



## Walk Through History

Today there is a moral crisis in our urban centers equal to slavery and segregation as debates continue in Washington and around the country on the effectiveness of the welfare system, affirmative action and federal vs. local government responsibility.

Is there not an urgent need to do everything possible to turn such deliberations and the economic and social health of our cities in a new direction? There is a need for a deep and transforming healing between the races, for it is the divisions of history and decades of inequity, which feed today's policy debates and public programs. I think there is a way toward reconciliation in America, but it requires a willingness for us as a nation to think imaginatively, accept personal responsibility and work together as a multi-racial community at the grassroots level all across the country. As a diplomat and researcher on racial and ethnic conflicts in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and Latin America for 25 years, I have learned that there is one cause of the apparent intractability of this form of conflict which runs through them all and which has application here at home.

Where one or more sides in a political conflict has suffered traumatic historical or current losses whose depth and tragedy have not been acknowledged or atoned for, wounds do not heal. They can be five, fifty or five hundred years old. Time does not heal wounds. Only healing, actively pursued, heals wounds.

### *The Burden of History*

Consciously and unconsciously, these wounds are part of the historical identity of the losing side, handed down from generation to generation. The memory of these unhealed wounds is a perpetual assault on the sense of self-worth and security of the people affected. According to Harvard psychiatrist Gregory Rochlin, when an individual is the victim of physical or psychological attack, the automatic result is rage and reactive aggression in some form. Political psychologists believe that this also happens with identity groups and nations. It fuels strong ethnic consciousness and intense nationalism. It can only be dealt with if the wounds to self-esteem are healed. This is the burden of history. To start the healing process there needs to be a "walk through history"—an inventory of hurts—carried out together by the winners and losers or their descendants, to rediscover what happened in the past which keeps alive so much anger and resentment in the present.

One such "walk through history" was Hope in the Cities' Richmond Unity Walk in June 1993. "Walk" is the operative word. This does not suggest an exchange of accusations and vigorous defenses. Any group can do that, and they often do. What began was an honest conversation about the past where informed, intellectually respectable and morally courageous men and women squarely faced their symbolic or genuine responsibilities for past injustices to victimized people. Such a walk establishes an agenda for healing. It reveals the record of past hurts and allows the conscience of large numbers of people to give up avoidance and be activated in its most positive sense. Ideally, this walk produces an acknowledgment of wrongs, a critical first step in liberating the victims from their fears and resentments. If acknowledgment, through honest conversation, is followed by expressions of contrition, no matter how imperfect, so much the better.

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## *Bridging The North - South Divide*

A good part of white America's inability - North and South - to respond to the moral challenges made by the painful situation of African Americans, particularly in the inner city, is the strong residual resentment of the white North by the white South. Since the condition of Africans from slavery to freedom has been the most visible contentious issue between North and South, white America has been essentially paralyzed psychologically in its capacity to deal with it openly and honestly. This burden of history is a major impediment to serious study and political collaboration between liberal and conservative/Northern and Southern politicians and leaders of other social and economic sectors of the country. These labels can be challenged on many grounds, but there is an underlying logic to their use.

The Southern feeling of resentment against the North long predates the Civil War, but it was powerfully amplified by the loss of the war. And much of the loss, this historic wound, has not healed. The white/white relationship is further complicated by the fact that Northerners do not "remember" their own history of anti-black racism and record of systematic insult of and disdain for almost all that was "southern." Furthermore, as Louisiana State Professor Lewis J. Simpson states in *Mind and the American Civil War: A Meditation on Lost Causes*, after the Civil War, the self-conscious moral and intellectual superiority of the "North" as a distinct region—led by New England—more or less disappeared as the country diversified and expanded. Thus in a major sense, the historical object of Southern resentment has disappeared, to be replaced by a fragmented and dispersed set of targets, symbolized in part by the liberal intelligentsia and politicians as well as Hollywood.

Symbolic representatives of the New England tradition need to acknowledge its destructive behavior and accept moral responsibility for it. Only in this way can the contemporary South unburden itself of its resentments against Northern "liberalism" and join with white Americans throughout the country so that all can face their responsibilities to black America.

## *Claiming A Shared History*

Very often, the fact of historic wounds lives only in the subconscious of a people. They know they feel hurt and put upon but they do not really know all the reasons why. And especially, the side that caused the wounds or represents forebears who caused them, is rarely aware of the pain with which they are associated in the minds of the victims. In psychology, this phenomenon is called "avoidance," a behavior that permits individuals and groups to escape the harsh judgment of their consciences or, less nobly, the threat of massive material reparations for the wrongs committed.

The "walk through history" is a very effective process through which blacks and whites can take ownership together of a shared history, which for so long has been avoided. The honest conversations, which can result from such a walk and are taking place around the United States, are bearing fruitful lessons, which in turn may be of benefit to other countries long wrestling with their own racial and ethnic conflicts.

*Written by Joseph V. Montville,  
Former Director of the Preventive Diplomacy Program,  
Center for Strategic & International Studies*