

XLVIII – Slaves to the Past

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By Butler Shaffer

In one of his boldest pronouncements since taking office, and at the risk of losing the support of white supremacists, President Bush came out against "racial bigotry." He went on to call slavery "one of the greatest crimes of history," an observation of such profundity that one newspaper decided to subject it to the ultimate test of validity for any proposition in our culture: a public opinion poll.

At a time when Bush's approval ratings have been dropping, I can just imagine his neocon advisors sitting around the White House, prior to this speech, wondering how best to reveal the depth of this man's thinking, and the breadth of his vision. They were doubtless careful to avoid Bush saying anything of a controversial or thoughtful nature — such as Barry Goldwater's famous "extremism in defense of liberty is no vice" — settling, instead, for words that would neither confuse nor upset members of his cognitively-challenged constituency.

What other significant issues might this man choose to confront? Shall we hear him orate about the evils of wife-beating, infanticide, or drunk-driving? Perhaps his penchant for banality is genetically derived. You will recall, no doubt, his father's resort to the "pledge of allegiance" as his major campaign issue in his run for the presidency. On the other hand, such traits may run with the office itself, as Bill Clinton demonstrated in his efforts to inform Americans on "what the meaning of u2018is' is." Or, the fact that each of these three men had been educated at Yale may have had something to do with it.

It has been a long time since political rhetoric has had any appeal to thoughtful minds. If Jefferson, the Adams's, Madison, Henry, Franklin, or any of the other articulate minds of late-eighteenth century America were around today, they would find their political progeny an utter embarrassment to behold. It's not that I have any problem with having the system embarrassed: quite the contrary! I was delighted with Bill Clinton's re-election in 1996, since his buffoonery helped to continue the federal gridlock that gave a bit of breathing room for the expression of liberty.

I love it when these boob-bumpers reveal to even the most witless of true believers that the emperor's new clothes are but a birthday suit. To this end, I welcome the candidacies of people like Jerry Springer, whose election to the Senate would make committee hearings all the more entertaining for C-SPAN audiences! I long for even more of such embarrassments to the system. Perhaps Anna Nicole Smith, Mike Tyson, Howard Stern, Bill O'Reilly, or Rosie O'Donnell could be induced to take their shows into the beltway. In this day of virtual

realities, Beavis and Butthead might even be transformed into statesmen. If Caligula could name his horse to the Roman Senate, what possibilities are beyond the reach of our modern culture?

The expansion of such mindlessness in Washington would probably go unimpeded by the media. They not only feed on this kind of foolishness — anything for ratings, after all — but most of them are, themselves, unable to subject political discourse or programs to any kind of critical analysis. This is why the public opinion poll is indispensable to modern "journalists."

One newspaper emphasized the fact that Bush's remarks failed to include an "apology" for slavery that some civil-rights leaders had demanded. Perhaps I have missed something: did President Bush own slaves in his past? Do his multi-national business interests include some wholly owned subsidiary catering to the servility trade? Or is this just another example of the kind of loose rhetoric inherent in socialistic thinking?

The practice of slavery derives from collectivist premises; from the idea that the lives and property of individuals may rightfully be claimed by others. Slavery does not depend on racism: historically, those vanquished in wars were often made slaves of the conquering tribes or city-states. This raises an essential question: to whom, and on whose behalf, ought George Bush apologize for the practice of slavery? Is the guilt for past slavery to be borne by all modern Caucasians, on the grounds that some of them are descendants of persons who owned slaves? Is an apology owed to men and women whose ancestors might never have been slaves?

To demonstrate the foolishness of such thinking, let us go back in time two thousand years. Let us imagine some Roman soldier — we'll call him Claudius — had enslaved, tortured, and then killed another Roman by the name of Octavius. Would the descendants of the victim have a plausible claim for an apology — or, perhaps, reparations — from the descendants of Claudius? Who would be the parties to this collective *mea culpa*?

The mathematics, alone, are overwhelming. Assuming thirty years to a generation, if one went back two thousand years, one would have to account for sixty-seven generations of ancestors and offspring. The direct ancestors would total 147,573,952,589,676,412,928 men and women! If Octavius had had no children, there would be no one to whom an apology could be made and, likewise, if Claudius died childless there would be no one to make an apology (assuming, of course, that one is buying into this collective guilt game in the first place).

But if both of these men had produced children and grandchildren, each of them would have contributed to the 147.5 quintillion descendants above. This makes it mathematically certain that everyone living today would be offsprings of both men. That being the case,

should I stand in front of a mirror and apologize to myself for the wrongs one of my distant ancestors did to another of my ancestors?

It may be pointed out that my example goes back too far, and that only six generations would amount to but 128 direct ancestors, a more manageable number. But of these 128, which ones were culpable, which innocent, and which opponents of slavery? It happens that my grandfather and his three brothers fought for the North in the Civil War. Am I entitled to some dispensation for their contribution to ending slavery? My three great-uncles died in this war: am I entitled to reparations, from modern blacks, for having been deprived of untold numbers of cousins whose would-be fathers died to end slavery?

I regard the Civil War as a great wrong done to the South, and acknowledge that that bloodbath was not conducted for the purpose of ending slavery. Do I owe an apology to modern-day southerners for my grandfather's part in bringing about their subjugation? Would I owe that apology to current southerners whose ancestors might also have fought for the North?

Once we start doing a simple analysis of the situation, the absurdity of the proposition of some people apologizing for wrongs done by others becomes quite evident. Furthermore, this is the kind of mass-minded thinking that generates more of the collective conflicts for which future generations must, in turn, make amends!

Socialist systems – such as the one created by Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party – have joined collective ownership with collective guilt, and fostered the organized violence, genocides, wars, and other conflicts that continue unabated into the 21st century. As soon as we begin identifying ourselves and others through mutually-exclusive groupings, and begin to ascribe "rights" and "wrongs" not on the basis of individual conduct, but on collective grounds, the concentration camps, gulags, holocausts, and ethnic cleansings become inevitable. When we believe that members of one race — or nationality, or religion, etc. — owe another such group apologies or reparations on the basis of what previous members of such groups did to one another, social mayhem is assured.

I suspect that George Bush loses about as much sleep over the "sins" of slavery as he does for the "heartbreak of psoriasis." But in case I am wrong, and he is truly desirous of eradicating slavery's wickedness from our social system, I would invite him to take steps to end the current system of state slavery in America, whereby over 45% of the wealth produced each year by Americans is taken via taxation. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution did not end slavery: it nationalized it, giving the state a monopoly on the practice!

He might also proceed to dismantle an ever-grasping state regulatory system that dictates how people are to live their lives, raise and educate their children, what food and other substances to consume, etc. Such controls, coupled with the extraction of wealth from the

producers, represents the essence of any slave system. So deeply has the slave mindset worked its way into our culture and thinking that we continue to refer to ourselves as "assets" or "resources" to our community, while many states declare "our children" to be "our most precious commodity."

In the 1905 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Lochner v. New York*, Justice Harlan made the point about as explicitly as one could expect from a state official. A New York statute limiting the number of hours people could work in bakeries was struck down by the Court. In dissenting, Harlan stated that excessive hours of work "may endanger the health, and shorten the lives of the workmen, thereby diminishing their physical and mental capacity to serve the State, and to provide for those dependent upon them" (emphasis added).

Though the institution of slavery has been modified in form over the years, its exploitative premises remain intact in the apparatus of the state. It is well to understand its nature and, to this end, a reading of history is essential. But for history to be of value, its lessons need to be made relevant to the present. To search the rosters of modern collective groupings for both "victims" and "wrongdoers" of past wrongdoings is but to continue energizing the vicious game, all to the benefit of the state.

As wars, slavery, genocides, and other oppressive practices teach us, it takes a long time for the entropy generated by political systems to work its way out of society. But if we are to end such inhumane destructiveness, either we must confront its modern ugliness, or hope that someone else, at some time in the future, will exhibit the sense of responsibility that we prefer to avoid. We cannot continue to find comfort in empty, mindless bromides babbled by empty-headed politicians, and imagine that we are "doing something" about the destructive world we have created. We should rise to the task, if for no other reason than to save ourselves from having to apologize to our children and grandchildren.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

