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Herald News (Passaic County, NJ)

June 22, 2005 Wednesday
All Editions

SECTION: OPINION; Pg. B07

LENGTH: 715 words

HEADLINE: Symbolism is important in **Mississippi**

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BODY:

Anybody who claims to understand **Mississippi** has probably never spent much time there. I'm back in my home state fairly frequently these days, and every visit leaves me both hopeful and despairing.

Mississippi is a state of confusion - the symbol of racism and backwardness and arguably the state that is trying hardest to repair the damage wrought by racism.

And so Edgar Ray "Preacher" **Killen** is on trial in Philadelphia - the Philadelphia of "**Mississippi Burning**" - for his alleged role in the 1964 lynching of three civil rights workers. You can argue that the 80-year-old **Killen** shouldn't be the only white man facing murder charges in the case, but the fact that there is a trial is testament to the work of a once-unimaginable coalition of black, white and Choctaw Mississippians, formed specifically to help purge the state of its racist past.

But when the U.S. Senate sought to speak to that past, with a resolution of apology for the body's failure to enact an anti-lynching law, missing from a list of 85 sponsors were **Mississippi** Sens. Trent Lott and Thad Cochran.

OK, maybe I wasn't too surprised by Lott's nonparticipation. After all, he is the guy who was stripped of his party leadership role three years ago for opining that America would have been better off if Strom Thurmond had won his overtly segregationist 1948 presidential campaign.

But Cochran, though conservative, is thought to be less wildly right-wing than Lott - what you might call a **Mississippi** moderate. So why was his name absent from the list of sponsors? "I'm not in the business of apologizing for what someone else did or didn't do," he told me. "I deplore and regret that lynching occurred and that those committing them weren't punished, but I'm not culpable. Would you apologize for an editorial written by The Washington Post 50 years ago that you disagreed with?" The trouble with Cochran's explanation is that he signed on as a co-sponsor of bills apologizing for the government's treatment of Native Americans and for the World War II internment of Japanese-Americans.

Why did he find it so difficult to apologize for the Senate's failure to deal with anti-lynching legislation?

More than 4,700 lynchings took place in the years between 1882 and 1968, according to Tuskegee Institute, with **Mississippi** leading the pack with 581. The resolution was symbolic. So, in many ways, is the action that has brought **Killen** to trial 41 years after the fact. But it is a powerful symbol of a desire to atone not just for the crime of murder but for the attitude that, for many white Mississippians, made lynching acceptable.

It is important that it isn't the feds, but Mississippians, who have made this trial happen. Former **Mississippi** Secretary of State Dick Molpus may have started the process with a speech of regret he made 16 years ago. That speech was followed by an interview of the mother of Andrew Goodman, one of the three slain civil rights workers, by a local newspaper.

Others involved in pushing the matter include former Gov. William Winter's Institute for Racial Reconciliation, the NAACP, the Medgar Evers Institute and scores of ordinary Mississippians chagrined by the state's racist reputation. Not very long ago, anyone who proposed such a coalition would have been visited by night riders.

Even now, it is well not to overestimate what is happening in the state. School segregation is widespread, thousands of whites having fled desegregated school systems for the so-called "seg academies." Racial fairness is still a dream. But there is movement. What was "**Mississippi Burning**" is, surprisingly often, **Mississippi** yearning.

They understand what seems to escape Thad Cochran: Institutions are more than their incumbents. **Mississippi**, like the U.S. Senate, is a continuing entity. If the entity believes it has erred, it isn't unreasonable that it apologize. Didn't Pope John Paul II apologize for the Holocaust? And to answer the senator's question: As an independent contractor for The Washington Post, I have no standing to speak for the newspaper. But surely a newspaper's editorial board could reasonably apologize for a 50-year-old opinion it now considers wrongheaded and offensive.

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LOAD-DATE: June 22, 2005