

Book Review: The Negro in the Making of America

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The book *The Negro in the Making of America*, by Benjamin Quarles, describes the evolution of blacks throughout early American history and their increasingly important role in the formation of present-day contemporary America. The book tends to focus on the beginning of blacks' journey as peoples in various parts of Africa that were enslaved by their captors (often other tribes), and the European demand for slaves gradually over time. Later on, the Europeans settled various parts of the US and brought slaves with them. First, they were brought to the Caribbean islands to plant staple crops, with the European powers eventually making their way to the US. Even the early settlement of Jamestown in 1619 saw the coming of African Americans. States eventually adopted slaves as an increasingly important form of labor, according to the demands for certain crops, while the North saw somewhat of a more limited role in agriculture for slaves and as more of a manufacturing base. The history of blacks' involvement in the major American wars is also mentioned. Over time, since the early days of America, we have seen discrimination in its various forms, yet large gains were made in equal rights over time, with the eventual culmination of the Civil Rights Act in 1968; however, the struggle for fairness in all levels of existence continues in the United States, and through profiles of great civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, we can greater appreciate the importance of these leaders breaking down the glass ceiling for many blacks.

When the Europeans first came to Africa, they discovered a land of rich resources and an ample supply of labor. They sought to carve out their particular territories while finding ways to mine gold, cobalt, various metals, precious gems, etc. There was a great deal of inter-tribal warfare going on in the many territories of this vast continent, and the tribes who were enemies of each other typically enslaved the conquered. The Europeans picked up on this and decided to try to take advantage of this opportunity. The various tribes decided that they could make quite a profit selling slaves to these foreigners, and they hatched plans to keep slaves in local sleeping quarters near the coast so that the Europeans did not have to travel inland. Often, the Europeans traded trinkets of all shapes and sizes for slaves and resources. The demand for extracting raw materials directly to Europe over time grew as increased demand called for greater expansion of territories. As Europe continued to explore many new parts of the world, they decided to claim these new lands and settle there. The Caribbean eventually over time became a haven for new crops to grow and new avenues to explore in terms of having yet further territories to conquer. Often the tropical climate was ideal for tobacco, sugar, and bananas, for instance. The Europeans saw great potential in these islands and started

importing slaves to the territories.¹ The slaves were restricted in their activities and could not defile the white conqueror or face severe punishment. Often a whip was administered to the rebellious slave in order to deter him from escaping his post. In fact, slave uprisings were not unusual in the Middle Passage voyage from Africa to the Caribbean islands, so called because it was a drop-off point before North America, which was soon settled. Mutiny was considered such a risk and the conditions so treacherous on the voyage that even bringing back a greater percentage of one's slaves without an incident was an accomplishment. It was not extremely difficult to do this, as the captain could be outnumbered, and the slaves could overtake him when he was most vulnerable. The big problem is that even if the slaves reached the Caribbean or North America, there was the risk that they would not be granted freedom and lose some rights and privileges if they did reach a European settlement.

One thing that I found fascinating about the book was that Quarles explained that the "peculiar institution" of slavery was a practice that became accepted over time in the United States instead of starting off as outright having people under involuntary servitude. Indentured servants were often brought along to pay off debts or to work off punishment with so many years of service. Over time, the black man in the United States, especially starting in the late 17th century, became synonymous with slavery, as indentured servitude saw an increase in length of service as these servants tried to escape more and more. The early British colonies in the United States eventually adopted the idea that these persons could now be seen as slaves because they proved in demand for their labor. The American Indian was more challenging to enslave, as he sparked the ire of other tribes if the white man held him captive, and the Indians proved more resistant early on.² It was thought that the black slave could withstand intense heat and adapt to the will of his master more easily and work in the fields.

Eventually, the later independent country of the United States decided to institute formal slavery laws so that involuntary servitude could be addressed, and to protect the property of the plantation owner. The plantation owner previously had not had any protection, and he needed the labor for his land, and so he was able to limit slave activities as a result. The South needed slaves more because of the longer growing season, while the North, influenced by the abolitionist movement of the Quakers, gradually outlawed it because manufacturing was more essential in the colder climate.

Quarles' reasons in writing this book are to address the common misconception that blacks did little to contribute to the founding of America and had little part in its history. On the contrary, blacks have made significant contributions to values we as Americans hold precious today and are part of the American identity. Quarles has presented a scholarly view of the great contributions to black history. In fact, earlier books of his addressed African-American roles in the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, and he even wrote a book on black abolitionists. Not many people have fully come to appreciate black contributions to American history, and so Quarles filled this much-needed gap, culminating in the work *The Negro in the Making of America*. It is important to recognize that he wrote an extensive overview of black history in this country and even

1 Quarles, Benjamin. *The Negro in the Making of America*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1987.

2 Quarles 30.

showed how black civil rights leaders, like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Frederick Douglass. Essentially, what Quarles did was show a positive view of blacks that was hardly addressed before in American history.

The book itself filled a huge gap in my own history growing up. As a child, I learned a great deal about American history, as well as later various undergraduate courses. However, the black leaders who contributed to its history were few and far between. Often it is said that the victor writes his own version of history, which is possibly the case in most of our educational institutions. The black American was downplayed for his role in many ways in serving our country, in contributing to the abolition of slavery, in playing a significant role in producing scholarly works, and in producing great civil rights leaders and quality businessmen serving the American public.

I had thought, though I learned little about these significant black contributions, that there must be more to American history than what I learned in my early coursework in my formal education. This book changed my early thinking quite a bit. In fact, my formal education at Clark Atlanta has opened my eyes to a great many scholarly works by black authors. Typical political science or history courses might cover some of these topics, but not to the extent or the emphasis that I get at Clark Atlanta. I feel that since examining Quarles' book, I have learned quite a bit about American history that matters, which includes the history of how minority groups have impacted America's founding.

I sincerely believe that Quarles has inspired a great many other black authors since the release of this book in the early 1960s. I do think that some schools have started to address this issue and have started to incorporate alternative subject matters in their curriculum, though it has only been in recent decades.

Quarles brings countless examples to the table of black contributions to history. The early writer and abolitionist Frederick Douglass was indeed one who sought to improve the lot of African-Americans and advocated a life for them where they could live in harmony with all of America in the "Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" speech: What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy -- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.³

Besides Frederick Douglass, Quarles goes on to profile Martin Luther King, Jr. in his book and explain his greatness through his civil rights efforts. The "I Have a Dream Speech" shows the powerful impact that Quarles felt that King had in inspiring many blacks to vie for true freedom: One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the

3 Douglass, Frederick. "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro."
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2927t.html> (Last Accessed: Feb. 18, 2008).

corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land...We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" we can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.⁴

Even Quarles' example of Malcolm X in detailing significant contributions of African-Americans has merit, as explained in Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech: The political philosophy of Black Nationalism only means that the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community. The -- The time -- The time when white people can come in our community and get us to vote for them so that they can be our political leaders and tell us what to do and what not to do is long gone. By the same token, the time when that same white man, knowing that your eyes are too far open, can send another negro into the community and get you and me to support him so he can use him to lead us astray -- those days are long gone too.⁵ These great speakers and writers should be no less admired than other examples of great persons in American history, such as George Washington, Robert E. Lee, or John F. Kennedy.

Likewise, there are other writers who frequently have praised Quarles for his recognition of prominent black figures over time. These include the influential author Marcus Garvey, who was an advocate for pan-Africanism, and who praised Quarles for his revelations about black abolitionists in his work "Black Resistance in the North": Since the vast majority of blacks in the United States were still in slavery, advocates of Black Nationalism naturally turned to the African homeland in search for a place to begin the long process of nation building. The appeal to black consciousness and black unity was not only present in the work of black separatists like Martin R. Delany but also in the efforts of black abolitionists. Professor Benjamin Quarles provides a good summary of their efforts. Unwilling to turn their back upon Afro-Americans in slavery, these men risked their lives and fortunes in aiding black fugitives to escape and in finding them a permanent home.⁶

In addition to Garvey, there have been a number of other prestigious authors who have admired the qualities of Quarles' analysis and his thoroughness in revealing little-known material prior to the 1960s. V.P. Franklin, a professor at Columbia University, is another academic who fully realizes the benefits of Quarles' research in opening the door to explaining black history in the American context, so much so that Franklin wrote the foreword to this very book. Quarles is also frequently mentioned in an article by Stephanie Evans called "The State and Future of the Ph.D. in Black Studies: Assessing

4 King, Jr., Martin Luther. "I Have a Dream." August 28, 1963.
<http://www.wordpower.ws/speeches/i-have-a-dream.html> (Last accessed: Feb. 18, 2008).

5 X, Malcolm. "The Ballot or the Bullet." April 12, 1964.
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/malcolmxballotbullet.htm> (Last accessed Feb. 18, 2008).

6 Garvey, Marcus. "Black Resistance in the North."
<http://www.marcusgarvey.com/wmview.php?ArtID=562> (Last accessed: Feb. 18, 2008).

the Role of the Comprehensive Examination”: In *Blacks in the American Revolution* (the Kaplans) and *Blacks in Civil War* (Benjamin Quarles) authors investigated the presence of African-Americans in America’s struggle for independence from Britain and their active role in their own emancipation. The demand of an exchange of liberty for patriotism is a central question that extended through WWI, WWII, and continues to be relevant today...Benjamin Quarles, in *Black Mosaic: Essays in Afro-American History and Historiography*, wrote on the controversy surrounding what kind of evidence qualifies as “credible” or “valuable” in traditional American history and how historians in the field of Black Studies have challenged that criterion. In “The Problem of Materials” he writes on the scarcity of materials in Black families where illiteracy or record keeping were forbidden as well as the limitations of written materials as seen in the National Archives...In *Black Mosaic*, Quarles discusses differences in approaches to history. He distinguishes between “ ‘the great man’ theory of history, presenting a gallery of heroic men and women pushing on to victory against greater odds” and the “revolutionary black nationalists.”⁷ From these above examples, we can begin to see that Quarles was an author who had quite an impact on the black community. In fact, he was known for his ability to put blacks in the important context of history, which few others did before him in the same way.

Overall, I felt that this book was indeed a subject worthy of study. The scholarly approach to black history was something that needed to be filled at some point in history, and Benjamin Quarles’ work opened the door to learning the valuable history of the greatest African-American contributors, leading to more persons perhaps being inspired to teach about this rich area of history that was neglected before.

In addition, the Quarles book makes for a great read among beginners and those seeking understanding of the broad appeal and effects African Americans had on the development of the American economy, and perfecting its democracy. There needs to be however, further examination into the intermixing of Native Americans and African Americans, along with white Europeans and how the dynamic of intermixing may have brought major economic, political, and social change in Americas past and current developments.

The evidence was certainly sufficient. In fact, one realizes that without these prominent blacks mentioned, others would not have such a great resource for learning about this field. Perhaps many black leaders today understand more thoroughly the contributions of African-Americans as a result. There are documented listings of blacks involved in major American wars, as well as of the writings of great leaders. Their stories have been greater appreciated as a result of Quarles’ analysis.

We are aware of many black leaders who can be praised for their contributions, of which Quarles remains significant even today. The frequent endorsement of black writers like V.P. Franklin, Stephanie Evans, Marcus Garvey, and others gives us an idea of the impact Quarles has had on America in re-thinking the context of blacks’ place in history. I sincerely feel that I have broadened my scope of understanding African-American contributions to history more as a result of this book.

Finally, we can examine how Quarles’ history of slavery to the modern-day success in business and the freedoms more enjoyed by minority groups has impacted

7 Evans, Stephanie Y. “The State and Future of the Ph.D. in Black Studies: Assessing the Role of the Comprehensive Examination.” *The Griot* Vol. 25, No. 1 (2006): 1-16.

America. We see the evolution of blacks contributing to wars, the abolitionist movement, and the major impact of civil rights' leaders in that era, along with other subjects, that make black history worth studying as an important scholarly field. The book read quite well and inspires me to read Quarles' other works that are available. There is no less a sense of admiration that I have for his research and filling in a gap in my education that was not addressed before I had come across this university and this book.

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