



**MESSAGE AND MIRROR TO AMERICA:
BLACK HISTORY AND JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

The passing and journey into eternity of Dr. John Hope Franklin brings us another important opportunity to pause and pay homage to one most worthy among us and to think deeply about the rich harvest of lessons we can glean from his life and work. Professor Emeritus of History at Duke University, he was a consummate scholar, committed advocate and activist intellectual, an author of hundreds of articles and numerous books and recipient of the highest civilian honor of the U.S., the Medal of Freedom. He had worked with Thurgood Marshall on *Brown*, dialogued with W.E.B. DuBois on life and history, marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. for justice, and been mentored, published and aided in his project on George Washington Williams by Carter G. Woodson, an honored historian and accomplished activist scholar, himself. He wrote the seminal and enduring text on Black history in the U.S., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, first published in 1947 and his last book *Mirror to America*, an autobiography, 2005.

Through his work and life Dr. Franklin offers both a mirror and message to America. By mirror, he means a depthful depiction and true reflection of America as it is without its self-congratulatory triumphant narrative and its open and covert claims of racial and religious superiority to the rest of the conveniently-imagined fallen and fractured world. He says he wants Americans “to see themselves and to ask themselves what kind of person or what kind of country (are we)?” Moreover, he wants a recognition of weaknesses, moral failures and a commitment “to improve. . . be more just, . . . be more giving, . . . be more sincere. . . want people to have what (we) have and. . . to be judged as (we) want to be judged”.

Most articles written in his remembrance are dedicated to: (1) praising his scholarship; (2) listing his impressive achievements in his field; (3) citing his numerous awards and honors, (4) his quiet dignity under racism’s savagery and brutal sickness; and (5) perhaps, an anecdote or two on Dr. Franklin as a loveable teacher, mentor, colleague and elderly lover of orchids.

But an inclusion of data which show him more critical and concerned, not simply about understanding history, but also about changing it reaffirms the roles he assigned to himself as “mirror to America” and thus bearer of a message of challenge and change of the racist context of this country. And these, I would argue, are indispensable to understanding his work, life and legacy. Recounting his ordeal of life in the crushing context of racism he states: “I grew up in a racial climate that was stifling to my senses and damaging to my emotional health and social well-being”. It was, he declared, an “environment of racist barbarism” which was “no more possible to escape. . . than one today can escape the industrial gases that pollute the atmosphere”. However, he would not surrender but rather resisted.

Thus, he says, “Living in a world restricted by laws defining race, as well as creating obstacles, disadvantages, and even superstitions regarding race, challenged my capacities for survival” and development. But “armed with the tools of scholarship. . . I strove to dismantle those laws, level those obstacles and disadvantages and replace superstitions with human dignity”. In a word, he sought to expose racism’s irrationality and intellectual weakness, its moral monstrousness and its pathological and pathogenic effect on society. He offers us a lesson of active self-knowledge saying, “I cannot imagine how

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knowing one's history would not urge one to be an activist". Indeed, he said of his role as a scholar activist, "I want to be out there on the firing line, helping, directing or doing something to try to make this a better world, a better place to live". But always he respected and balanced the scholarship requirement of intellectual rigor and the ethical obligation of social responsibility central to the Black scholar activist tradition.

Moreover, Dr. Franklin gains foundation and framework for studying and understanding other humans and the world by delving deeply in the rich soil of Black history, where he cultivates his skills, develops his insights and brings to magisterial maturity his impressive scholarship. And this history studied is not only archival records, but the agonizing concreteness of daily life, death, violence, disappointment, indignities, endurance, achievement and ultimate victory in America. There is no scavenger history here, searching for and feeding on real and contrived faults, failures and compulsory pathologies; and no post-Black fantasies or conceptually dead-end deconstructionist diversions.

Dr. Franklin clearly fits within the best of African intellectual and social tradition and rightfully places himself in the context of the historical oppression, resistance and daily life of his people. Thus, his task, he tells us, is to weave Black history tightly into the fabric and formation of U.S. history as a whole, to demonstrate its essential and foundational role, and its resourcefulness in understanding the country and the contours and character of its development. He describes African American history as "an exciting story, a remarkable story. It is a story of slavery, freedom, humanity and inhumanity,

democracy and its denial. It is tragedy and triumph, suffering and compassion, sadness and joy". And as noted above, he draws from it lessons for society and the world about human rights and responsibility, justice, equality, mutual respect and cooperation for mutual benefit.

Finally, in his later life, Dr. Franklin is impatient with soft racial reformism, apologies without social change and with acute denials of oppression and calls to move on without redress and repair. He argues that apologies cost nothing; his honorary degrees are "not the way you measure anything. Some of it is conscience pay", and he cannot and will not "move on" without rightful redress and repair, i.e., a life of dignity, decency, democracy and peace for Black people and all others.

He concludes with hope, noting that in spite of the moral horror, holocausts and hypocrisy which mark so much of the history of the country and the world, he believes in the capacity of the people to transform themselves and the country and contribute meaningfully to the well-being of the world. "There is so much good for all of us to do in the world," Dr. Franklin tells us. "There are hungry mouths to be fed, . . .diseased bodies to be healed;. . .deranged minds to be delivered" and oceans, rivers, deserts and forests to be respectfully and measuredly used as resources for the benefit of all humankind. And he trusted and hoped we can together build a world of democracy, equality, justice and peace in which this great and urgent work can be cooperatively accomplished and left as a legacy for future generations to build on and expand.

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