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Clinton's race advisory board meets; may consider segregation

Bruce -  
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Race Initiative

WASHINGTON (AP) The debate over whether President Clinton should apologize for slavery is evolving into a call to apologize for another wrong: the rigid segregation endured by black Americans under Jim Crow laws.

That suggestion was offered in some of the 600 pieces of mail sent to the White House and the offices of Clinton's advisory board on race since June. The board, which Clinton charged with analyzing a slavery apology, will meet for the second time on Tuesday.

Race board chairman John Hope Franklin bolstered the suggestion Monday, saying in a radio interview that any presidential apology would have to extend beyond slavery and address segregation, because the institution of segregation endured for so many years after slavery ended.

"The most rigid apartheid laws this country has ever seen were passed in this century," Franklin told the American Urban Radio Network. "What are you going to do about all of the examples and practices of degradation and humiliation and segregation practiced in the 20th century? An apology for slavery is not going to do it."

Clinton appointed the board to spend a year gathering information on the country's racial climate that he will use to compile a report on race. The board's main activity is to conduct a series of town hall meetings where Americans can talk openly about race.

The White House said that, for now, it is unlikely that Clinton will apologize for segregation, the same response it gave to the suggestion for an apology for slavery.

"If you must do something now, today, the president doesn't think any kind of apology would be productive at this point," said spokesman Joe Lockhart. The matter will be referred to the race advisory board, Lockhart said.

Judith Winston, the advisory board's executive director, said the board would explore an appropriate response to the whole question of apologies, but was "not spending a lot of time on that."

Jim Crow laws, named for the black character in an 1830s-era song, were enacted by Southern states in the late 1800s. They required separate facilities for blacks and whites sometimes even separate Bibles in courtrooms and were bolstered by the Supreme Court's 1896 decision that upheld Louisiana's "separate but equal" facilities on railroads.

Segregation endured even after the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, which called for integration of schools. It was officially eliminated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, although civil rights activists argue that its vestiges linger today in such areas as education and housing.

The White House shunned the slavery apology idea because it would touch off a demand for reparations government compensation to the descendants of African slaves. Clinton ruled out reparations in June, saying it would be impossible to determine who should be paid.

Privately, Clinton aides say an apology for Jim Crow seems more acceptable because it was a more narrowly focused racial action. An apology would provide a natural means for Clinton to defend affirmative action and other federal programs created as a remedy for inequality.

A sampling of the president's mail, provided to The Associated Press on the condition that the authors' names be concealed, showed some writers calling directly for an apology for segregation, while others proposed that Clinton address segregation in some form so that the country can start dealing with slavery's deeper wounds.

"It is time for a moral reckoning with segregation," said an Aug. 23 letter from a writer who identified himself as a historian at Stanford University. "I am convinced that multiracial democracy cannot be achieved until the nation faces up to its history of racial segregation."

Not all writers were pleased with the notion of an apology. "Let's just forget about white people, you know. Let's make them the minority," said a June 19 e-mail whose author signed off, "An Unhappy White Person."

Another letter, dated Aug. 14, proposed nominating a colonial-era New York cemetery as a "world heritage site" under a 1972 U.N. convention. The Negroes Burial Ground, unearthed in 1992, dates back to the 1750s and contains the graves of slaves and poor blacks.

"The proposal (is) premised on the notion that 'to apologize or not to apologize' need not necessarily be the question, ... and that, in any event, an 'apology' can take many forms," the letter said.

Even a student leader in Evanston, Ill., saw the need for Clinton to deal with the vestiges of segregation, saying he is devoting his term in office to trying to ease "residual segregation" at his school.

"There remain many school groups or activities and some classes that, in practice, are predominantly segregated," the student said.

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