

Mumia Abu-Jamal: Slavery, reparations and 'apologies'

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Nat Turner and his comrades planning the 1831 Virginia slave uprising.

Res. 194: An apology for the enslavement and racial segregation of African Americans

In July 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives passed House Resolution 194, apologizing for slavery and racial segregation of African Americans. The bill was drafted and introduced by Steve Cohen (D-TN) some 11 years after President Bill Clinton said he would consider an apology for African Americans for their ancestors' suffering.

In 1997, while a state senator in Tennessee, Cohen had urged Clinton to apologize for slavery and Jim Crow, and to make the announcement on the 30th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin L. King Jr. on April 4, 1998.

Clinton, an opponent of reparations, said during an interview, "Rather than reparations, the nation needs to continue to work to erase the effects of past discrimination." He initiated a "National Dialogue" about race in 1997, encouraging all people in the U.S. to talk about race and recommend solutions.

When Cohen was elected to Congress in 2007, he introduced a resolution which officially recognized the horrors of slavery from 1619 to 1865, and Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation and disenfranchisement of people of African descent that continue to this day.

The resolution was passed July 29, 2008, with 120 co-sponsors. Though the resolution was nonbinding and primarily symbolic, it was considered by many a step forward in acknowledging the great wrongs of the U.S. government. Nearly a year later, on June 18, 2009, the U.S. Senate finally passed a similar resolution.

Prison Radio recorded the following commentary by political prisoner Mumia Abu-

Jamal about a week after the House of Representatives agreed to pass H. Res. 194, a “simple resolution.”

— Gloria Verdieu

Oooh! Sorry about the slavery thing!

By Mumia Abu-Jamal

Several days ago, a majority of the U.S. House of Representatives approved a resolution apologizing for slavery.

The Senate has not yet moved on such a measure, and probably has no intention to do so.

That it comes today, some 143 years after slavery was prohibited in the Constitution (notice I said “prohibited,” and not stopped, for historians and scholars have uncovered that the trade continued long thereafter, as an underground one, kind of like drugs today), gives us some idea of how deeply slavery still resides in American consciousness, and how empty such an apology is in light of all that has intervened in the century and a half since the cessation of the Civil War.

It’s like robbing someone, growing fat and rich on stolen wealth, and then passing that person on the street, who is now homeless, destitute and starving — and tossing him a nickel. (Except, of course, in the case of the U.S. House resolution, there isn’t even a nickel!)

As the great Black historian J.A. Rogers taught us (especially in his 1961 “Africa’s Gift to America”), the wealth of America was founded on African slavery.

One need look no further than the brilliant young W.E.B. Du Bois, who published his

doctoral thesis, "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America: 1638-1870" (1896). For, citing contemporary sources, Du Bois quoted the following: "The number of persons engaged in the slave-trade, and the amount of capital embarked on it, exceed our powers of calculation. ... The city of New York has been until of late (1862) the principal port of the world for this infamous trade." (p. 179)

Centuries of slavery; the intentional destruction of families, tribes and nations; ripping people asunder from their religions, their clans, their spouses, children, lands and all that they knew and loved, for centuries, to build and enrich a nation of strangers who enforced the practices of slavery for a hundred years after its supposed abolition; only to consign the grandchildren of these people to the bitter half-lives of sub-par education, poor housing, second-rate health care, underemployment, the cruelties of mass incarceration and a cynical judicial and political system that endlessly engages in white supremacy (without the labels). ...

Yeah, a political apology should just about cover that.

[Listen to Mumia's commentary here.](#)

