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Arab-Americans must find a way to engage in politics

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Arab-Americans must find a way to engage in politics

[Hussein Ibish](#)[2]

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August 28 marked the 50th anniversary of the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom", a rally that led directly to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act that changed, forever, the American political landscape. That August moment contains, if they will but see it, important lessons for Arab-Americans.

The march is best remembered for [Martin Luther King](#) [3]'s speech, one of the greatest in American history. But it built on years of agitation by leaders such as labour organiser A Philip Randolph, the pioneering nonviolent activist Bayard Rustin, and the patient "legal strategy" of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People led by attorneys Thurgood Marshall and Charles Hamilton Houston.

A series of seemingly modest but crucial judgements won by Marshall and Houston beginning in the 1930s made the political claims for equality being articulated at the rally legally and rationally unchallengeable. All that was left to support segregation were the ancient political monsters of fear and hatred, twin demons that feed each other with bile.

In American history the march has become symbolic of the civil rights movement as a whole. This movement was the progenitor of a whole series of campaigns for equality from marginalised communities including Latinos, women, homosexuals, and a vast array of other American identity groups.

The normative American self-image turned from the "melting pot" model of the great migration era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries - which insisted on total assimilation into a pre-existing Anglo-American culture - to a "salad bowl" model that emphasises the virtues of diversity within unity.

Yet the march, and the entire civil rights movement, contains many important lessons for Arab-Americans, who face both significant external discrimination and self-imposed limitations.

There were angry voices in the black community at the time that denounced the entire campaign for equality as quixotic. Malcolm X dismissed the whole idea as a capitulatory and pathetic plea by "Uncle Toms" and "House Negros". Instead, his Nation of Islam was agitating for an independent black-only state in a territory ceded by the United States. They wanted no part of a "melting pot" and could not imagine a "salad bowl". The idea that African Americans could become full, first-class citizens of the United States was dismissed out of hand as ludicrous.

Several prominent African-American intellectuals and activists found themselves caught in the middle of this debate. James Baldwin proudly participated in the march, and dismissed Malcolm X's ideas as authentic but fundamentally misguided since he insisted they were

simply an inversion of racism itself. On the other hand, he doubted the potential for first-class citizenship and remained an unrepentant pessimist on the subject until his death in 1987.

No one can doubt that racism against African-Americans in the United States persists. But it is slowly, and obviously, dying.

Probably the most profound, lasting effect of the [Obama](#) [4] presidency will be an entire generation of young American children of all races watching his two daughters growing up in the White House. When that generation comes of age, it will inevitably have internalised a new American cultural norm regarding racial equality and national unity.

What the civil rights movement and its analogues prove is that bigotry and prejudice, whether in law or culture, can be challenged in court, through nonviolent protests, and political work, and be defeated. Not only is there nothing in the American political or legal system barring Arab-Americans from fully participating both collectively and individually, their right to do so is absolutely protected and enshrined in law.

Yet there is a pathological, self-defeating attitude in much of the Arab-American community: a notion that the system is somehow uniquely closed to them, or that the political structure in the United States is irredeemably tainted and involvement in it is inherently corrupting. Too many of them don't want to be part, at least politically, of the salad that is presently in the bowl.

Some Arab-Americans have succeeded in joining the political system, but entirely through their own efforts. For this, they are frequently castigated and reviled by community "activists".

To insult them, some have even tried to usurp Malcolm X's notorious accusations that civil rights leaders were "house Negroes", - which, while unfair, was based on the real history of African-American slavery - and refer to those who engage the American system as "house Arabs". This absurdity not only trivialises the horrors of slavery, it ignores the fact that Arabs, in so far as they were involved in the slave trade, were not exactly rotting in the abominable bowels of the infernal slave ships.

The United States was founded on the principle of "no taxation without representation". Yet many Arab-Americans are so hostile to the American political system that, in shunning direct engagement with the political system, they are insisting on having no representation within the decision-making establishment, while still paying taxes.

Arab-Americans have been reminded of a simple choice: they can continue to ignore the lessons of the March on Washington, or they can roll up their sleeves and work together within the system to claim their undeniable rights as first-class American citizens.

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