

*June 13, 2005.*

First, I want to commend Senators George Allen and Mary Landrieu for their leadership in introducing Senate Resolution 39 and for their persistence in bringing it to a vote today. I also wish to express my profound gratitude to Mark Planning who has been indefatigable in his quest for the passage of this measure.

While some members of the Senate question why so many of us have been seeking the passage of this official expression of apology at this time, the real question is why Senate action was not forthcoming decades ago.

Consider the scope and depth of the crimes committed against humanity: more than four thousand men and women were hung from trees, many of them disemboweled, their limbs and organs amputated, and then set on fire. These heinous acts, carried out and protected under the claim of "states rights" were designed to terrify African-American citizens, remind them that they had fewer rights and protections than animals, and drive them from their land—all while serving as entertainment for white society.

Picnics were even held by white communities so that those who claimed to be decent, law abiding citizens could witness and rejoice in the mutilation of those whose ancestors had been ripped from their homeland, separated from their families, sheared of their identities, brought in chains to America, and sold on the auction block as sub-human chattels.

It is inconceivable that any person of reason or conscience, of any faith, Christian or non-Christian, could possibly tolerate such barbarism, such a display of pure evil. But people did, of course. They tolerated it and sanctioned it, not during the Dark Ages, but during my lifetime. And those who sanctioned it were not uneducated barbarians; they included men who held positions of office and honor at all levels of government, including the United States Senate. The parliamentary delaying tactics that currently are the subject of so much debate took place in the nation's Capital, on the floor of this hallowed institution.

I have come to the United States Senate today for many reasons. As a Black woman, as the spouse of a former Senator, and as one who had a family member lynched, I need to bear witness to an act of decency that has been deferred, indeed filibustered, for far too long.

I am told that some members of the Senate are not prepared to support this measure because they think that an official apology is too trivial, meaningless and irrelevant to the times in which we live.

The passage of time can never remove the stain of institutionalized terrorism from our history or permit any public official to dismiss the pain of those who have lost family members to the savagery of lynch mobs as something unworthy of the Senate's agenda and deliberations.

It's important to remind the American people about the evil chapters in our history. It is the reason we construct museums in Washington and beyond, to hold up for all to see how capable we are of descending into the heart of darkness. It's important for us to look back into the past so that we can pledge to never again allow racial hatred to consume our ideals or humanity.

In his Second Inaugural Address, President Bush stated that, "Our country must abandon all habits of racism because we cannot carry the message of freedom and the baggage of bigotry at the same time." These are noble words and they deserve to be acted upon as well as invoked.

Finally, let me say that this Resolution is but a first step in the process of educating the American people about our history; of not allowing this part of our past to be reduced to a footnote, or glossed over and air brushed into oblivion.