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**Professor John Hope Franklin  
African American Leadership  
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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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There have been a number of fitting tributes to John Hope Franklin lauding his life work, but as a scholar, I have some different perspectives on who he was and what he meant to us.

I also came to know John as a friend over the years since our first meeting at Fisk University in 1962 where I was a student leader protesting bad food and he was a member of the Board of Trustees. But as scholars, subsequently, I came to see him in a number of familiar places such as the Association for the Study of African American life and History conferences. This was a black organization and he was an esteemed historian.

Today, many of our esteemed black scholars never grace the conferences of black academic organizations without a fee. So, you won't see them at the National Conference of Black Studies, the Association of Black Sociologists, or the National Economic Association, the National Conference of Black Political Science, or others. A kind of national pecking order has set where there used to be camaraderie of scholars engaged in attempting to forge an intellectual project that would clarify both history and the current condition of black people, and serve them at the same time.

What has happened over the years is that careerism has taken over the ethic of service. That ethic comes from not just reading about black people but from having lived that experience. I once ran into John at a conference and he said that the latest book he was working dealt with "run-away slaves." When I got up to speak, I told the audience that since Professor Franklin had never forgotten where he came from and would not find ways to justify racism, he might be considered to have the sensibility of a modern "run away-slave."

Too many black scholars have found ways to justify racism, not only because they have not experienced it as strongly, but because, like to many black professionals

today, they have adopted the criteria of excellence of the institutions in which they work rather than worry about service to the community from which they came. Would that they could do both, but rather than that, they have become intimidated by the surrounding of their endowed chair, or their standing among their colleagues or the administration for which they work. If this were not true, I would see many more of our distinguished scholars on the firing line, trying to make sense of the current crises of our community, not only by writing, but by engaging in the media debate, by working with various leaders, by serving their communities and through other means.

I know that this brings to the mind of some my age and yes, another irony is that as John leaves the stage, I am retiring this year. But I remember the powerful impact that his classic, [\*From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans\*](#), made on those of just starting out. First published in 1947, it was re-published in 1969 just as the Black Studies movement was being launched and those of who were chairs of newly minted department desperately needed texts for our hungry students. It was an invaluable reference because history is the mother's milk of the curricula we were building and gave us linkages to other disciplines and fields of life. It gave us real examples of struggle and service

John Hope Franklin was no black nationalist, but he was respected for his prodigious and accurate scholarship. The distinction was frequently made by some in that era that you could not be an artist that was "politicized" by reference to blackness; you could not be a distinguished scholar if you worked in Black Studies, etc. So, you could not publish in many of the standard journals, be invited to the standard conferences, and etc. It was a difficult, yet rewarding time. But John did not denounce openly the project of Black Studies as did some of the then, old-guard scholars. Instead, he was a beacon of light in a troubled academic landscape whose scholarship was exemplary of the possibilities we might achieve.


So, it is true that Professor John Hope Franklin will be missed as a person, but with that, his monumental academic contribution to America and his example of opposition to injustice, as well.


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