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Congress should apologize for slavery

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

When Ohio Congressman Tony Hall introduced his resolution in 1997 asking Congress to officially apologize for slavery, he was blasted from pillar to post. Irate whites called the resolution wasteful and racist. Many blacks ridiculed it as much too little and much too late. Hall won't give up. He'll again try to get Congress to apologize for slavery as well as to set up a commission, fund education programs to study slavery's effects, and establish a national slavery museum. Almost certainly he'll be hammered again with the same arguments that it's unfair to blame whites and other non-whites for slavery and that blacks have had a century and a half to shake off the horrors of slavery. These are wrong-headed and fallacious arguments. The U.S. government, business, and the white majority, not just a handful of Southern planters, profited and benefited from slavery. The U.S. government encoded slavery in the Constitution, and protected and nourished it for a century. Traders, insurance companies, bankers, shippers, and landowners, made billions off of it. Their ill-gotten profits fueled America's industrial might. Meanwhile, white labor groups for decades after slavery insured that blacks were excluded from unions and the trades and confined to the dirtiest, poorest paying jobs.

While many whites and non-white immigrants did come to America after the Civil War they were not subjected to the decades of relentless racial terror and legal segregation as were blacks. Through the decades of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, African-Americans were transformed into the poster group for racial dysfunctionality. The image of blacks as lazy, crime and violence prone, irresponsible, and sexual predators has stoked white fears and hostility and has served as the standard rationale for lynchings, racial assaults, hate crimes and police violence.

The fact that some blacks earn more and live better than ever today, and have gotten boosts from welfare, social and education programs, civil rights legislation, and affirmative action programs, does not mean that America has shaken the hideous legacy of slavery. Recent polls by the National Conference for Community and Justice, a Washington D.C. public policy group, found that blacks are still overwhelmingly the victims of racial discrimination, and the Leadership Council on Civil Rights found that young blacks are far likelier than whites to be imprisoned for similar crimes. Blacks continue to have the highest or near highest rates of poverty, infant mortality, victims of violence, and HIV/AIDS affliction then any other group in America. They are more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods, be refused business loans, and attend decrepit, failed public schools than non-whites. The beating of black motorist Rodney King, the shooting of Amadou Diallo, the torture of Abner Louima, and the racial profiling of young black males by the police are ample proof that blacks are still at mortal risk from police violence. Blame this on the legacy of slavery. Also, there is nothing new about state and federal governments issuing apologies and payments for past wrongs committed against African-Americans. The U.S. government admitted it was legally liable in 1997 to pay the black survivors and family members of the two decade long syphilis experiment begun in the 1930's by the U.S. Public Health Service that turned black patients into human guinea pigs got \$10 million from the government and an apology from Clinton. They were the victims of a blatant medical atrocity conducted with the full knowledge and approval of the U.S. government.

The brutal truth is that the hinge of America's continuing racial divide is its brutal mistreatment of blacks. This can be directly traced to the monstrous legacy of slavery. That's why Hall is legally and morally right to demand that Congress apologize for that mistreatment. And Congress should do the right thing and issue that apology.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of *The Disappearance of Black Leadership*. email: ehutchi344@aol.com.

A salute to the commission for racial justice

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

I don't think I've ever quoted the Bible in this column before, but there are some words, thousands of years old, which perfectly describe this moment in life of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. It comes from the book of Ecclesiastes and it says that "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...."

For 37 years the Commission for Racial Justice served as the national civil rights agency of the United Church of Christ. For 37 years it has stood with those on the margins of our society, from the disenfranchised in the south to the homeless in the North. From people of color who are disabled to battered women, from young people in gangs to those crying out for environmental justice in their communities.

Through the years the Commission for Racial Justice spearheaded the international campaign to free the Commission for Racial Justice spearheaded the international campaign to free the Wilmington Ten the United States' first political prisoners recognized by Amnesty international and has spoken out on behalf of prisoners' rights and for an end to the death penalty. It has focused on incarcerated women and the families of those who are in prison.

Through these years, it has examined racism in public education and pressed for quality public education for every American child. It has helped some 6,500 young people of color to attend college, many of whom were written off by the larger society.

Through the years the Commission for Racial Justice listened to those crying out for Justice in their communities and then it has walked with them to make their communities more healthy and safer to live in. Sometimes that has meant getting arrested with those opposing the siting of toxic wastes in communities of color. Sometimes that has meant commissioning studies like Toxic Wastes and Race, which we published in 1987. Proving what we long suspected—that communities of color are more likely to have toxic wastes dumped in them. Sometimes that has meant assisting our communities to deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic raging through communities of color or helping local churches to become wellness centers for our communities.

Through the years that has meant saving African American institutions like Fankinton Center at Bricks. A historic center in eastern North Carolina which has a rich history educating and training African Americans and which verged on closing in the 1980's Today Franklinton Center at Bricks is flourishing and serving not only as a conference and retreat center, but also as a place of empowerment for those fighting for justice in their communities, their workplaces and in

our nation.

The Commission for Racial Justice was begun by the United Church of Christ to work for racial justice and reconciliation shortly after the bombing of the 16th street Baptist Church in Birmingham and the assassination of Medger Evers. Many other so-called mainline Protestant denominations began similar agencies in the 1960's but the Commission for Racial Justice has remained the only fully-staffed agency devoted to racial justice issues. Sadly, we found ourselves fighting many of the same problems at the end of the century as we did when we began—the burning of Black churches, the inequities of the criminal justice system, discrimination in housing and the workplace.

Through the years wherever African Americans, and later wherever people of color, were struggling for justice, you could find the Commission for Racial Justice. Whether it was on the picket and sit-in lines with the Students Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, IN back in 1972, in Alabama during the 1980's when Albert Turner and other black activists were being harassed by the FBI around so-called voter fraud cases; in New York City during the many marches against police brutality or in response to attacks on African Americans or in Convent, LA when Shintech threatened to build the world's largest polyvinyl chloride manufacturing plant, the Commission for Racial Justice has stood with our communities.

Much of the tone of work of the Commission for Racial Justice was set by its first Executive Director, the late Rev. Charles E. Cobb, Sr. His legacy was carried forward by Rev. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. (now Benjamin Muhammad) for the past seven years I have had the privilege and honor of serving as the Executive Director. Throughout these 37 years, we have had extraordinary staff—men and women dedicated to justice from the core if their being. But now, as the United Church of Christ reforms itself for a new century and a new millennium, we will end our life as the Commission for Racial Justice. The name will be no more, but the commitment to the struggle for racial justice will live on and will be embodied as the racial justice team of the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United States Church of Christ. In this new life, our church will continue to focus on racial justice issues, alongside those of economic justice. Human rights and justice for women issues, justice for the disabled and gay and lesbian people. Together, we will advocate for public policies which are just and fair which speak to the needs of people in pain, not only in our nation but around the world.

We are proud of the history and the legacy of Commission for Racial Justice. We are determined that its nearly four decades will not be in vain. We are committed to honoring its work and the work of all those dedicated staff and board members and friends throughout its life. We shall not give up the fight, we have only started...



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