

Last Sunday, I walked the crest of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama as I have for many years now, to join in commemorating the infamous “Bloody Sunday” civil rights march and to pay tribute and join in recognizing the unspeakable hardship and indefensible prejudice that African Americans have had to overcome throughout our nation's history.

On “Bloody Sunday,” some 600 civil rights marchers, protesting the many methods employed in the South to prevent African Americans from registering to vote, headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80. They got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs, bullwhips, rubber hoses wrapped with barbed wire and tear gas, driving them back into Selma.

Footage of “Bloody Sunday” was shown on television, causing a national outcry. Several days later, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress to propose what would become the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The legislation was signed into law 40 year ago on August 6, 1965, thereby guaranteeing African Americans the right to register to vote.

Making the trip to Selma and crossing this bridge with my friend Rep. John Lewis, who suffered a fractured skull when he led the Selma march in 1965, is vitally important to me, as it is critical that we not forget the contributions of African Americans whose hearts are not hardened by the toils of history, but who are committed to building families and communities, and a better nation.

In our own community, we have been inspired by the indomitable spirit of James H. Taylor, the first African American judge in Prince George's County, and new leaders such as Edith Patterson, the first African American member to serve on the Board of Charles County Commissioners, African Americans in our community are making progress.

Our community truly has a proud record of African American Heritage. Prince George's County is recognized as one of the wealthiest African American suburbs in the nation and more than 50 percent of the businesses in Prince George's are minority-owned – compared to 20 percent in the state of Maryland as a whole.

At the end of last year, the Washington Post reported that investor interest in Prince George's County has been growing, and that Prince George's was ranked 49th in median household

income, far above most of the 3,000 counties in the nation.

The County also has had steady job growth in recent years. From 2000 to 2003, jobs in Prince George's grew by 2.8 percent, faster than growth in the District (2.1 percent) or Montgomery County (0.6 percent).

We have good reason to celebrate the victories of our community. However, the undeniable and indefensible economic and social disparities in American society compel us to look honestly at the challenges that confront minority families.

In January, the national unemployment rate fell to 5.2 percent, but unemployment in the black community has remained almost the same for more than a year now at 10.6 percent – more than double the white unemployment rate of 4.4 percent.

And, it isn't only in the job market that American families are having trouble staying afloat. More than 20 percent of African-Americans in Prince George's County live below the poverty line, as compared to 7 percent of whites.

This is why I continue to travel to Selma on a regular basis – in order to recall our past as we strive to improve our future. We must continue marching.

Last month, we commemorated the impressive landmarks of Black History, and as we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, I think we should also take a sobering look at the issues that continue to face our nation and minority families.

We must recommit ourselves to fixing the disparities facing minority families in our country and building a better future for all Americans. We must make sensible choices in choosing domestic priorities, and we can do this by rededicating ourselves to civil, social and economic justice and equality for all Americans.