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## OPINION

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# Dirty Little Secret in History

## Washington's slave tunnel illustrates important point

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Just steps away from the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall in Philadelphia, archaeologists recently unearthed remains of a secret passageway that President George Washington's slaves used to enter and exit from his presidential home in the late 1790s, when the city served as the nation's capital.

Not far from where the Declaration of Independence was signed, there stands evidence of the hypocrisy that shrouded the burgeoning nation at its birth.

"As you enter the heaven of liberty, you literally have to cross the hell of slavery," observed Michael Coard, leader of a group of Philadelphians working to have the slave tunnel recognized at the site, to the Associated Press. "That's the contrast. That's the contradiction. That's the hypocrisy. But that's also the truth."

The father of our country represented a contradiction in terms. On one hand, Washington played an important role in securing our America's independence from England. On the other hand, he served as king of his Mount Vernon estate in Virginia.

Like King George III whose rule he fought to rid America of, Washington had his own set of subjects -- over 300 slaves he had acquired



through inheritance, marriage and transaction over the course of his life. When he became president, he had a rotating cast of eight slaves living in his Philadelphia house, where there was a law on the books making slaves free after six months of residence. Hence, the rotating cast, which he reportedly aimed to keep secret from his staff and the public.

didn't occur until after his wife died -- not during his own lifetime. His personal servant, however, was freed following his death in 1799.

But as his president, it was different story. Washington concealed his personal misgivings over slavery from the public, which some historians consider a tragic missed opportunity while others contend it averted the upset of a very delicate balance in the fledgling republic over the contentious issue. He signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act, which mandated the capture and release of fugitive slaves, even in states

now the parties involved seem to be serious about incorporating the artifacts.

As Mr. Coard noted to the AP: "Nobody is saying, 'No, it shouldn't be done.'" This bodes well that they won't attempt to cover up evidence of a dirty little secret in American history.

The irony of a nation committed to independence and freedom using slave labor to achieve those goals should never be lost on us, our children or our children's grandchildren.

After all, without the contributions of African Americans, the fledgling nation would have re-

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Washington started out life as a typical slave holder. But in the 1770s, he began to soften his stance and express reservations privately. The sign-up of hundreds of free blacks to join his revolutionary army made him view slavery in a harsher light at least on a personal level. He stopped selling slaves against their will to prevent breaking up families, and he was the only slave-owning founding father to emancipate them. This, however,

where slavery was outlawed.

The recent discovery of the slave tunnel under his home has prompted calls to incorporate the ruins into a new exhibit as opposed to just filling the passageway in. It has caught National Park Service and city officials by complete surprise, causing an indefinite postponement of the exhibit, originally scheduled to open in 2009.

Before the tunnel was unveiled, the exhibit wasn't expected to display archaeological findings. But

maintained a fledgling colony of Great Britain.

Our nation owes a huge debt of gratitude to the thousands of slaves brought over here against their will from Africa. That is exactly why officials in Philadelphia should seek to incorporate these fascinating artifacts into their exhibit of the Washington presidential home.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

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## Empowering Our Poorest Citizens

### Support anti-poverty plan

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Well over 30 million Americans live in poverty.

Some are employed, but their jobs don't pay a living wage. They worry each month how they'll pay for basic necessities, like food and shelter. A trip to a doctor is considered a luxury. Others live in extreme poverty. They have no income and often wonder where their next meals will come from.

In a country as rich in resources as the United States, there shouldn't be poverty of any kind. All of our citizens have a right to a decent quality of life, where clean, safe

housing, an adequate food supply and access to healthcare are the norm.

Realizing America's poor were growing in numbers and that there

was no comprehensive national plan to stop it, the Center for American Progress last year brought together economists and other business and government leaders to discuss poverty in America. These discussions led to the creation

of a \$90 billion plan designed to cut American poverty in half in the next 10 years. It's an ambitious project, but one worth taking on. The country must get behind it.

According to federal guidelines, a family of four is considered poor if the family's yearly income is below \$19,971. One in eight Americans currently lives in poverty. In

5 million poor workers and nearly 10 million other low-income workers.

Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit is another key step. The EITC, a tax credit for working low-income families provides a tax refund, helping to boost the amount of money a family brings home. The Child Tax Credit provides a tax credit of up to \$1,000 per child, but provides no help to the poorest families.

The task force proposes tripling the EITC for childless workers and expanding help to larger working families. It also proposes making the Child Tax Credit available to all low- and moderate-income families. Doing so would move as many as 5 million people out of poverty.

The group also recommends guaranteeing child care assistance to low-income families and promoting early education for children. Child care expansion would raise

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the last six years the number of poor Americans has grown by five million and the gap between the haves and the have nots has widened considerably.

Inequality has reached record highs. Consider: the richest one percent of Americans possess the largest share of the nation's income, while the poorest 20 percent of Americans possess only 3.4 percent of the nation's income.

It doesn't have to be this way. The plan to reduce poverty outlines concrete steps that this country can take now to uplift and empower our poorest citizens in the near future.

According to the task force that has proposed the plan, raising the minimum wage, which the country has done, is a critical step in helping to alleviate poverty in America. Doing so will eventually help nearly

employment among low-income parents and help nearly 3 million parents and children lift themselves out of poverty.

These steps seem simple enough, especially since they could potentially help alleviate poverty for millions of Americans, giving them the opportunity to reach their full potential, while also minimizing the burdens tax payers must bear to support those who are unable to support themselves. The United States government must find the funds - perhaps by calling an end to the war in Iraq - to fully fund these initiatives. Doing so would demonstrate that this country is willing to invest in all of its citizens.

Judge Greg Mathis is a national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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