

**Heritage and Horizons February 2, 2000**  
**The African American Legacy and the Challenges of the**  
**21st Century - February 2, 2000**  
**Franklin Work Camp Inmates**  
**Apalachicola City Commissioner Van W. Johnson**

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As I pondered upon the theme of this year's Black History month "Heritage and Horizons: The African-American Legacy and the Challenges of the 21st century. I chose for my topic tonight "Can I make a Difference?" As I speak tonight, I want each of you to ask yourself that question "can I make a difference?"

Having just crossed into the 21st century, we are now 37 years from the era when the nonviolent protests of the Civil Rights Movement, put an end to separate drinking fountains for blacks and whites.

We have since moved from the point where soldiers have to be sent in to protect our children, as we send them off to school. It is but a distance memory of the days when we had to take our sit, on the back of the bus. It's difficult to believe, that these were some of the conditions in this country less than 40 years ago.

Conditions like this existed until ordinary people like Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama, helped bring about the civil rights movement.

Thurgood Marshall, a great civil rights lawyer and the first black supreme court justice, who won cases before the Supreme Court such as Brown vs. the Board of Education, and Roy Wilkins, former executive director of the NAACP and organizers of the 1963 March on Washington.

These leaders and others rose above the brutality, took a stance, and vowed to make a difference.

Because of their sacrifice, we are now at liberty to enjoy our first African-American national holiday named for the slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We have African-Americans holding posts as Chief Executive Officers on boards of major corporations. There are also an unprecedented number of Blacks elected to public offices throughout this country. We also see achievements in the field of sports and entertainment.

This is the type of America that the strugglers of the past envisioned when they sacrificed their lives for our liberty and dignity. This is the type of legacy they left behind, one of which all Americans can be proud of.

However, it saddens me to say, that it appears that we have forgotten the struggles and sacrifices of the past. It seems as if Black America has drifted off into a sea of complacency, where we care more about material wealth than social progress. Where we trade a college education for a prison sentence and sell our heritage for drugs. While we are being swept away in this sea of complacency, there are people in this country working to take away our gains of the past. Dr. King, and the others, struggled too hard and too long to leave this legacy behind, for us to just give it away.

You must ask yourself, what can 21st century Black America do, to reverse this course of self-destruction and leave behind a legacy that future Blacks can be proud of. First, as fathers, Brothers, uncles and nephews, we must start assuming the responsibility for our own actions and learn to abide by the rules of a civilized society. We must stop terrorizing our own communities with the sale of drugs and start sending more Blacks to college than to prison. We must put an end to single parent homes and teenage pregnancies. We must educate ourselves, through reading programs, adult education courses, and by joining political, civic and community groups.

A recent survey, conducted by the Washington Post, revealed that the better educated know more about society than those with less education; and that whites know more about politics than blacks do. The survey also revealed that the more knowledgeable were more likely to vote and were more inclined to see their votes as a way to bring positive changes in their communities.

Knowledge has always been the key. With knowledge comes the power to influence government and improve the quality of life, for all Americans. If you don't vote, you don't have a voice. Without a voice, Black communities are often ignored and are left to sit on the sideline and watch as someone else decides our fate. Our continued development as a people means exploiting our political power, by maintaining our right to vote and by voting in every election from the school board to the presidency. If we as African-Americans want to get things done, we had better start voting.

We must also make certain that our children acquire the necessary education, so that they have the ability to compete in this age of technology. We must prepare them to understand how society works and to communicate to them our high expectations, and send them off to school ready to learn.

As I close, please be reminded, that the new century on which we have just embarked, offers us a unique opportunity to write our own chapter in the history of this country. We should resolve this night, to leave the legacy that "I made the difference."