

# Making a case for reparations

An apology alone just won't do

MELODYE MICERE STEWART

In the spirit of Ma'at



Earlier this year in South Carolina, four major religious denominations — Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic and United Methodist — issued a statement confessing to the sin of racism and asking forgiveness. In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention acknowledged the shame of racism and apologized. According to white sociologist Howard Winant, "on a moral level, this country owes African Americans an apology for one of the most serious violations of human rights that has existed in recorded history, in fact, in all history, recorded and unrecorded."

This important admission is significant to the discussion on reparations; it appears that part of the public retreat on a national apology is designed to bury any discussion of overdue compensation for the sons and daughters of slaves. Yet, we must discuss both the apology and reparations.

For the historical record, the issue of reparations for African Americans dates back to 1865 when congressional discussions were led by Thaddeus Stevens, a congressman from Pennsylvania who advocated that "large plantations be broken up and distributed to the freedmen in forty-acre lots." According to historian Lerone Bennett, Stevens' belief was based on the idea that "freedom was not free without an economic foundation."

While issues of economics still remain a thorn in black America's side, the discussion of just compensation for the unpaid labor of our ancestors is receiving scant conversation. However scant, a dialogue of sorts is indeed taking place. In February of this year, the topic was featured in *Emerge* magazine; November's issue of *Essence* tackles the subject with the help of Mary Frances Berry, chairperson of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and attorney Stanley Mark, program director for the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

In those articles, the need for educating the public, having the dialogue and building momentum for a positive change in the political climate are crucial strategies. For those calling for a committee to study the subject, every two years since 1989, U.S. Rep. John Conyers has introduced a congressional bill to study the issue, while two noted white scholars have already published their findings. (Lester Thurow of Massachusetts Institute of Technology wrote "Poverty and Discrimination" in 1967-68 and Boris Bittker, professor emeritus of Yale School of Law, wrote "The Case for Black Reparations" in 1972).

In 1991, Charles Krauthammer, an ultra-conservative journalist, wrote an essay in *Time* magazine titled "Reparations for Black Americans." In it, Krauthammer states "It is time for a historic compromise: a monetary reparation to blacks for centuries of oppression in return for the total abolition of all programs of racial preference." His justification centers upon reclaiming "the notion of color blindness before it's too late." Though it is questionable whether America is capable of operating in a color-blind manner, Krauthammer is correct when he asserts that reparations "... would honor our obligation to right ancient wrongs."

# Race relations conference topic

Starts Monday in Charlotte

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killer in South Carolina to Charles Stuart's fabricated black murderer of his pregnant wife in Boston — bring to light what's become increasingly evident:

Blacks and whites, and other races in this country, are becoming increasingly polarized in their beliefs about American society and in their dealings with each other.

In the wake of such polarization, efforts are under way to bring about a reconciliation some hope will stave off a further destruction of the national unity necessary for continued economic prosperity and peaceful relations in our communities and on our jobs.

Such efforts include President Clinton's appointment of a race commission chaired by African American historian John Hope Franklin of Durham. And Monday and Tuesday, Gov. Jim Hunt is hosting a Conference on Racial Reconciliation at the Adam's Mark Hotel in Charlotte with Franklin providing the keynote address at a Tuesday luncheon.

The Community Building Task Force is planning a conference on race Dec. 7 and 8 in Charlotte.

The Hunt conference, suggested by a task force which investigated the burning of black churches in the state, will bring together several hundred law enforcement officers, business leaders and city and county officials from across the state.

"We are making some progress, but we've got a long way to go," Hunt said. "We have to redouble our efforts when it comes to fighting intolerance, injustice and hatred in our state, and we need to continue working together to get the job done."

The conference, first in a series of discussions, is designed to help communities develop action plans for better relations among races.

Hunt will host another conference in the spring that will include religious and community leaders.

The conference will include a Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation study on race relations and roundtable discussions with titles such as "Race Relations in the State and Nation," "Can We Talk," and "Intolerance and the Law."

A report will be delivered by the N.C. Human Relations Commission and there will be discussions on the role of the clergy and local officials in religious and racial reconciliation.

Rev. Harold Diggs of Mayfield Memorial Baptist Church, will participate, as will Rep. Mel Watt, who will speak at Monday's luncheon on the topic "The Cost of

Intolerance." Watt represents a district carved out to insure blacks have a fair chance at getting elected to congress. He and Rep. Eva Clayton were the first blacks elected to Congress from North Carolina since the turn of the century.

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno has been invited to address Monday's dinner meeting, but it is not clear if she will be able to attend.

Charlotte's Community Building Task Force is already conducting focus groups with as many as 15 people at a time talking about race issues.

Organizers hope as many as 450 people will attend the two days of discussions in December about race issues in Charlotte.

Family therapist Don Taylor, assistant director of the task force, has handled the focus groups leading up to the forum.

"Folks had the chance to let loose," Taylor said. "The conversation has been phenomenal. Blacks have shown an underlying anger, while white participants have a more quizzical 'what's the problem, 'what's going on,' view. They say 'I don't know why things are out of whack.'"

Taylor pointed out that the simplest subject can draw angry reactions, including a recent public spat about whether blacks should

be encouraged to attend and participate in NASCAR auto racing.

"Last night, several people bounced off that," Taylor said of an all-black focus group at Silver Mount Baptist Church Monday. "Something as simple as driving a car brought out vitriolic comments."

The group Monday ranged in age from the mid-20s to the 50s and were middle- to lower-middle income. There were five men and six women in the group.

"There was an overriding anger about the feeling of being devalued and discounted," Taylor said. "That came out over and over again from the group last night."

A report on the focus groups will be compiled and released at the December conference.

Task force director Diane English admits there's some skepticism about the upcoming conference and any effort to solve the community's race problem.

"What's the point?" she asked. "If we don't do it and we have another serious incident, people will say 'what are we doing to deal with the business of race.'"

"If it were easy, somebody would have solved them (race problems) before."

"One of the problems is...part of it is we are in denial about the existence and the impact of racism," English said. "And the other part is that we need, within the major segments of this community, to make an ongoing, long-term commitment to dealing with race relations."



Watt



Clayton

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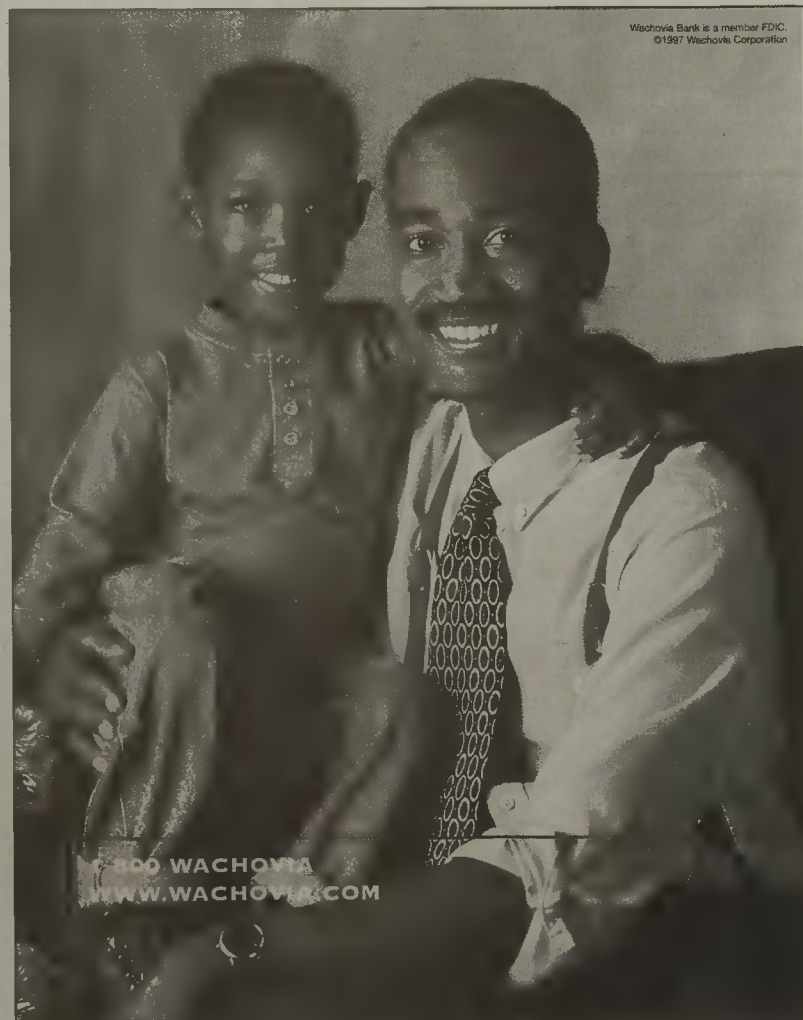
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