

Will blacks help mark 200 years of freedom?

By ETHEL L. PAYNE

WASHINGTON — In a speech of July 4, 1852. Frederick Douglass, the black abolitionist, asked, "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" The dialogue follows: "What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of 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 sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, imoiety, and hypocrisy - a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages."

Douglass was plainly angry about the whole idea of celebrating a day of independence while the nation was coming apart on the issue of slavery. If he were alive today, he might be not quite as angry, but skeptical about the approaching bicentennial celebration of the American Revolution on July 4, 1976.

There are many doubting Thomases with him who fear that the observance will degenerate into a round of old battles re-enacted, period costume pageants, fireworks and enough patriotism to drown out any guilty about stealing the country from the Indians.

While plans proceed for the celebration, there are counter moves to assure that blacks will be an integral part of the program. The American Revolution Bicentennial Commission was created by a Joint Resolution of the 89th Congress on July 4, 1966. Its mission is to prepare an overall program for commemorating the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, and to plan, encourage, develop and coordinate observances and activities commemorating the historic events that preceded and are associated with the American Revolution."

The Commission was directed to give "due consideration" to related programs developed by state, local and private groups. Currently, the Commission has 35 members — 17 public, with one vacancy at present, eight Congressional representatives and all 11 ex-officio (representing government departments and agencies.) Only two of the 35 members are blacks, Dr. Luther Foster, president of Tuskegee University, and Sen. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts. So far, it has one black staffer, Samuel J. Johnson, who was recruited from the Bureau of the Census, after widespread complaints over the lack of blacks and other minorities.

ARBC officials say they are aware of the underrepresentation, but in defense, they say they are still in the midst of organizing and have yet to be fully funded.

Most of the staff is "on loan" from federal agencies. The Chairman of ARBC is David J. Mahoney and the Vice Chairman is Hobart Lewis, president of Reader's Digest. Obviously, the Commission has been hampered both by political factors, as well as lack of funds. Authorized by President Lyndon B. Johnson, it never really got off the ground before the 1968 president election, and then it had to wait nearly 18 months before President Nixon moved with his new appointments and his own ideas about the function and purpose of the ARBC.

In general, the Nixon concept includes a full week of celebrations in each of the 50 states, as well as the territories; multi-city expositions, but no commercially oriented worlds' fairs in the traditional sense; international participation with the principal site as Philadelphia; for Washington, the Nation's Capital, long-range projects such as the new rapid transit system and an urban renewal program; and the publication of films, coins and medals and other suitable commemorative items.

It is not sure yet to what extent Congress will appropriate funds for the Bicentennial. The President's thinking leans towards the cities and states raising a major portion of the expense. Someone has pointed out that when Canada decided to hold Expo '67, the Parliament initially appropriated \$400 million to get the project started. The American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission is limping along on a widow's mite so far. There are assurances that the money will come. Meanwhile, the Democratic National Committee charged that President Nixon was "stealing the American Revolution" by loading the Bicentennial Commission with Republicans and squeezing out Democrats. He said the politicization has been quiet but total.

Fact, the DNC newsletter, accused the Nixon Administration of failing to plan a substantive celebration as envisioned by Congress. It said the ARBC has no public representatives of American constitutional jurisprudence, American youth, Indian Americans, American artists, musicians or dramatists and only one recognized scholar of the American Revolution.

Fact did not say that black representation on the Commission is barely token. On one very vital committee, Communications, there are no Blacks, no other minorities, no youth, none from the East Coast and none from NBC or CBS. The chairman is James S. Copley, President of the Copley Newspapers, and the membership of 15 includes Robert O'Brien, Senior Editor of Readers' Digest; Herbert Klein, the President's Communications' Director; John Lynch, Chief of ABC News; and Robert O. Carlson, President of the Public Relations Society of America. The roster also includes a Pentagon representative and one from USIA. (Continued Tomorrow) ...

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