

JC Watts column
Stephens Media Group
02/07 – Black History Month
Final draft

If you've ever seen a photo of me, or seen me on television, you won't be surprised to know that I take particular interest in Black History Month, and receive many invitations to speak around the nation at related events around the nation every February. I'm happy to oblige as many of those invitations as my rather frenetic schedule will allow. Significant black history has been made already in Black History Month 2007, and there is indeed much to discuss at these events this year.

Much hoopla was made in the two weeks between the NFL conference championships and the Super Bowl between the Colts and da Bears of the fact that two men of African descent were coaching in the Big Game for the first time in its forty-one year history. This was a truly historic event, and appropriate that it occurred during Black History Month.

(On another significant note, a pastor friend of mine pointed out to his congregation on Super Bowl Sunday the historic significance of the two competing coaches. His flock awaited his expected commentary on the social significance of two black coaches facing each other for the first time in Super Bowl history. All were pleased to hear, rather, of the bold stands both coaches have made in their personal faith in Jesus Christ.)

Now that this social milestone has been reached, I believe such events will be met in the future with more of a "just another big game" approach. This is as it should be.

In the lead-up to the game, I heard a white conservative talk show host asking why black folks can't rise above race and stop talking about the color of the two coaches' skin. This is ironic, in that just a month or so ago, the nation was engaging in the hoopla over the first female Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, which was a big deal. The possibility of a Hillary Clinton or Condoleezza Rice presidency would also be truly historic.

I find it interesting when some would suggest that we put skin color behind us, and they underscore their argument by quoting Dr. King himself with his exhortation to judge people on the content of character and not the color of their skin. At the same time, they conveniently fail to quote his observations on the disparities and inequalities that existed, and still exist in many areas today.

It was in 1962 that Dr. King said "The negro lives on an island of poverty in the midst of an ocean of affluence and wealth." This was less than a year before his "content of character" remarks. Clearly, Dr. King believed inequity existed due to skin color.

The Declaration of Independence was not about creating equality of success, but equality of opportunity. This is the foundation of our success as a nation.

That equality of opportunity is growing, but still needs improvement in terms of minority procurement opportunities, home ownership opportunities, the opportunity to be the CEO of Fortune 500 company, opportunity to coach NFL teams, or even to own one.

There are over 300 coaches in NFL, and only 32 head coaching positions. We often get in our mind a stereotype of what a head coach should look like or be like. For years, the head coach

was not supposed to be black, but today, because a white owner decided 15 years ago to give a black coach a chance, we experienced two coaches in the big game.

There have always been blacks in many areas of society who are intelligent and qualified. They just need the opportunity to show it. I wish I had a dime for every time I've heard leaders in the telecommunications, aerospace, transportation and energy industries tell me they can't find a qualified minority. I always take that as code for "we like our homogeneous vendor base, and it's much easier for us to give money to minority causes than to create real financial opportunities for real people." Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith are the pictures of what can happen when people of color are given opportunities.

So, is it a big deal that two men of color stood on the sidelines as opposing head coaches for the biggest game of the year? You bet! As the old commercial used to say..."we've come a long way, baby." I think this is something all Americans can be proud of.

Indeed, we can say we Americans really experienced African Americans making history. Making American history during Black History month.