The Power of a Public Apology

An Australian prime minister’s remorse for his nation’s treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities provides a model for the United States.

By Aaron J. Hahn Tapper
Lorna Nungali Fejo was 4 years old when she was kidnapped by her government. Her family, who lived in an isolated desert village in the Australian outback, had heard that the authorities regularly stole Aboriginal children from their communities. They had dug holes into creek banks where kids could hide and practice how to stay motionless. Despite these efforts, one day, with help from an Aboriginal tracker, white “welfare men” showed up without warning and dragged off Lorna and her siblings and cousins, throwing them into the back of an open truck and stealing them from the only home they had ever known. Her mom frantically clung to the sides of the vehicle as it drove away. Lorna never saw her mother again.

Some three-quarters of a century later, on February 13, 2008, Lorna—by then a Warumungu elder known to her seven children, 23 grandchildren, and 14 great-grandchildren as Nanna Nungala—sat in the Great Hall of the Parliament House in Canberra next to other select members of the group known as the “Stolen Generations.” They were there to hear Australia’s new prime minister, Kevin Rudd, acknowledge that Australians had systematically dehumanized and degraded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and apologize. “We waited a long time for this,” she told The Sydney Morning Herald. “I never thought I’d live to see this day, but I’m here. I’m a survivor.”

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For Australia and its first peoples, Rudd’s historic apology was a long-awaited turning point. Widely embraced by Australians as an extraordinary act of contrition, it shifted the country’s discourse around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in important ways. For the United States, it epitomized the power of an honest
accounting of the past. Fifteen years later, though, it remains an example that no American leader has dared emulate. And though Australia’s approach provides a model for other nations, it is also a reminder that words—no matter how deserving or well received—are only the first step toward lasting justice.

A few days before the apology, Lorna sat with Rudd in person and recounted her traumatic childhood. “The whole reason that she told her story was because she wanted people to understand what the Stolen Generations were about,” her daughter Christine Fejo-King told ABC News. “The lasting impact that it had on the children who were taken, the families that were left behind, and the stain on this country.” Those who were forcibly removed have suffered higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, and health challenges. Rudd’s words recognized this collective trauma as fact, writing the Stolen Generations into Australia’s national biography.

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The speech was Rudd’s first official parliamentary act, greeted with watch parties in central squares in major cities, such as Sydney and Melbourne. “Rudd had the madness of courage,” Charles Passi, a former chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, told me.

An apology like the one Rudd offered is long overdue in the United States. In recent years, federal officials have twice formally apologized to American Indians on behalf of the nation. But the details of these apologies highlight the ways in which they fell short.

On September 8, 2000, while commemorating the 175th anniversary of the establishment of the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs, Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Kevin Gover delivered a speech owning up to the horrific abuses inflicted on the very communities the bureau was supposed to have protected. The agency had participated in the “ethnic cleansing” of American Indians, he said, and failed to prevent the “deliberate spread of disease … the use of the poison alcohol to destroy mind and body, and the cowardly killing of women and children”; it then “set out to destroy all things Indian.” But as heartfelt as the sentiment no doubt was, Gover was not speaking for President Bill Clinton in any official capacity.
Perhaps even more important, Gover is a member of the Pawnee Nation. Rudd told me that his apology worked in part because he is a “white, eighth-generation Australian male whose ancestors were criminals.” Gover, by contrast, is himself a member of the community that had been wronged.

On December 19, 2009, President Barack Obama signed an “Apology to Native Peoples of the United States” into law. Here, in theory, was the presidential apology the nation needed. But President Obama did not hold an event to mark the moment. The Senate sponsor of the bill, Sam Brownback of Kansas, read the statement aloud in a small ceremony five months later, and it received little news coverage.

It’s hard to escape the conclusion that this was intentional. The American public was not brought into the conversation before, during, or afterward. There was no national ceremony of any kind. Neither a U.S. president nor a major leader from Congress delivered the apology, nor did a representative of the administration even hold a press conference. In Australia, people pulled their cars to the side of the road to listen to Rudd’s apology. In the U.S., as Brownback later conceded, “nobody knows about it.”

The text was buried in Section 8113 of a Department of Defense Appropriations Act, placed in between a segment of the bill that designated money to the National Guard for a counterdrug policy and a provision requiring any government agency receiving funds by virtue of the act to submit a report thereafter. The act is 67 pages long, and the apology is on page 45. It didn't even merit a mention in the bill's table of contents. (In some ways, the apology echoed a 1993 resolution, signed by President Clinton, apologizing to Native Hawaiians, although that earlier resolution was passed as its own bill.)
An apology requires more than just a signature on a bill if it is to have an impact. The Australian apology had three basic elements: an admission of the wrongdoing, a demonstration of regret and remorse, and a commitment to forging a new future in which the wrongdoing would not be repeated. In the U.S., both the 2000 and 2009 apologies included all three components. Yet the latter apology also included the following closing sentence: “DISCLAIMER.—Nothing in this section—(1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or (2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.” That rider was attached to ensure that no one could bring a legal suit against the U.S. government for its maltreatment of Indigenous peoples, using antiseptic language that watered down the admission of guilt.

In Australia, a great deal of work remains to be done. On the tenth anniversary of Rudd’s apology, Richard Weston, a former CEO of the Healing Foundation, told The Guardian that 230 years of oppression remained “the root cause” of the “disparity between life expectancy” that “feeds into all of the social and health problems in our communities, like violence, like poor education outcomes, [and] poor employment outcomes.”

Rudd’s apology was a necessary start, but not a solution to these problems. “For a lot of people the apology was viewed as a finalisation of something,” Ian Hamm, a member of the Stolen Generations, said to The Guardian, “whereas for people in the Aboriginal community, particularly for stolen children, it was a beginning.” Rudd himself shares that view. Earlier this year, on the 15th anniversary of his apology, he
rated it both a success and a failure. “Let us have the honesty,” he said, “and the courage to acknowledge both.”

True progress for Indigenous peoples—in both the United States and Australia—requires reckoning with the past. The U.S. must confront its founding sins, including the genocide of Indigenous peoples, and use restorative justice to address them. Any solutions need to be shaped by Indigenous Americans themselves. But a national apology would be the first major step in finding a way forward.

Aaron J. Hahn Tapper is a professor of Jewish studies at the University of San Francisco and author of the forthcoming book, *We Are Sorry for Stealing Your Children and Killing Your People: Apologizing for the Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Australia and the United States.*