

APOLOGY FOR SLAVERY, JIM CROW IS RELEVANT

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The U.S. House last week passed a resolution apologizing for slavery and the era of Jim Crow laws. The apology is not meaningless, contrary to critics' claim that it is little more than a political gimmick to help some white Tennessee congressman win re-election in his predominantly black district.

No American alive today was enslaved, they say, and few under the age of 40 have more than a history-class inkling about segregation laws. Move along, they say, there's nothing left to acknowledge and regret.

They are wrong.

True, there isn't one black American today who was a slave. But many are direct descendants of slaves. Many more were born into segregation and raised under Jim Crow laws so restrictive a black man could get lynched for "reckless eyeballing," the legal term for looking at a white woman the wrong way.

Many white Americans, too, were raised to believe their race superior, and many Virginians remember when their school was forced to integrate or was shuttered to prevent the mixing of races.

Not to diminish in any way the Herculean efforts by civil rights leaders, but laws are changed much more easily than human behavior.

There's a whole lot of hurting still. We can't move on unless we acknowledge that this country's sins created a pattern of discrimination that, while no longer overt, still exists through subtle prejudices, including those espoused by opponents of apology measures who feel blacks ought to stop acting like victims.

Not one of us knows what it is like to be black in America or white in America unless we are of that color. It is no more possible than for a person born into chronic illness to understand what it is like to live each day without one thought of health or sickness. Or for a healthy person to know what it feels like to live disabled.

But this we do know: Any advancements that have been made to live up to this country's ideal that all men are created equal have come through the courage and tenacity of people of all colors. Clearly, it will take people of all races to make further strides.

Fortunately, we have the stories of people like Linwood Holton and Oliver Hill to inspire us.

Hill, a black lawyer born in Roanoke, died last August at the age of 100 after a lifetime of devotion to civil rights. Most notably, Hill filed the Virginia lawsuit that was folded into *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court ruling that bars racial segregation in public schools.

In Virginia, that ruling was greeted with massive resistance. Holton, the first Republican governor in the 20th century, could have stood with the political majority and continued to disobey court orders. Instead, he famously enrolled his children in predominantly black public schools in Richmond.

Holton, now 84, has finally written his memoir. He spoke recently to a gathering in Roanoke that made for an engaging and enlightening evening, with one disappointment: The audience was entirely white.

Holton's story doesn't belong just to white Virginians, nor does Hill's belong just to black Virginians. These are the stories of our commonwealth, of our nation, and they arise out of a not-so-distant, shameful past. It is neither too late nor irrelevant to express sorrow for those days or to acknowledge the past shades today.

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