

John Hope Franklin

By Wilson J. Moses

Growing up in Detroit during the 1940s, I constantly heard the name of the late American historian, John Hope Franklin. He was born in 1915 and graduated from Tulsa, Oklahoma's, segregated Colored High School three years ahead of my mother, who always held him up to me as an example of what we used to call "a truly representative Negro." On his first day at Harvard Graduate School, one student was deliberately rude. It didn't matter. The professor required all students in the seminar to have a fluent reading knowledge of Latin, which Franklin possessed and the bigot did not. As you can imagine, the legend of John Hope Franklin was pretty intimidating to African Americans who attended graduate school in the late 1960s. But later, when, as an instructor at the University of Iowa, I finally met Franklin, he was not intimidating at all. He was always very kind and gracious towards me and in every way encouraging. He understood that the consciousness of my post-war generation, influenced by J. R. R. Tolkien, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and Timothy Leary, was profoundly different than his own.

All the world knows the story of how he volunteered for military service during World War II. He simply presented himself to his naval recruiter, told them he had a Harvard University Ph.D., and offered himself as a prospect for Officer's Candidate School. That was the first and last of his discussions concerning military service. Too bad. Franklin was a handsome man with a lustrous mahogany complexion, and with his aristocratic manner, he would have been strikingly beautiful in a naval lieutenant's dress whites. But in those days, African Americans in the United States Navy served mainly as food workers, or, as they were called then, "mess boys."

Franklin was the author of several books, but the most important, in my opinion, are the following three. First, his doctoral dissertation, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*, is a classic example of scientific history. It represents history at its most objective, although it was produced under conditions that were hardly conducive to objectivity. He had to do his research under degrading conditions in segregated libraries. Indeed, a less heroic character might have found the research conditions unendurable. On one occasion the librarians found it necessary and desirable to put a screen around his work table to preserve the technicality of a racially segregated reading room.

In 1947 Franklin published his general history of African Americans, *From Slavery to Freedom*. You should be warned that this is not light reading; it is a tough-minded, old fashioned, no-nonsense textbook with no frills and very few pictures. I own several editions of this textbook, which is currently in print and contains much new material contributed by my good friend Professor Alfred Moss of the University of Maryland. I once used it in a course at Penn State, and while my students gained much from it, they also found its flood of data overwhelming. When Franklin visited Penn State in 1999 to receive an honorary doctorate, I asked him to sign my copy of the eighth edition, but he declined because of an ongoing dispute with the publisher. I believe part of the conflict had to do with his refusal to "modernize."

Among his many books, Franklin told me his favorite was *The Militant South* (1956). This work is a brilliant masterpiece combining imagination, moral commitment and stern intellectual discipline. A great historian is expected not only to report what has happened but to theorize as to why things happen. Franklin asked the question, "What caused the Civil War," and the answer was unpopular, for he said it was the southern love of violence. The South

rejoiced in violence as the solution for every problem. The culture of violence and a belief that obscene bluster and masculine bravado could solve all problems caused the Civil War. Franklin did not deny that these attitudes were present in the North, as well, but he felt that in the South they went practically unquestioned. Before wading into the quicksand of Afghanistan, President Obama would do well to learn something from Franklin's theory of history. Any region, any country, any society that believes its own war propaganda and declares itself unbeatable is likely to bring destruction on itself. Franklin's later opposition to the Vietnam War, which was no secret, was an extension of ideas presented in *The Militant South*.

With respect to African-American history, Franklin's ideas were deeply intellectual. They are often distorted through abbreviation, thus he is often misrepresented, although he made his point repeatedly. First in "The Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar" (1963), later in a famous letter to the editors of *The New York Review of Books* (September 26, 1991), he said, "African American scholars sought to extend themselves into various fields, they were pushed back into 'Negro studies' by white so-called scholars who would not tolerate their presence in non-Negro fields. . . . The Negro scholar can hardly be held responsible for this sad turn of events. . . ; seeking diligently to qualify as scholars of authority and having been rebuffed by white scholars in other fields, they retreated to the study of Negroes. . . and that is how most African American scholars went into so-called black studies, not by choice but by the force of white racism that dictated the nature of scholarship, as it did in virtually all other aspects of American life."

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