

Why No Apology for Slavery?

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It's easy to see why the White House spotted Goree Island — Senegal's former slave-trading outpost — as a perfect photo op. What better site to pose George W. Bush coming out against slavery and championing the rights of African-Americans, whose votes he would very much like to attract in next year's presidential election?

This White House takes photo ops very seriously, usually confining them to U.S. military settings where an enthusiastic crowd can be counted on as a backdrop.

So this one was risky. Bush is not popular in Senegal, partly because his administration's contempt for the United Nations is seen as an attack on the one international institution where Africans feel they have a voice.

What if the Senegalese crowds proved less docile as a backdrop than the usual U.S. military crowds? (What if the president appeared, for instance, in the doorway of the old slave prison — where shackled slaves were pushed onto waiting ships below — and the crowd chanted something inappropriate, like — "Jump!")

One precaution taken to avoid this sort of slip-up was the rounding up of many of the island's residents at 6 a.m. the morning Bush arrived last week. As Reuters reported, men, women and children were taken to a football field on the far side of the island where they were held for about six hours until Bush departed, allowing the photo op to go off without a hitch.

U.S. officials insisted that the lock-up was done by Senegalese authorities, but it's hard to imagine the White House wasn't at least consulted.

Of course, the fact that Senegalese residents were essentially held prisoner for six hours so that Bush could have an undisturbed photo op wouldn't likely upset an administration that for many months has been holding more than 600 prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in defiance of international law, and plans to conduct secret military trials to decide whether to execute some of them.

The White House also probably failed to appreciate the irony of locking up hundreds of black Senegalese — one report suggested 1,000 were detained — so that the American president could make a speech celebrating liberty for blacks.

In any event, it's good to know that Bush opposes slavery — despite his past wooing of anti-black southern Republicans.

During his bid for the Republican leadership in 2000, Bush delighted southern racists by making a campaign appearance at that ultimate bastion of racism, Bob Jones University, where interracial dating is actually banned.

Bush also refused to call on South Carolina to stop flying the Confederate flag over the state capitol.

Condemning slavery is, in fact, a fairly safe way for Bush to score points with African-American voters, while doing nothing to risk alienating his core support among racists. (Even most Republicans oppose actual slavery.) Bush's message seems to be: slavery — no; ban on interracial dating — optional.

Bush has managed to get away with pandering to southern racists largely because the media have shied away from challenging him about it.

A less submissive media would have used the anti-slavery photo op to grill Bush about Republican policies that negatively affect millions of African-Americans today.

Like proposed cutbacks to the Head Start program for disadvantaged preschoolers, and the denial of an enhanced tax credit for 12 million low-income families in the recent tax cuts.

Another obvious question that should have dogged Bush throughout the trip is the U.S. refusal to apologize for slavery.

What's the reason for not apologizing? Is the U.S. not sorry for stripping so many people of their most basic rights?

Refusing to apologize suggests Americans aren't willing to take moral responsibility for this vicious denial of freedom — an integral part of the history of the "land of the free."

It would be nice if media commentators would at least point out these contradictions, if they would refuse to allow the White House to turn the unspeakable crimes of Goree Island into a colourful photo backdrop, without at least questioning Bush's open flirtation with pro-Confederate racists.

Interestingly, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice — the prominent African-Americans in the Bush administration — accompanied the president to Goree Island. Media spin suggested Powell and Rice pushed Bush to make the Africa trip, out of their determination to focus more administration attention on black issues. (All the more reason for African-Americans to break their long allegiance with the Democrats.)

Another possibility is that Powell and Rice, who have never been noticeably focused on black issues, were deliberately trotted out to enhance the administration's pro-black image for the anti-slavery photos.

It's impossible to know where the truth lies, but the seething scowl on Colin Powell's face might be one clue.