




2-22-2015

## Link Racial Past to the Present

Jill Ogline Titus  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwifac>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Titus, Jill Ogline. "Link Racial Past to the Present." Philly.com (February 22, 2015).

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwifac/10>

This open access opinion is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

## Link Racial Past to the Present

### **Abstract**

Americans have been putting a great deal of energy into commemorating the 50th anniversary of some of the key moments of the civil rights movement. This burst of memorialization has inspired one new museum in Atlanta and the redesign of another in Memphis. The Smithsonian and Library of Congress are launching a new oral-history initiative, and films like *Selma* bring the movement to life for those who rarely read a history book or visit a museum.

This year brings more anniversaries: the Selma-to-Montgomery March, the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and the Watts rebellion. And the commemorative stakes are high given recent events in Ferguson, New York, and Cleveland. [*excerpt*]

### **Keywords**

Civil Rights, Civil Rights Movement, peaceful protest, Selma, Montgomery, Voting Rights Act, African American, Racial Violence, Selma-to-Montgomery March, Martin Luther King Jr

### **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Cultural History | Curriculum and Social Inquiry | History | Peace and Conflict Studies | Political History | Politics and Social Change | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | United States History

## Link Racial Past to the Present



On the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. JAMES KARALES  
POSTED: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2015, 1:09 AM

By Jill Ogline Titus

Americans have been putting a great deal of energy into commemorating the 50th anniversary of some of the key moments of the civil rights movement. This burst of memorialization has inspired one new museum in Atlanta and the redesign of another in Memphis. The Smithsonian and Library of Congress are launching a new oral-history initiative, and films like *Selma* bring the movement to life for those who rarely read a history book or visit a museum.

This year brings more anniversaries: the Selma-to-Montgomery March, the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and the Watts rebellion. And the commemorative stakes are high given recent events in Ferguson, New York, and Cleveland.

Will we trumpet the victories of 1965 and then close the book on civil rights anniversaries? Or will we acknowledge that neither the movement nor racial inequality ended with the passage of the Voting Rights Act? When the dust settles on our 2015 commemorations, will we be able to say we have used them effectively to inspire reflection and action today?

Racial injustice is not history. Black Americans continue to live in poverty at disproportionate rates, bearing the brunt of urban decay. Police violence against minorities and racial disparities in the criminal-justice system are front-page news. Protesters must take to the streets to proclaim the value of black lives. Though mostly peaceful, these demonstrations draw criticism, often from white Americans, for obstructing public streets and destroying private property. And the right to vote in 2015 is far from guaranteed.

Yet many white Americans continue to define racism as personal antipathy held on the part of one individual toward another, and thus dismiss it as a relic of another age, terrible, but increasingly rare. As recent events have demonstrated, however, racism is interwoven into our political, economic, and judicial institutions, whether or not a specific intent to discriminate is present.

A series of recent polls has shown that African Americans understandably mistrust these institutions, particularly the court system and the police, at rates substantially higher than whites. These divergent perceptions are grounded in history. So this year, we must commemorate the struggle for civil rights by probing

the deep roots of state-sponsored violence against African Americans, the resurgence of voting discrimination in U.S. politics, and the links between chronic poverty and civil unrest.

This March, we should mourn Jimmie Lee Jackson, whose murder inspired the Selma-to-Montgomery March, ultimately helping to secure passage of a groundbreaking voting-rights law, restoring a franchise largely denied to African Americans in the South since the turn of the century. Remember, too, that the march also called attention to police brutality. In 1965 Selma, it was necessary to assert that black lives mattered. Heartbreakingly, it remains necessary today.

When we mark the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August, we must emphasize that this milestone has been largely gutted of its power to combat voter discrimination. From 1965 to 2013, the legislation proved remarkably effective, but two years ago, the Supreme Court struck down the formula that made parts of the act enforceable, and some states adopted restrictive voting rules, many of which disproportionately affect citizens of color.

And Congress has yet to put forward a new formula to replace the old one. Commemorating the sacrifices that led to the passage of this law will be an empty exercise if it is not combined with a campaign to push Congress to restore the Voting Rights Act's power to combat discrimination.

Also in August, when the anniversary of the rage unleashed in Watts confronts us, we must embrace it, not run from it. We must find ways to use the anniversary to open difficult conversations about rioting, property rights, and human lives - conversations that are as relevant today as they were in 1965.

By using Watts as an entry point for discussing the recent protests in Ferguson, we can explore the way that poverty, deindustrialization, job discrimination, housing segregation, and police violence create the backdrop upon which unrest unfolds. These conversations, though difficult, offer hope of bridging the divide separating white and black experiences in the United States.

Use these anniversaries as a reminder that even as the ink dried on voting-rights legislation, much remained undone. And much work remains today. Let's spotlight the structural issues underlying racial inequality. This will not only honor those who struggled, but it will also connect the past to the present.

---

Jill Ogline Titus is associate director of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College.

<http://mobile.philly.com/news/opinion?wss=/philly/opinion&id=293109991>