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## An Apology for Slavery

By Carol M. Swain

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It's time for the Republican Party to write a new chapter in race relations. What I have in mind is something beyond the Senate's recent resolution on lynching and this week's expression of regret by a high-ranking Republican official for the GOP's use of what came to be known as the "Southern Strategy." What I propose is a formal apology for slavery and its aftermath. This could take the form of a joint resolution passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the president in a ceremonial setting where Americans could gather to symbolically bury their past.

Whenever the idea of an apology is raised, some whites reflexively recoil. They believe it is a bad idea because it conjures up images of innocent whites prostrating themselves before blacks for crimes they never committed. Most outspoken are whites whose ancestors arrived after the end of slavery and those who fought for the Union. Neither we nor our ancestors, they argue, had anything to do with slavery, so why should we apologize?

Others will say that an apology is not necessary because one has already been issued -- two, really. In 1998 President Clinton acknowledged the evils of slavery. And last year President Bush visited Goree Island, a holding place for captured slaves in Africa, and spoke of the wrongs and injustices of slavery. "Small men," he said, "took on the powers and airs of tyrants and masters. Years of unpunished brutality and bullying and rape produced a dullness and hardness of conscience. Christian men and women became blind to the clearest commands of their faith and added hypocrisy to injustice."

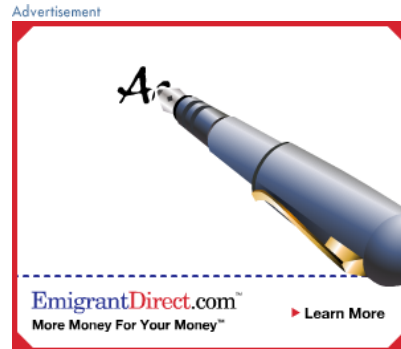
That sounds like an apology. Nevertheless, while presidents as far back as John Adams have acknowledged the wrongness of slavery, there is still much to be said for an official apology. It would bring closure and healing to a festering wound.

President Bush is the right man for the job. Since he cannot run for reelection, he can't be accused of pandering for votes. Because he is a born-again Christian, he can and should do this. Since most blacks are Christians, they would graciously accept the apology. By issuing an apology, President Bush could dramatically improve race relations and his party's standing among African Americans.

A national apology would be a collective response to a past collective injustice, and would imply no culpability on the part of individuals living today. America as a nation would apologize for allowing slavery within its borders, with no individual present-day party being singled out for blame.

Already, our failure to acknowledge such a blatant wrong has set us apart from other great nations that have expressed contrition for misdeeds. Consider Germany, which has apologized for the suffering caused by its actions toward Jews and others. More recently Tony Blair apologized on behalf of Britain for its treatment of the Irish during the potato famine of the 1840s. Pope John Paul II apologized for the past sins of the Roman Catholic Church against non-

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Catholics. Australia apologized for its mistreatment of the country's aborigine population. What, then, would be the great harm in our apologizing for slavery and the Jim Crow racism that followed?

Opponents will sometimes argue that an apology would open the door to claims for monetary reparations. But a national apology would do no such thing. To begin with, the very legality of slavery before passage of the 13th Amendment would make a claim in tort proceedings highly dubious. Then there is the problem of the statute of limitations having long expired. An additional impediment would be the absence of a living wrongdoer to prosecute. Legal precedent is against it. There is little chance that an apology would trigger the legal liability its opponents claim.

There are no good reasons to oppose a national apology for slavery and plenty of good ones to support it. We would all reap enormous national and international rewards from such a goodwill gesture. The Republican Party would perhaps reap the most. An official apology would offer the party the opportunity to reclaim the mantle of the party of Lincoln by forging a new relationship with African Americans, one not clouded by the spectacle of Willie Horton or Trent Lott. And it would do immeasurable good in terms of improving race relations. Best of all, it wouldn't cost a cent. That's a pretty good deal all around.

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