

CAPPS LECTURE, University of Virginia  
October 15, 2008

HONEST PATRIOTS: LOVING A COUNTRY ENOUGH TO REMEMBER ITS MISDEEDS

Donald W. Shriver, Jr., President Emeritus, Union Theological Seminary, New York

---

There is something special about this occasion for me, something deep in my autobiography. My father graduated from the University of Virginia in 1924 with a joint degree in liberal arts and law. In my mind his footprints are here in this Rotunda, which, when he was here, was still the University library. A panoramic photo of this building and the Lawn adorned the wall of his office from my earliest memory of it, and it now adorns a wall of my own home. He was the only one of five brothers to graduate from college. His pride in this place was tangible during all the years of his long life. He always said that his happiest years were spent at “the University” --a judgment to which my mother may have objected and which I myself would not imitate concerning my four pre-marriage years at Davidson College. His pride in this university was part of his identity as a Virginian for the last 85 years of his life. The first eleven years he had spent in Baltimore and Washington. He would have liked to claim that he was Virginia-born. His father, my grandfather, had a work associate in the early 1900s whose daughter had been born in D.C. A few days after that birth, he took his little girl across the Potomac and rubbed Virginia dirt on her backside. It’s a humorous story, but it resonates with a fact that adorns and afflicts the culture of this state. A Boston friend of ours commented not long ago to me, “You must have been born in Northern Virginia, so you are not a real Virginian.” I

was surprised at how assertively I replied to him: “Oh no. I am a native of Norfolk.”

How many mixtures of memory and forgetting of Virginian history is represented here in this audience, I cannot say. Charlottesville and this university are host now to a cosmopolitan assembly of persons old and young to this history. No doubt the consciousness of history in the minds of many Southerners is an annoyance to immigrants into the south from other regions of this country and the world. On the whole, Americans are not very patient with the past, we love the future. Infact there is lots in our national past not to love, especially in the southern past, which we are likely to remember with pain as well as pleasure. James Dabbs of South Carolina liked to tell the bittersweet story of that soldier trudging at the rear of a column commanded by General James Longstreet. The general came by and, in due concern, leaned down from his horse and inquired, “Think you’ll make it, soldier?” “Yes, General,” came the reply, “Ah’ll make it, but ah hopes to God I never loves another country.”

Deep pain from that war mixes with pride in southern memory. The pains, especially the injustices, of the past stick seem to stick most in personal and collective memory among humans worldwide. In America, southerners are most likely to have a deep sense of history. A Mississippian, a guest professor in this university, put the southern point of view succinctly when he famously said, in his acceptance of the Nobel prize for literature, in 1950, “The past is not dead and gone; it isn’t even past.”

He spoke the theme of my book, Honest Patriots [Oxford University Press, paperback 2008]. The book documents from the life of three countries-- Germany, South Africa, and the United States-- the difficulty and the necessity of refreshing public memory of past events most publics would as soon forget. Who wants to remember the misdeeds of one’s ancestors? Why

take care to do so, when the challenges of the present and the future press upon us? One ethical answer is: The misdeeds most necessary to remember are those which still afflict living descendants of those who were harmed the most by those misdeeds. To express that ethic in terms of political wisdom is to note that not to share the same memories with one's fellow citizens is to some degree not to be really their fellows. I defy any new arrival to Charlottesville, for example, to try living here without so much as a word of praise or blame for Thomas Jefferson. You can criticize Jefferson here, but you had better not disdain a memory of him.

The central truth about all societies, illustrated in three of them in my book, is that shared and omitted memories constitute large dimensions of public political culture. Included, of course, are the memories of pasts of which a people has every right to be proud. In his recent book, A Life in Transition, his autobiography as a major political leader in contemporary South Africa, Alex Boraine says of his role as Deputy Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that perhaps we should have paid more attention to the "good stories" of the apartheid era, the heroic acts of people of all races who struggled against the racism. Telling the good stories is no small part of political rhetoric, and historians can help us remember them along with the not-so-good stories. A combination of proud and painful memories marks the most competent of histories. An illustration quoted early in my book comes from an essay by C. Van Woodward, southern historian translated from Louisiana to Yale. His 1953 essay is entitled, "The Irony of Southern History," a title drawn directly from his reading of the book by Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History, published the year before, 1952. Woodward notes that Americans are likely to forget that in the decade of Jefferson's death there were more antislavery societies in the Upper South than anywhere in the North. About that

decade

“It is not too much to say that this was a society unafraid of facing its own evils. The movement reached a brilliant climax in the free and full debates over emancipation in the Virginia legislature during the session of 1831-32...[But then] it withered away to almost nothing in a very brief period during the middle thirties. By 1837 there was not one antislavery society remaining in the whole south....Opponents changed their opinions or held their tongues.”

So we have the bittersweet truth about Virginia history that for a time it led the movement towards abolition while becoming a large post-1808 center of the country's internal slave trade in Richmond.

Beginning in the 1990s, Richmond saw a vigorous public movement to remember and to memorialize that slave trade. Ben Campbell, longtime resident of Richmond, in a recent public lecture, notes that neither popular memory nor high school history texts take much notice of the 1835-60 era when Richmond was the transfer point for some 300,000 slaves. As it happens, in early 2007, we saw an official apology for it all by the Virginia Legislature, an example followed by five other state legislatures including that of New Jersey. Good for New Jersey! Its state politicians remembered that slavery and varieties of racism always were national sins in the United States of America. It's a truth acknowledged too rarely by Yankee voices. Honesty about that truth serves the coming of that “more perfect union” which the Fathers of the Constitution set down as the purpose of their 1787 work.

To combine explicit pride and shame about one's collective past is no easy matter, intellectually, emotionally, or publicly. Back in 1962, in the midst of the great upset over the integration of the University of Mississippi, a Mississippi-born Presbyterian minister named Robert Walkup told his Starkville MS congregation about his recent visit to the Civil War

Battlefields in Virginia. It brought home to him the mixed goods and evils on both sides of that war, and especially its unprecedented destructions of life and property. All of it, all the wealth piled high by slaves, all the clashing patriotisms of the two sides, he said, were not worth the carnage on those battlefields. When I first read that remarkable sermon, I wondered: would modernday African Americans rather say that the death of 620,000 Americans was a just cost to pay for the liberation of four million slaves? How very difficult the question is. How very necessary that we Americans learn to cope honestly with the retrospective thought, "Could that Civil War have been avoided while at the same time getting rid of that great curse of slavery, what Roger Wilkins of George Mason University calls "the grating chain that snaked through the new republic and diminished every life it touched"? Public memory is fluid, you know. As James Young says in a recent issue of your Hedgehog Review, the very stone monuments that we erect in memory of the past are subject to changing evaluations by subsequent viewers. We should think of the memories evoked in them as collected rather than collective. I think of Monument Avenue in Richmond, whose first monument was that raised in 1890 to Robert E. Lee. But in the 1990s, several blocks down the same avenue, is that new statue to Arthur Ash. It was another general, was it not, who liberated his slave ancestors.

For some, of course, the idea of revisiting history is a no-brainer. Not so, I have to say. All tribute to Gordon Craig, great modern American historian of Germany, when he defines the obligation of historians to "restore to the past the options it once had." If we cannot say of the acts of our ancestors, "They should have done this and not done that," we deny to them and ourselves an attribute most popular in American ideology: freedom. Define it minimally as the power of choice. In a country whose political rhetoric is peppered with celebrations of freedom,

it is ironic that anyone would believe, with Henry Ford, that “history is bunk,” or that anyone would buy into the current cliché that dismisses the past, “it’s history.” A fine recent example of “whate if” history is the book by another Richmonder, Cry Havoc, as study of the fateful spring of 1861 when Virginians debated secession from the Union.

My colleague Kosuke Koyama, who was teaching in New Zealand when we invited him to Union Seminary in New York, reports that the Maori tribes in that country image their advance into the future as walking backwards, eyes on the past which we can know while being uncertain about the future which we cannot know. We can only know it by clues from our past and present. By contrast, as Carl Becker once wrote, Americans are like riders on a train which kicks up dust in its trail, dust which they hardly notice as they focus on what they imagine to be ahead.

Well, if there is one nation on earth which in recent decades has exemplified the reverse philosophy, it is Gordon Craig’s specialty, Germany. From Germany and South Africa, the first two chapters of my book allege, Americans might learn some important lessons about how to combine pride and shame in one’s national past, in public ways which educate the future with hope that its citizens will neither repeat the crimes of the past nor ignore the citizens of the present whose ancestors suffered most in that past. Let me offer a few illustrations, first from Germany and then from South Africa, before we turn to the United States.

### Germany Remembers

In 1999, in a visit to a high school or gymnasium `12<sup>th</sup> grade class, several of the students who had spent summers in America, testified to some negative impressions of this country: one, the American celebration of July 4. “All those flags, all those parades and marching bands, it

reminded us of Germany in the 1930s. And then the questions students our own age would ask us: ‘Do you know what a zwastika is?’ Know what it is! We’ve known about it almost from birth.”

The average American does know what Nazism is and was. What we are not so likely to know is how diligently, for the past 40 years, German leaders have tried to make sure that no future generation of Germans fails to know what Nazism and the Holocaust were. Said one of those students: “We study that history three times in our 13 years of schooling. We study the Holocaust so often that you will find plenty of people in Germany saying, ‘We’ve had it up to here with the Holocaust.’ But that evil was so deep. I think we may never get to the bottom of it, but we must keep on trying.” Her remark validates James Young’s view that we all have “memory work” to do on the great tragedies of the past. And some of our monuments invite a diversity of memories and citizen points of view. An illustration is Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial in Washington: you can celebrate or grieve at that engraving of 58,000 American war dead. And you could raise the question, should we also grieve the two million Vietnamese dead?

Germans have a keen interest in American history especially the history of Native Americans. They are prompt to call it a genocide, and they wonder why the real history of native Americans gets buried in cowboy-and-Indians movies. I tell them that we are doing better these days in the history books and in the movies, but we have a long way to go. Is there, for example, any memorial in Charlottesville to the Indians who used to live here?

As for Germany, it is hard to find a central space in any German city which lacks some version of a memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe. Increasingly German communities are

finding leaders who press some version of the question: How did this community collaborate in the crimes of Nazism? A sculptor, Gunter Demnig began in 2003 to hammer out little brass plates for embedding in certain sidewalks in Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, and other cities. One, for example, reads:

Here lived/ Hermine Baron/Born Loew, J8 1866/Deported 1942/

Theresienstadt/ Murdered 22.1.1943.

Not so comfortable, living in the house with that marker on one's front sidewalk.

Other markers are larger and more comprehensive. There is the Mirror Wall, the Spiegelwand in the Berlin community of Steglitz, in the middle of the marketplace, engraved with the names of the 1700 former Jewish residents who left Steglitz in the 1940s never to return. They know those names because the Gestapo kept very detailed records. The wall is "in your face" in a very literal sense. You cannot take a picture of it without photographing yourself. One of the wall's inscriptions asks the simple question, 'Und Du?' And you? The nearby upper class community of Schoeneberg now has 80 signs on various poles around their central plaza, each with quotations from the evolving anti-semitic laws the 1933-45 era, beginning with simple measures like restrictions on the acting profession and ending with the right of the government to order Jews out of their residences.

Someone has said that Germans are not all that efficient, but they are very thorough. Once they decide to do something, they do it down to that last detail. As regards teaching each other about the Holocaust, they have been doing it for forty years, ever since the university students of the 1960s began to ask their parents and grandparents, "What did you do between 1933 and 1945?" It parallels, I think, the question that children white and black might now be asking their parents



and grandparents: “What did you do in the era of the Civil Rights Movement?”

The catalogue of German efforts to erect memorials, to revise school curricula, to observe anniversaries, and to keep this history alive in political speeches is simply overwhelming. The printed listings and descriptions run to thousands of pages. An account of my own first tours of central Berlin, which begins my chapter on Germany, can be duplicated by any visitor to that city. Even on a first visit you may participate in the sense of weariness at Nazi-reminders that many Germans experience. Here is a bus stop whose shelter tells you that Adolf Eichman had his office here. There beside the Philharmonic Hall is a memorial to people murdered for being too sick or insane to qualify as good Germans. And down Unter den Linden, in the square across from the former University of Berlin, a transparent glass square, covering a buried set of empty bookshelves, reminiscent of the event of May 1933 in which students and faculty burned books from the university library. Around that glass square, a quotation from the poet Heine: “Those who begin by burning books will end by burning people.”

Well, that is just a peep into the total work of public remembering that is still proceeding in modern Germany. Say that they are overdoing it, say that it all has still not gotten rid of slumbering and wakeful anti-semitism, say even that Nazism was so evil that its legacy composes a burden on public memory unique to Germany—say all of that—but in so saying you will be in danger of failing to identify the kinship between the misdeeds of another nation and the misdeeds of one’s own. Visit modern Germany for a cure to the prejudice that it is impossible for a nation to repent. Visit it for understanding that there is such a thing as the politics of repentance.

That is also a reason for visiting modernday South Africa.

South Africa remembers

Alex Boraine is right about the importance of good stories about our collective past. How can we mold a society without agreeing to something in our past we are proud of? But there is another, more subtle quality of pride in a political culture: perhaps, strengthened by pride in some of our past, citizens acquire an ability to cope with our shame, too. There is both principled and prudential reason to admit publicly to the shameful past. Germany is a far healthier country for its now-proven ability to acknowledge the dreadful era of 1933-45. Can you imagine what Germany's international relations would be if its leaders had said to the world: "OK, Nazism is history. Let's get on with the future and forget about the Holocaust." One of these days the international relations of the USA may have to improve as we display a great deal more honesty of our roles in world history. We might begin with our 1900 invasion of the Philippines, before we tackle the gross mistakes of our Iraq War.

But the point is that it is possible to forge an amalgam of pride and repentance in a public account of one's national past which is healthy all around. A good friend of ours in Berlin has paid a high compliment to my own witness, like the above, to Germany's diligent trudge towards national repentance for Nazism. "You have helped make me feel," he said, "that as a German I am no longer in the dock." No longer on trial for the sins of my ancestors. It's really an expression of the old insistence of the Bible that if you confess your sins, forgiveness for them will be available. If you do not, you will not be forgiven. The Hebrew Bible, especially the psalms, assert that God the judge of our sins will forget our sins once we repent of them. But there is nothing in those scriptures to suggest that there is divine forgetfulness for our unrepented sins.

In my first visit to South Africa in 1986, it was certain that the sins of racism in that country were heading for either a civil war or a national political transformation. That the latter came is

one of the overall good stories of modern history. At this moment, that story seems under severe internal political threat. But essential to note is the importance of a device that South African politicians accepted in 1994 as the bridge between old injustice and new justice: A truth and reconciliation commission. Ever since its work in 1996-98, TRC leaders have insisted that no one national model for public facing of past sins is imitable by other nations. Each has to wend its own way into the cleansing of amnesia with the tonic of honest memory.

The really “good story” out of South Africa is the combination of that society’s publicity for the evils in its past and the new structures of justice that help insure against the repetition of those evils. The good story consists of the TRC and the new human-rights suffused constitution.

The path towards that combination exhibited an astonishing version of honest patriotism. The TRC was intent on giving voice to the painful, bad stories of the people who suffered most from apartheid. That process had a double benefit: it abolished the readiness of white South Africans to minimize or ignore the suffering, and it provided the victims the therapy of telling their stories to a large listening national audience. There are two levels of insult to the victims of gross injustice, you know: the first is the injustice itself, the second is for your neighbors to forget it. The torturers in South African prisons taunted their prisoners with the word: “Groan all you want to. Nobody is listening. And nobody will remember you.” The latter is the final insult.

If it did nothing else, the TRC opened the door to the bad stories as a way to open the door to the good story of full membership of all citizens in South African society. No sufferer of evil racist law was too obscure a person to appear before the Commission. Here was Lukas Sikwepere, shot, blinded, arrested on false charges, left with bullets in his neck. Ten years later he recounts it all to a listening national audience, and at the end he testifies: “I feel what has been making me

sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now I—it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story.”

In his article in the summer 2007 Hedgehog Review, Jeffrey Olick of this university faculty remarks that “what is repressed in the memory of a people is never ‘totally’ repressed in the sense of being hermetically sealed off from their conscious lives; there is always unconscious memory-traces of what has been repressed.” Yes, and on the social-political level the repressed can get expressed because some members of the society are likely to have preserved the painful memory without repressing it. They wait for the opportunity for public expression. In an allegedly “free” society there has to be such opportunities. Making space for the exercise of this freedom, for these testimonies, is the obligation of leaders in a genuine democracy.

The variety of means for curing public amnesia are many in South Africa: Museums, statues, revised history texts, that amazing new national constitution, new freedom of speech-- South Africa has served us all with these forms of civic courage. You can be human now in South Africa, on a level long denied to four-fifths of its citizens. Like other countries with buried pasts, South Africa has a way to go before it truly reckons with its history. But it has begun to work at the task.

But I hasten to American parallels.

### America Remembers

Those of us who insist that we cannot rightly recover from the sins of the past unless we rightly remember them can easily be dismissed as muckrakers, apostles of gloom, and oppressive moralists. This book tries to combat that reputation by practicing what I have come to believe is the most powerful principle for the work of teaching. Over much of my experience as a student in

public school, I was mostly led to fear being wrong. With her red pencil the teacher did not hesitate to tell me what I did wrong. Against that is my certainty that as students we are most likely to remember best those moments in the classroom when the teachers said something like, “Good job!” A Harvard graduate in the ‘fifties was asked what was the highest educational moment in his four years. He replied: “I think it was the time a professor wrote in the margin of one of my papers, ‘Nice point!’” Teachers take notice: positive reinforcement works better than negative.

On that principle, I have tried in the latter chapters of this book to celebrate those events and trends in recent American history that show the coming of some new maturity in our public life as regards public attention to the misdeeds of Americans in our past. In his Confessions, Augustine of Hippo said, “There is something in humility that lifts up the head.” There is something in confession of sins, private or public, that brings new dignity, new justice to public culture. My illustrations of that are legion.

First, in regard to the history of the long struggle of African Americans to see and to be seen as full citizens of the country whose “fathers” enslaved their ancestors.

In our own time, historians have worked at this history with might and main.. Many of them are African Americans like Roger Wilkins. Another is Vincent Harding. I think especially of his first volume of history of the Civil Rights Movement, There Is a River. In its opening pages he recounts how, in December 1865, a gathering of two thousand newly freed slaves in Charleston adopted a proclamation which climaxed in the amazing words: “We are Americans by birth, and we assure you that we are Americans in feeling; and in spite of all the wrongs which we have so long and so silently endured in this country, we can exclaim, with a full heart, ‘O America, with all

thy faults we love thee still.’”

The patriotism of many of us white Americans greets this testimony with pleasure, of course, but often enough we fail to pause before it in deep amazement. Not long ago a black ethics scholar exclaimed in a national meeting, “If there is a black American who has never had the thought, ‘I want out of this [country], he grew up somewhere else!’” White Americans have a long way to go before we develop empathy enough to accept that testimony, too. Had we developed that empathy we would not have had so widespread horror at Jeremiah Wright’s much-quoted sermon in which he said that many of his constituents would as soon say “God damn America” as “God bless America.” That so many still believe that (in Langston Hughes’ words) “America will be”, should be greeted with some humble amazement. Such amazement dawned on me decades ago in my first visits to all-black churches. The normal paranoid projection of us who were brought up in a segregated society is the suspicion that we would not be welcome in a black church. “They” have not been welcomed into white churches, have they? To the contrary, we are welcomed, leaving one with the repentant feeling that the remarkable thing is not that white people are finally willing to welcome blacks into their company but that for long blacks have been willing to welcome whites into their company.

Getting to such a thought takes an appreciation of history, especially those dimensions of history which were left out of your high school history , even your university, history classes. There are books from historians which are not yet welcomed into the history classes of our public schools. One is James Loewen’s, Lies My Teacher Taught Me, another is Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States, and yet another David Blight’s Race and Reunion. The basic history text for Virginians in this matter will long be Edmund Morgan, American Slavery,

American Freedom: the Ordeal of Colonial Virginia. Along with Orlando Patterson's work, Morgan advances the astonishing, troubling thesis that the idea of political freedom has as its pre-supposition the idea and the reality of slavery. You could intuit what freedom might be by observing its opposite in a slave. You could do that in ancient Greece, and you could do it in America. It is the embarrassing conclusion of Morgan's book: "Racism became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the ideology that enabled Virginians to lead the nation." (Page 386.)

In all four major chapters of my book I have recorded changes in school history books which, over fifty years, have gradually included more realistic accounts of who benefitted and who suffered in the course of American history. It is slow but significant progress of truth in our teaching of history in high schools. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, some widely used high school history texts tell facts that never appeared in predecessor books of the 1950s. Now in the text are the names Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Henry Highland Garnet, Sojourner Truth, and Elijah Lovejoy. Chapters on the Civil War tell us that 180,000 freedmen served in the Federal Armies, that 32,000 died, and 20 received the Medal of Honor. Reconstruction, the most neglected period in the history that most of us learned, gets the next thirty pages.

But alas for us who write books, their influence on public acknowledgment of evils-past has can be slight without the supplement of other media. Film is one of them. We owe it some great debts for dramas like Raisin in the Sun, Glory, The Defiant Ones, and To Kill a Mockingbird. And then, like modern Germany, we now have some additions of an anniversary or two to our national calendar. The Martin Luther King birthday is the great example. In addition, we are coming to a more complex public memory of the man who occupies October 12 in our national

calendar. We celebrated him this past Monday. Prior to the year 1992 most of us imagined that we would have a great national ceremony around the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas. Descendants of Native Americans would not have it so. They succeeded in muting the celebration, especially as they brought to notice their own memories of Columbus and the work of historians like James Loewen of the University of Vermont. Haiti, for example, one of Columbus's ports of call, probably had at least three million inhabitants in 1492. "Thanks to the sinister slave trade and labor policies initiated by Columbus....fewer than 200 were alive in 1542. By 1555, they were all gone." (Loewen, p. 63)

Is there any wonder that native Americans consider Columbus the villain in their history? Or that they would organize in 1992 to dampen other Americans' enthusiasm for that anniversary? Why not, I suggest in a late page of this book, turn Columbus Day into something like "All America Day," and in doing so season our pride as Euro-Americans with memory of the devastations to some, as well as the benefits to others, of the European arrival on these shores?

Slavery and the near-genocide of Native Americans are the two great original sins of Euro-American civilization. There are many concrete improvements in popular memory of this history, and I hope that Honest Patriots makes an incremental contribution to this cause. I have described dozens of the improvements in these pages. Among the most remarkable are those recent occasions when whole communities have recovered their public memory of the misdeeds, once drowned in local amnesia: Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; Abbeville, South Carolina; Richmond Virginia; Oxford, North Carolina; the State of Oregon; and, yes, New York City. In the latter's state historical society, several years ago, we had a display of "slavery in New York." It was in that display that this southerner learned for the first time a vital bit of history—how, in



January 1861, the mayor of New York seriously proposed that his city should secede from the Union along with the South. The cotton trade, you know. Albany quickly overruled that proposal.

A long fourth chapter of this book dwells on matters which the author himself had to treat as a frontier between his knowledge and his ignorance of American history. You cannot have grown up in eastern Virginia without knowing that African Americans are a living presence in one's own life. They are there, so to speak, around every corner. Not so, Native Americans, at least for those of us who happen to live east of the Mississippi, whence the Andrew Jackson government expelled all Indians in the 1830s. Down in Jamestown now they are recovering the history of the Powhatans in the new museum there in ways denied to my own childhood. It is a marvelous museum. But we all as a public have a long way to go on this one. As James Loewen puts it:

Historically, American Indians have been the most lied-about subset of our population. That's why Michael Dorris said that, in learning about Native Americans, 'One does not start from point zero, but from minus ten.' (Page 99)

The inclusion of a chapter on this matter in my book is something of an act of intellectual repentance on my part. Some years ago in a seminar around my 1995 book on forgiveness in politics, a student said: "This would have been a better book if it had treated the case of the Indians as well as the case of black Americans." He was right. The literature that treats the Indian case is vast now, and we have to be glad that, in our public media, Indians get a fairer shake than they have gotten in most of our history. I think of the changing reputation of General George Armstrong Custer. In the early 1991, at the lobbying of Sioux descendants of Sitting Bull, Congress changed the name "Custer Battlefield" to "Battle of Little Big Horn." I have wondered if the 1970 movie Little Big Man had influenced the members of that Congress in their own earlier

age.

Now, of course and at last, we have a museum of the American Indian on the Mall in Washington, where plans for the even more belated Museum of African Americans are afoot. But it remains true that for public consciousness in this field we have a long way to go. An example local to the region where my family has a summer home in upstate New York will suffice to illustrate the symptom that needs a cure for our public amnesia in this matter. In the summer we live near the top exit of the Taconic Parkway. From our hill we can just glimpse the Hudson River from our front porch. The name “Taghonic” is Mohican. At the uppermost overlook of the parkway one sees the great river valley spread out. A highway marker tells how Henry Hudson came up the river in 1609 as the pioneer in the coming European settlements of the region. The marker notes the Dutch and the English plantations of succeeding centuries. But there is nary a mention of the Mohicans who once lived on both sides of that river and who so impressed Henry Hudson with their friendliness and generosity. They had lived here for perhaps 12,000 years. Well, in 2009 New York State will celebrate a 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary akin to Virginia’s recent one in Jamestown; and for that anniversary a collection of us in Columbia County expect to raise another highway marker in that overlook, acknowledging the former presence of those Mohicans who greeted Henry on his way up the river soon named for him. It’s a small gesture towards public education. Many such gestures across America would improve public memory of this painful history. It is another example of what James Young terms a “counter-monument,” which invites the viewer to note something left out of popular memory. Ben Campbell notes that recently, in August 2007, a new highway marker came to Virginia highway 5 near Charles City Courthouse. It memorializes the massacre of sixteen members of the Paspahugh tribe close to Jamestown in

August 1610. Men, women, and children, murdered by Sir Thomas Dale and his men, an event that horrified the Paspaheghs, who could not countenance the killing of women and children in war. Deanna Beacham, of the Virginia Council on Indians, who helped create this marker, said of the event: “Look at all the history, not just some of it. We’re not trying to rewrite it. We’re just trying to add to it.” (Richmond Times Dispatch, August 5, 2007.)

In researching the book this author compiled many other such gestures and tangible improvements in belated acts of justice to African Americans and Indian peoples in our history. The pain of uncovering this history is deep and ongoing. But endurance of that pain has a lot to do with what it means to expand the perimeters of a citizen’s sense of inclusion of other citizens long neglected in the precincts of one’s own mind. In a time like the fall of 2008, when for better and for worse we are linked with each other economically on a global scale, we are having to learn how to include each other’s histories on our way to a truly global human community. To learn to do that is the task of honest patriots everywhere now. Training in the task of including “all sorts and conditions” of our fellow humans in our consciousness takes place everyday in these United States when we chip away at the walls that have separated us, in mind and in deed, from our neighbors near and far.

There is a theology that fits this task. It prevents some of us from buying into a political philosophy which puts “America first” and which shrouds a human identity in a nationalistic identity.

The teacher in my education who best taught me the personal, social, political, and ethical dynamics of collective memory was H. Richard Niebuhr of Yale, who, with his brother Reinhold and Jonathan Edwards, Martin Marty names in his recent nomination of “America’s three greatest

theologians.” In his 1941 book, The Meaning of Revelation, HRN set forth the role of shared memory and shared forgetting in our common life.

We do not destroy this past of ours; it is indestructible. We carry it with us; its record is written deep in our lives. We only refuse to acknowledge it as our true past and try to make it an alien thing—something that did not happen to our real selves. So our national histories do not recall to the consciousness of citizens the crimes and absurdities of past social conduct, as our written and unwritten biographies fail to mention our shame. But this unremembered past endures...Our buried past is mighty; the ghosts of our father and of the selves that we have been haunt our days and nights though we refuse to acknowledge their presence....

The conversion of the past must be continuous because the problems of reconciliation arise in every present...Groups use their separate histories as means of defending themselves against the criticism of others and weapons for warfare upon rival parties. We cannot become integrated parts...until we each remember our whole past, with its sins....No mere desire to overcome differences of opinion is of any avail unless it expresses itself in such reinterpretation and appropriation of what lies back of opinion—the memory....The measure of our distance from each other in our nations and groups can be taken by noting the divergence, the separateness and lack of sympathy in our social memories. Conversely the measure of our unity is the extent of our common memory. (HRN, 113-114, 118-120, quoted pp. 124-25 in Honest Patriots)

I would be deeply gratified to think that Honest Patriots offers its readers some confirmation of the truth in these eloquent paragraphs from a great theologian and a great teacher.

