Slavery was then, but race is now

By William C. Kashatus

Apologizing for the founding fathers distorts history and distracts from our real work.

When asked if he thought that posterity would forgive the founding fathers for neglecting the issue of slavery in their Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin allegedly replied, "It doesn't matter; we won't hear a thing. We'll all be long gone. Besides, what will posterity think we were, demigods? We're men — no more, no less — trying to get a nation started against greater odds than a more generous God would have allowed. If it does matter, the history books will clean it up!"

Don't count on it, Ben.

Last spring, when President Clinton raised the question of whether the United States should formally apologize for your indiscretion, he stirred a debate that has raged ever since.

But apologizing for your role in slavery is a mistake, for at least two big reasons: It misreads history, and it distracts us from the real work we need to do about race in this country.

Apologizing for slavery has become a controversial issue not only because few understand what it will accomplish, but also because today, more than a century after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, slavery still haunts the national soul.

That is why Steven Spielberg's new film, *Amistad*, promises to be a blockbuster; why the idea of a slave memorial on the Washington Mall is becoming more popular. A school board in New Orleans erased the name of President — and slaveholder — George Washington off of one elementary school.

Folks here in Philadelphia are hoping that our own school district continues to overlook the fact that the author of *Poor Richard's Almanac* kept slaves for nearly 30 years. Either that or this city is in for some serious name-changing!

In this age of political correctness, as our current dilemma over race relations compels us to ask pointed questions about the past, the founding fathers have come under greater scrutiny. Often at issue is the consequences of their failures rather than the benefits of their successes. We don't know whether to honor them for establishing an independent nation or to reject them for the sins of omission.

To be sure, slavery was not only a moral injustice, but also a disgrace to humankind and must never be forgotten. We should always reexamine the past and those institutions that shaped it, for better or worse. In no other way can we understand how slavery continues to define contemporary attitudes on race.

At the same time, however, it is irresponsible to apply contemporary standards to the past without making appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions.

Founders like Franklin, Washington, and Thomas Jefferson relied on the tacitly understood moral conventions of their time in deciding what they could and could not do to help others. The concept of equality, which today we almost universally regard as a basic tenet of democracy, had its beginnings only in the 18th century; it did not emerge full-blown from the Declaration of Independence.

Nevertheless, Jefferson felt compelled to write a clause into the Declaration of Independence condemning slavery, and Franklin, as president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, signed a petition to Congress recommending abolition. Had these measures been adopted, they would have committed the United States to emancipation much earlier than 1865. Instead, both measures were rejected because most Southern statesmen were unwilling to commit themselves to abolition at the time. To pursue the issue any further would have jeopardized American independence from Great Britain.

If we revere the founding fathers, then, we should do so for their genuine attempt to push the moral conventions of their time past the double standard that justified slavery. If, on the other hand, we fault them for the sins of omission, we should at least acknowledge that they were products of the 18th century and, as such, were limited by the ethical standards of the time.

But apologizing for their inability to abolish slavery is not only historically irresponsible. It is also lazy, not to say dishonest. It is the easy way out of a much more complex racial dilemma that only we ourselves can resolve.



JOHN OVERMYER

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Don't destroy our district; better improve our schools

By Mark Forrest

Dwight Evans and Vince Fumo's proposal to dismantle the Philadelphia school system and create 22 new and smaller districts, each with its own elected school board and its own taxing authority, is a very bad idea. It won't make the schools 22 times better — it will make them 22 times worse. Bigger is not always better, but neither is smaller. In fact, there is no one way, no single solution, no uncomplicated act that can make bad schools good or poor students better.

Can Philadelphia afford the creation of 22 patronage factories? That is exactly what these new independent and elected school districts would become. Whatever criticism has been aimed at the present administration of the school district, no one has charged that it is corrupt. Principals are chosen on the basis of merit, and teachers are not required to make campaign contributions to be promoted or get a better assignment.

That was, however, the experience in New York, where the system resembles what has been proposed for Philadelphia. That was also the experience in Chicago, where board members went to jail for bribery and embezzlement. Why should we expect that the Philadelphia experience will be any different? Who will monitor the expenditures of these newly created districts? Who will ensure fair and equal treatment of teachers as well as students? If the answer is a super-superintendent, then why not continue the present system, which calls for a superintended charged with that very responsibility?

Not to suggest that Philadelphia's schools don't need to get better. They do.

The problem is not the physical plant, the bureaucracy, the presence or lack of computers, or the manner of staffing the board. The problem is the way of thinking that looks for one solution when a complex and interrelated array of conditions need to be addressed. It takes a troika to do the job: Teachers, students and parents. Teachers have to be willing and able to teach, students willing and able to learn, and parents willing and able to support the process.

How can we reasonably assume that absent or uncaring parents are going to be any more supportive simply because it is the school district of Swamp Poodle instead of the School District of Philadelphia? How would Philadelphia profit from having a dozen or more poor school districts lacking the resources and the will to produce?

Philadelphia schools can't be made better by destroying them. Fumo and Evans' idea is akin to burning the house down to repair the roof. Yes, a certain number of repairs are required to improve the performance of students and teachers — but not at the price of creating a problem even bigger than the one we have now. Remove the clout that Philadelphia has in Harrisburg — based on the size of our delegation — and you will see state subsidies contract very quickly.

In an ideal world, if all three members of the troika were working in each school toward a common goal of excellence, I could see adopting something like this plan. But the world we have here is not ideal. This is the real world, in which patronage and power mean much more than good schools.

The recent Evans-Fumo proposal to create 22 smaller school districts is a recipe for chaos.

Any plan worth doing will require consistent commitment from teachers, encourage parents to work closely with their children, and motivate students to achieve. In fact, that family-based approach — rather than children achieving, how about children and parents learning together? — is a good way to start. Let parents in the community show they can play the needed role in the education of their children. But whatever we do, let's not destroy the system. Let's keep the good schools good and make the bad schools better.

Mark Forrest is a Philadelphia writer and deputy editor of *Milestones*.

This is no one-issue politician; Chris Smith fights for his beliefs

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report put N.J. Congressman Chris Smith (R., Fourth District) on its cover this month. Above it was the headline "Making a Difference: CQ Profiles a Dozen People Who Shaped Congress's Legislative Record in 1997." Smith shared this designation with some heady company: Sens. Ted Kennedy, Jesse Helms, Mitch McConnell, John McCain and Bob Torricelli, among others.

Each of these, the accompanying article said, had moved Congress in unexpected ways. Torricelli made the list for casting the deciding vote against the Balanced Budget Amendment, which he had supported as a candidate. Smith won his place by using every means at his disposal to keep promises to curtail abortions.

His moment came when, as chairman of the House Subcommittee on Internal Operations, Smith blocked payments to the United Nations and International Monetary Fund in the absence of guarantees that the monies would not go to abortion-related activities. He prevailed against opposition from the Clinton administration, the foreign policy establishment and members of his party.

Smith's detractors dismissed his actions as machinations of a "single issue" legislator. Hill watchers see his success as signs that the nine-term representative has learned how to bend the legislative chamber to his will. CQ proclaimed Smith's behavior more befitting of a senator than of a congressman. After all, Kennedy, Helms, and McConnell have all threatened to shut down the operations of the upper chamber over issues of concern to them. The lesser-known Congressman from the Garden State has simply learned how to play in their league.

Labeled an ultraconservative by some who disagree with him on abortion, Smith has been equally effective on issues that bridge the gulf between right and left. He has craftily used his chairmanship to protect human rights. Smith's fact-finding tours abroad and hearings at home exposed slave labor and religious persecution in China, child slavery in Rwanda and Zaire, and exploitation of children, whether through forced child labor or prostitution, in developing nations. Scores of political refugees owe their freedom to his personal intervention.

Smith's pro-family/pro children agenda includes his sponsorship of the $5,000-per-adopted-child tax credit, opposition to banning certain asthma inhalers before there are good alternatives, and advocacy of universal and worldwide child immunization. He angered party leaders when he, along with five other Republicans, opposed reduced Medicare spending as part of deficit reduction.

His alliance with organized labor against most-favored-nation trade status for China, fast-track trade negotiating authority for the President, and use of federal funds to subsidize mergers in the defense industry is rooted as much in conviction as in convenience. Displaying his family's working-class, Democratic roots, he embraces much of labor's economic agenda, while he opposes its politics.

Perhaps the fairest comparison for Smith is the John Quincy Adams of 'Amistad.'

"Without unions," he says, "people would be very far back. Even doctors are forming unions to fight predatory practices of some insurance companies. [He advocates greater and better home care.] They [unions] brought standards up. I want to see free, independent trade unions abroad too. I was an early backer of Solidarity in Poland."

While critics continue with the "one-issue" canard, his opponents in New Jersey know better than to take him at face value. First elected on a pro-life platform in 1980, he defeated Democratic warhorse Frank Thompson, polling 57 percent. Because Thompson was under indictment for his participation in the Abscam scandal, the pundits dismissed Smith's win as an anomaly. So certain was Smith's Democratic opponent that he would defeat Smith in 1982 that he contemptuously offered to make the 27-year-old Congressman a page boy when he got to Washington.

When he held onto the seat in three different districts Democratic state legislators had drawn specifically to remove him, the conventional wisdom was that Smith would "moderate" his views on the issue on which they deemed him vulnerable. He did not. Energetic attention to local issues became his trademarks, such as saving the naval base at Lakehurst, and meticulous case work for constituents.

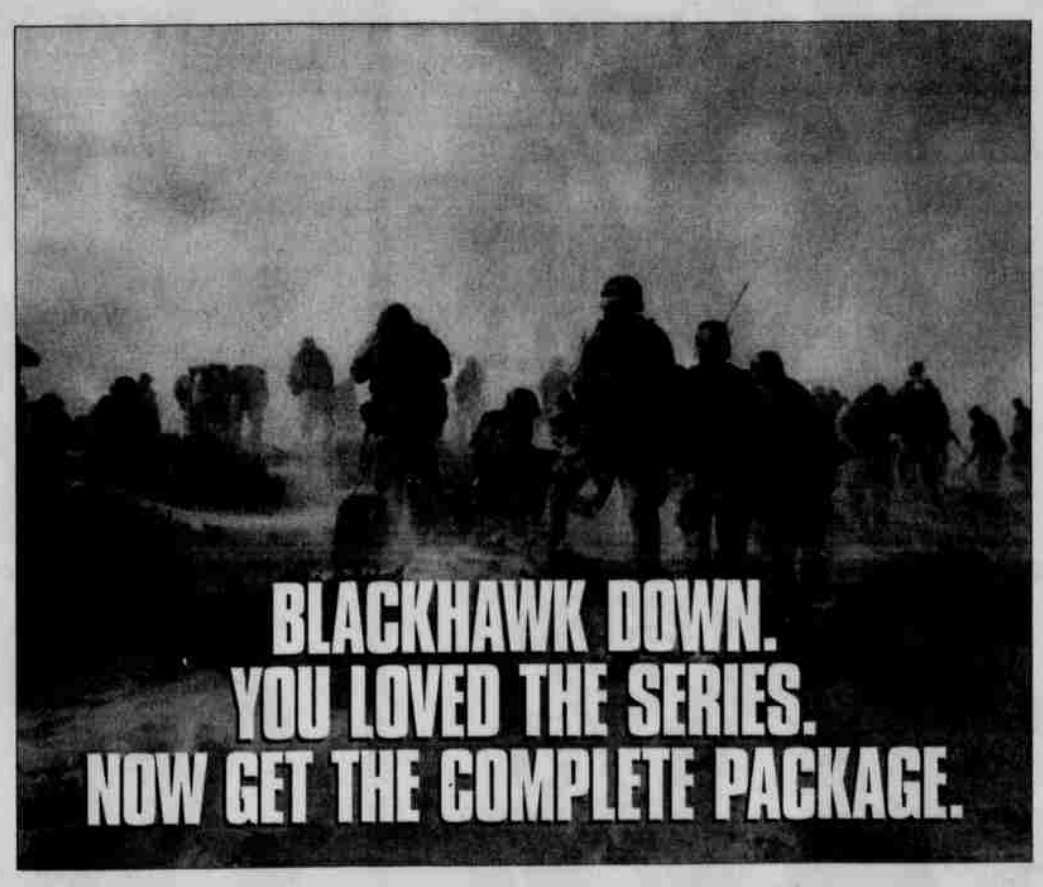
When he won later elections by wider margins, talk grew that Smith, like many young idealists before him, would succumb to the temptations of Washington. Smith moved his family to the Washington area while more and more of his colleagues ran against it. He dines with his family most nights and coaches his children's baseball and soccer teams. He won reelection in 1996 with 64 percent of the vote.

Smith attributes his tenacity and tactics to the belief that he is fighting for the right and that his views will prevail. He calls abortion, the "violence of the act, its long-term effects on women, and protection of the unborn" the "ultimate human rights issues." Smith compares present efforts to ban intact dilation and extraction, known in some circles as "partial birth" abortions, to abolitionist efforts to end slavery more than a century ago. William Wilberforce, the Member of Parliament who led the movement that ended slavery in the British empire in the 1930s, is the historical figure he most admires.

Students of the House of Representatives may see a closer resemblance between Smith and John Quincy Adams, recently brought back to life in Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*. When not defending slaves who mutinied against their captors, the ex-president-turned-congressman often brought the House to a standstill by using the rules to petition on behalf of slaves and their abolitionist supporters. Like Chris Smith, Adams became known as the congressman those aligned against him most loved to hate.

Alvin S. Felzenberg is a political scientist who writes and lectures on the American presidency. He served as New Jersey's assistant secretary of state in the Kean administration.

■ **Tomorrow:** A Christmas Carol for our times, Part I; Jane Eisner bids farewell to Max King.



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