

Apologies do little for race relations

WHEN WACHOVIA CORP. apologized last month because two banks in its family tree either owned slaves or used them as collateral for loans, it not only re-ignited a debate about reparations but also about the morality of the founding fathers themselves.

Wachovia, the nation's fourth largest bank, made the apology under pressure from the cities of Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles, all of which passed city ordinances requiring companies to disclose historic ties to slavery. Along with the apology came the revelation that Revolutionary War financier Robert Morris and his partner, Thomas Willing, "amassed part of their personal fortunes from the slave trade."

In fact, Morris and Willing, lost money on slavery. The ship they sent to purchase West African slaves was seized by French raiders. The plantation they bought in Louisiana was expropriated by Spain after that country took the Louisiana territory from France.

But because Morris, like Benjamin Franklin and other founding fathers, did own slaves and engaged in the slave trade as a side business to their property investments the advocates of reparations have single-mindedly focused on blame and what they are owed. They're missing the point.

To be sure, slavery was not

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only a moral injustice but 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.

Founding Fathers such as Morris, Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington 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 that is universally recognized in our contemporary society as a basic tenet of democracy only had its beginnings in the 18th century; it did not emerge full-blown from the "Declaration of Independence."

Nevertheless, there were those Founding Fathers who sought to bring the civil law of their time, which condoned slavery, into compliance with natural law and the moral principles underlying the "Declara-

tion."

Jefferson, for example, felt compelled to write a clause into the "Declaration" condemning the slave trade. Similarly, Franklin, as president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, signed a petition to the Continental Congress recommending the abolition of the institution itself. Had these measures been adopted, they would have committed the United States to emancipation much earlier than 1865. Instead, both measures were rejected.

To pursue the issue further, Congress believed, would have jeopardized the primary goal, American independence.

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 limits 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 ethical standards.

But apologizing for their inability to abolish slavery is not only historically irresponsible, it is the easy way out of a much more complex racial dilemma that only we, of the 21st century, can resolve.

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