

Honest Patriots

reviewed by [Robert Pollack](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember Its Misdeeds

Donald W. Shriver
Oxford University Press

The United States has a complicated history. In telling that history to one another—through textbooks, movies, holidays, memorials and museums—Americans have tended to avoid giving a full accounting of slavery and of the dispossession and killing of indigenous peoples over the 400 years since Europeans first arrived and settled on this continent. Donald Shriver asks why that is and suggests what we might begin to do about it.

Shriver's is a passionate but gentle teaching on personal, political, educational and religious repentance. It is written in the first person by a man who has confronted those questions many times in his life as a civil rights worker, teacher, minister and president—now emeritus—of Union Theological Seminary in New York. He has a

generous sensibility, and one can be sure to find oneself treated fairly here whether one is a descendant of slaves, of their masters, of people who were here before 1492, or of immigrants who found refuge here well after slavery ended.

The book has a trajectory as flat and true as that of a well-shot arrow. Shriver introduces readers to the notion of national repentance for national shame by reviewing the past decade's developments in Germany and South Africa—two places whose problems Americans are unlikely to think of as models of our own. After all, many will think, the bad times of our past surely were nothing next to the racial laws and intentionally murderous policies that those nations enacted—and later had to come to terms with.

Shriver makes it clear that we should study South Africa and Germany because they now are ahead of the U.S. in the development of school curricula, national holidays, and national and local museums and memorials that offer citizens the chance for true repentance, true reconciliation and a true capacity to work together to ensure that past events will never again happen.

Germany since reunification and South Africa since the end of apartheid offer us dozens of good models for what the U.S. might have done after the Civil War but never did. It is embarrassing to read of an explicit, self-critical, internationally recognized *Denkmal*, a monument of remembrance, or a *Mahnmal*, a monument of mourning, in Berlin, or of Cape Town's District Six Museum, and then to realize that Congress has yet to authorize the building of a museum of African-American history on the Mall in Washington, D.C., or in any other way to properly credit those who built our country's first centuries with their blood-soaked contribution of slave labor.

Similarly, it is chilling to learn that few Americans are taught that 400 years ago there were more than 500 different indigenous nations woven into alliances on this continent, most having been here for thousands of years. Can Congress do no better to make restitution for the forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of first Americans than to permit tax-free gambling on reservations?

Shriver points to missed opportunities for repentance in schoolbooks on American history, a sin of omission that has allowed us to succumb to the idolatrous notion of a national manifest destiny. He quotes, for example, historian Eric Foner, who writes:

On the eve of the Civil War, the economic value of slaves in the United States was \$3 billion in 1860 currency, more than the combined value of all the factories, railroads, and banks in the country.

How do we begin acts of reconciliation that acknowledge such facts? How do we rewrite textbooks to make clear that slavery was not the local habit of a backward, agrarian South, but rather the economic engine that had by 1860 transformed this country from a collection of coastal European settlements into a continental empire? To begin with, Shriver suggests, we might all take a deep breath and accept, admit, acknowledge, apologize for and memorialize the fact that there is no part of our country that does not owe a vast debt to people of African descent.

Shriver also quotes Randall Robinson, who provides an even more shocking example of repressed historical memory:

To erect the building that would house the art that symbolized American democracy, the United States government sent out a request for a hundred slaves. The first stage of the Capitol's construction would run from 1793 to 1802. In exchange for the slaves' labor the government agreed to pay their *owners* [author's emphasis] five dollars per month per slave.

Can we know this and think we are done with the problem of race in America because of the Civil Rights Acts and the national holiday honoring Martin Luther King's birth?

Shriver calls on all Americans to renew the covenant of their citizenship, beginning by personally acknowledging that each of us is indebted to others of wholly different ancestry and that therefore none of us can lay claim to any presumption of privilege by birth. This could become a national covenant, with people entering the political sphere via a proper acknowledgment of the costs of slavery and the dispossession of native peoples.

For this second step, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Germany's payments to the survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants have much to teach us all.