of segregation was advanced there.<sup>28</sup>

What was the will, the intellectual objective that Carter G. Woodson wanted understood? Woodson wanted black Americans to be informed about the effects of American foreign policy on Africa, particularly Southern Africa and to erase the existing erroneous notion that black Americans should have no say in the direction of their government's foreign policy.

### Objective of Adherence to The Principle of Self Sufficiency

Carter Woodson believed that black people would save themselves from racial oppression if they stood up and faced racism and voted it out of office. Woodson was a great advocate of self-help, also. He instructed black people to stop listening to politicians tell them that they were poor. Woodson's message was that, "It is a mistake to say that the Negro of this country have no money."<sup>29</sup>

Woodson believed that once black people recognized and understood their potential economic power in America that social and political change would follow. He also believed that blacks would build businesses in their own communities. Woodson urged blacks to educate themselves about business so as not to leave "the field to the ignorant and unscrupulous to destroy the confidence of the masses who may be successfully led by honest and efficient leaders."<sup>30</sup> Woodson believed that self-help, not

dependency was the ticket to economic liberty in America, a point that he emphasized in 1944. Woodson said,

"If the Negro will learn to do more for himself and depend less on others, he will have a better chance for establishing an immunity against another sort of vicious control. For example, segregation while restricting the Negro to the ghetto permits nevertheless a sufficient number of white men to fleece the Negro community through the business establishments maintained on the corners of the streets and up and down the alleys where they are permitted to dwell."<sup>31</sup>

Woodson's view was that blacks should not imitate "the exploiter," the "stores of foreigners who prosper," and "acquire the property in which their victim lives...."<sup>32</sup>

A part of Woodson's message for self sufficiency was the notion that "the Negro learn to save their income and invest it properly."<sup>33</sup> If blacks saved and invested their funds Woodson asserted, "they [would] become sufficient unto their own needs and [would] be able to present a solid front against those so long accustomed to keeping down . . . all oppressed peoples."<sup>34</sup>

What was the will, the intellectual objective that Carter G. Woodson wanted his people to understand? Woodson's message was that black people must become self - sufficient in order to achieve economic liberty. Woodson's words speak for themselves.

"If the Negro expects to look outwardly eternally for employment to those who keep his name always at the bottom of the list of eligibles his future is along a dark and difficult road. Those who have no capacity to become to some extent sufficient unto themselves will never have much of this world, and will be forever subject to that inexorable law that to him that hath it shall be given and from him that hath not shall be taken away even which he seemeth to have. This defeatism has been the cause of the failure of the Negro to figure conspicuously in the business world." 35

### Conclusion

There is much to celebrate as the Association for the Study of Afro Americans Life and History reaches its seventy-fifth year. A part of this celebration commands a review of the words that Carter G. Woodson wrote and a closer examination of their meaning and the objectives of his will. 36

END NOTES

- 1 Carter G. Woodson, Mis-education of the Negro 7 (1933).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Id. at 8.
- 4 Id. at 22.
- 5 Id. at 23.
- 6 Id. at 24.
- 7 Woodson, The Great And The Near-Great, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 120 (Feb. 1945). (According to W. Leanna Miles, "Dr. Woodson wrote all of the editorials in the Bulletin even though their is no by-line." Most of the articles herein cited are editorials from the Negro History Bulletin supplied to the author by Ms. Miles, and credited to the authorship of Carter G. Woodson. Discussion by author with Ms. Miles, the oldest living staff person at the Associated Publishers, Inc., May 4, 1989 ).
- 8 Ibid. See also, Vols. 1 and 2, The Afro-American Family (no date) (W. Leanna Miles, editor).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Woodson, Supplementing Nothing 8 The Negro History Bulletin 143-144 (1945).
- 12 Woodson, Questions Answered, The Negro History Bulletin 185 (May, 1945).
- 13 Achievement And Recognition, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 122 (March, 1945).

- 14 Woodson, Negro Historians of Our Times, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 155 (April, 1945). (Woodson mentioned Madeline R. Morgan, Jane Shackelford, Sterling A. Brown, James A. Porter, Rayford W. Logan, John H. Franklin and Benjamin Quarles). See Courtland Milloy, We Need Black Historians, Washington Post, Jan. 15, 1989 at B3, col.5; Rene Sanchez, D.C. Schools Seek to Rekindle Flame of Pride in Black Heritage, Washington Post, April 23, 1989, at B1, col. 2.
- 15 Woodson, The Negro Must Be Sincere In His Demands For Democracy, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 96 (Jan., 1944).
- 16 Woodson, Misrepresenting the Negro, The Negro History Bulletin 144 (March, 1944).
- 17 Woodson, The Open Door to Civic Honors, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 123 March, 1945).
- 18 Woodson, Gains and Losses In Retrospect, The Negro History Bulletin 200 (June, 1944).
- 19 Id. at 202.
- 20 Woodson, The Negro Must Be Sincere In His Demand for Democracy, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 96 (Jan., 1944).
- 21 Woodson, Democracy or Empire, Which Shall It Be? 8 The Negro History Bulletin 72 (Dec., 1944).
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Woodson, Democracy or Empire, Which Shall It Be? 8 The Negro History Bulletin 72 (Dec., 1944).
- 26 Woodson, The Cooperation of Persons of African Blood, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 96 (Jan., 1945).

- 27 Woodson, Questions Answered, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 185, 187 (May, 1945).
- 28 Woodson, One And the Same Objective, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 216 (June, 1944).
- 29 Woodson, Questions Answered, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 185, 187 (May, 1945).
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Woodson, Development of the Negro Community, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 48 (Nov., 1944).
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Woodson, The Negro Must Be Sincere In His Demands for Democracy, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 96 (Jan., 1944).
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Woodson, Questions Answered, 8 The Negro History Bulletin 185, 187 (May, 1945).
- 36 Logan, Carter G. Woodson: Mirror and Molder of His Time, 1875-1950, 58 The Journal of Negro History 1 (Jan., 1973); Winston, Carter Godwin Woodson: Prophet of A Black Tradition, 50 The Journal of Negro History 459 (Oct., 1975). See also, M.A. Scally, Walking Proud 87-97 (1982).