AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

"The Legacy of Shirley Chisholm"
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In honor of Women's History Month, we will spotlight a passionate and principled civic changemaker: **Shirley Chisholm**. A pioneering figure, she asserted her influence to enhance the future of the United States as a courageous advocate for civil rights and women's rights at a time when both these movements were fighting to ensure equal rights regardless of race and gender.

A true trailblazer, Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman elected to Congress and used her power and influence to improve the lives of Americans and to fight for the injustice she perceived to be plaguing American society. She was also the first woman considered for a major party's U.S. presidential nomination. This month's resource will highlight intriguing aspects of Shirley Chisholm's mark on America and the spirit of progress she rallied for.

Photo: In 1977, Shirley Chisholm became the first Black woman and second woman to serve on the House Rules Committee (Source: National Archives)

Once elected to Congress under the campaign motto "Unbought and Unbossed", Chisholm encountered resistance from Southern congressmen who sought to limit her influence. How did they do this? They assigned her to the Agriculture Committee, intending to curtail her influence as a New York representative because New York City is an urban center with little involvement in agriculture. Chisholm had expressed interest in joining the Housing or Poverty Committees, more in alignment the the profile of her constituency. With the encouragement and advice from Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Chisholm used her new position as an opportunity to help advance food initiatives for Americans in need.

Source 1: Shirley Chisholm, "Speech at Howard University." April 21, 1969, Washington, D.C.

While nothing is easy for the black man in America, neither is anything impossible. Like old man river, we are moving along and we will continue to move resolutely until our goal of unequivocal equality is attained. We must not be docile, we must not be resigned, nor must we be inwardly bitter. We must see ourselves in an entirely new perspective and we cannot sit in our homes waiting for someone to reach out and do things for us.

Every tomorrow has two handles; we can take hold of the handle of anxiety, or the handle of faith. And the first battle is won, my brothers and sisters, when we fight for belief in ourselves, and find that it has come to us while we are still battling. We must not allow petty things to color our lives and stimulate them into vast proportions of evil. To dwell on every slight and clutch it close to our breast and nourish it will corrode our thinking. We're on the move now, and as Frederick Dougless said, "Power concedes nothing without a struggle." It never has, and it never will.

The United States can no longer afford the luxury of costly morally, religiously, and ethically wrong racial discrimination. For America needs all of her citizens with their abilities developed to make a fuller contribution to the future. Many problems scream loudly in this country. The thousands of black citizens disenfranchised, living under degrading conditions. The millions of poor in this nation, white and black, who lack the bare rudiments for fruitful living. The rapidly growing numbers of children caught in a web of disillusionment which destroys their will to learn. The increasing numbers of aged who do not even look forward to rest or retirement.

And despite the historic legislation in our cities and our states, nearly eleven million black citizens today still live in basic ghetto communities of our cities. From decades of non-participation, or only modest participation, the black man has within the last two years shifted his goal to full political participation for full American citizenship. And while on the picket line at the lunch counter and on the bus and the store boycott the black man came face to face with the full breadth and weight of the power of influence exercised by local and state governments intertwining and often stifling the protests.

Indeed, a principle byproduct of the American Civil Rights Movement has been the awakening of the black citizen to his awesome political potential. And just as the picket line and the lunch counter demonstrations and the boycotts were dramatic and effective weapons of protest for the civil rights movement, the polling place is the new phase in the new thrust of the black man's bid for equality of opportunity. "Power concedes nothing." How else can any man rise to power and hold sway over millions or tens of thousands except by smothering dissenting voices?

Freedom is an endless horizon, and there are many roads that lead to it. We must walk arm in arm with other men, and we must struggle toward goals which are commonly desired and sound. We must give and lend to the youth for stronger voice and encourage their individuality. We must look to the schools and constantly work for their improvement because that is where the future leadership of the country will be coming from to a large extent, particularly in the black communities.

Discussion Questions:

1. Chisholm remarks, "We must not be docile, we must not be resigned, nor must we be inwardly bitter. We must see ourselves in an entirely new perspective and we cannot sit in our homes waiting for someone to reach out and do things for us." What does Chisholm believe is the proper approach to be empowered citizens? How do you believe one can channel civic apathy toward energy and action?

2. Chisholm's speech was delivered in 1968—do you find her message to be as relevant today? In what realms of society would her words have the most impact?

3. In addressing the many opportunities to increase liberty, Chisholm says, "Freedom is an endless horizon, and there are many roads that lead to it.". What, in your view, are the "Roads" to freedom? How would you define 'freedom" in 2025, whether politically, socially, economically or personally?

Source 2: National Museum of African American History and Culture. "Pinback button for the Shirley Chisholm presidential campaign." Smithsonian Institution.

Discussion Questions:

1. Chisholm's campaign slogan, "Unbought and Unbossed" emphasizes independence from political contributions. What do you think her campaign slogan means in terms of empowerment and integrity?

2. What are other ways to foster political independence and protect against the influence of special interest groups?

3. In the Supreme Court Case of Citizens United vs. FEC (2010), The Supreme Court ruled that laws preventing political spending by corporations and Unions violate free speech. Do you agree with this reasoning–why or why not?

Source 3: Shirley Chisholm, "Presidential Announcement Speech." 1972. Excerpt.

I stand before you today as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the presidency of the United States of America. I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not a candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman and I'm equally proud of that. I am not the candidate of any political policies or fatcats or special interests. I stand here now, without endorsements from many big name politicians or celebrities or any other kind of prop, I do not intend to offer you the tired clichés that have too long been an accepted part of our political life. I am the candidate of the people of America.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think of the way Chisholm describes herself? Do you find it unifying or do you believe that identifying more strongly with each group she identifies with strengthens her candidacy? Why or why not?

2. If you were running for office as an elected representative, what aspects of your background would you highlight? How do you believe it would strengthen your position as a strong advocate of the People?

Source 4: Dr. David Luchins Luchins, "How WIC & Food Stamps Grew", YouTube, 2008 - https://youtu.be/OYnhTBQ5p2s

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Chisholm ultimately use her position in the Congressional Agriculture Committee to help millions of Americans who faced food insecurity?

2. This story between Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson and Shirley Chisholm highlights the concept of turning challenges into opportunities for change. Is there an episode or event in American history or in your own life where a challenge was transformed into a source of strength?