United States Senate Approves Resolution Apologizing for Slavery

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The U.S. Senate approved a resolution on Thursday apologizing for slavery and segregation of African-Americans, almost five months after Barack Obama was sworn in as the first black U.S. president.

While the Senate resolution acknowledged that an apology for centuries of wrongdoing could not erase the past, it said a "confession of the wrongs committed and a formal apology to African Americans will help bind the wounds of the nation that are rooted in slavery, and can speed racial healing and reconciliation, and help the people of the United States understand the past and honor the history of all people of the United States."

In an unusual step, the three-page resolution was read in its entirety in the chamber, where the first black senator, Hiram Revels of Mississippi, stepped onto the Senate floor about 139 years ago.

A man is silhouetted in the "Door of No Return" at Goree Island in Senegal, where African slaves were shipped out. Photo by Finbarr O'Reilly, Reuters.
However, the resolution is not without controversy. Some are upset by the last lines of the resolution that include a disclaimer: "Nothing in this resolution -- A) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or B) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States."

Democratic Senator Roland Burris, the lone African-American in the Senate, argued that the disclaimer should not prohibit future congressional action on the issue of reparations. Despite the concern, the resolution passed the Senate by voice vote.

Iowa Senator Tom Harkin noted that the Senate adopted resolutions apologizing to Native Americans, for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and for not enacting anti-lynching legislation -- but never slavery.

"A national apology by the representative body of the people is a necessary collective response to a past collective injustice," Harkin said on the Senate floor.