

The formal apology for slavery and Jim Crow issued by the US House of Representatives in 2008 was unprecedented. It was followed in 2009 by an apology put before the Senate as a Concurrent Resolution. The plan was for the two Resolutions to be combined into one apology and given fitting celebration and publicity in a formal ceremony in the Capitol as the official apology of the United States. The Congressional Record reported the action in the Senate by reading the entire text of the resolution below.

Following the reading of the Resolution, Senators spent a couple of hours patting themselves on the back for this accomplishment. Tom Harkin (then the Democratic Senator from Iowa) looked forward to the official ceremony, stating:

"In closing, Madam President, again I say a fitting ceremony is being planned for sometime early in July that will take place in the main Rotunda of the Capitol to mark this occasion. As I understand, we don't have a firm date yet, but that date will be coming about shortly in consultation with the Speaker and the minority leader in the House and the majority leader and minority leader here in the Senate. We are looking forward to that occasion, and I think it is one that will be poignant and one that will again bring home to all of us and to the American people the enormity of what we have done in terms of finally acknowledging the official role of the US Government in promoting and sanctioning slavery and Jim Crow laws."

No joint bill was ever passed and the ceremony has not happened. But the apology is there, an essential first step toward compensating for centuries of exploitation of our American-African citizens. Unfinished business, to be sure.

Whereas during the history of the Nation, the United States has grown into a symbol of democracy and freedom around the world;

Whereas the legacy of African-Americans is interwoven with the very fabric of the democracy and freedom of the United States;

Whereas millions of Africans and their descendants were enslaved in the United States and the 13 American colonies from 1619 through 1865;

Whereas Africans forced into slavery were brutalized, humiliated, dehumanized, and subjected to the indignity of being stripped of their names and heritage;

Whereas many enslaved families were torn apart after family members were sold separately;

Whereas the system of slavery and the visceral racism against people of African descent upon which it depended became enmeshed in the social fabric of the United States;

Whereas slavery was not officially abolished until the ratification of the 13th amendment to the Constitution of the United States in 1865, after the end of the Civil War;

Whereas after emancipation from 246 years of slavery, African-Americans soon saw the fleeting political, social, and economic gains they made during Reconstruction eviscerated by virulent racism, lynchings, disenfranchisement, Black Codes, and racial segregation laws that imposed a rigid system of officially sanctioned racial segregation in virtually all areas of life;

Whereas the system of de jure racial segregation known as 'Jim Crow', which arose in certain parts of the United States after the Civil War to create

US Senate apologizes for the enslavement and racial segregation of African-Americans (2009)

APOLOGY FOR THE ENSLAVEMENT AND SEGREGATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS, The Congress--

(A) acknowledges the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow laws;

(B) apologizes to African-Americans on behalf of the people of the United States, for the wrongs committed against them and their ancestors who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow laws; and

(C) expresses its recommitment to the principle that all people are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and calls on all people of the United States to work toward eliminating racial prejudices, injustices, and discrimination from our society.

(2) DISCLAIMER- Nothing in this resolution--

(A) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or

(B) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.

Passed by the US Senate on June 18, 2009



The gravestone of William Chapman, an African-American veteran of the Civil War, at St. George Cemetery in Illinois. Photo reprinted with permission of Nick Schnelle for Pro Publica Illinois.

separate and unequal societies for Whites and African-Americans, was a direct result of the racism against people of African descent that was engendered by slavery;

Whereas the system of Jim Crow laws officially existed until the 1960s--a century after the official end of slavery in the United States--until Congress took action to end it, but the vestiges of Jim Crow continue to this day;

Whereas African-Americans continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery and Jim Crow laws--long after both systems were formally abolished--through enormous damage and loss, both tangible and intangible, including the loss of human dignity and liberty;

Whereas the story of the enslavement and de jure segregation of African-Americans and the dehumanizing atrocities committed against them should not be purged from or minimized in the telling of the history of the United States;

Whereas those African-Americans who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow laws, and their descendants, exemplify the strength of the human character and provide a model of courage, commitment, and perseverance;

Whereas on July 8, 2003, during a trip to Goree Island, Senegal, a former slave port, President George W. Bush acknowledged the continuing legacy of slavery in life in the United States and the need to confront that legacy, when he stated that slavery 'was . . . one of the greatest crimes of history . . . The racial bigotry fed by slavery did not end with slavery or with segregation. And many of the issues that still trouble America have roots in the bitter experience of other times. But however long the journey, our destiny is set: liberty and justice for all.';

Whereas President Bill Clinton also acknowledged the deep-seated problems caused by the continuing legacy of racism against African-Americans that began with slavery, when he initiated a national dialogue about race;

Whereas an apology for centuries of brutal dehumanization and injustices cannot erase the past, but confession of the wrongs committed and a formal apology to African-Americans will help bind the wounds of the Nation that are rooted in slavery and can speed racial healing and reconciliation and help the people of the United States understand the past and honor the history of all people of the United States;

Whereas the legislatures of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the States of Alabama, Florida, Maryland, and North Carolina have taken the lead in adopting resolutions officially expressing appropriate remorse for slavery, and other State legislatures are considering similar resolutions; and

Whereas it is important for the people of the United States, who legally recognized slavery through the Constitution and the laws of the United States, to make a formal apology for slavery and for its successor, Jim Crow, so they can move forward and seek reconciliation, justice, and harmony for all people of the United States: Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the Senate (the House of Representatives concurring), That the sense of the Congress is the following (see text in center of page):