The Politics of Official Apologies

Intense interest in past injustice lies at the center of contemporary world politics. Most scholarly and public attention has focused on truth commissions, trials, lustration, and other related decisions, following political transitions. This book examines the political uses of official apologies in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. It explores why minority groups demand such apologies and why governments do or do not offer them. Melissa Nobles argues that apologies can help to alter the terms and meanings of national membership. Minority groups demand apologies in order to focus attention on historical injustices, the rectification of which, they argue, should guide changes in present-day government policies. Similarly, state actors support apologies for ideological and moral reasons, driven by their support of group rights, responsiveness to group demands, and belief that acknowledgment is due. Apologies, as employed by political actors, play an important, if underappreciated, role in bringing certain views about history and moral obligation to bear in public life.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The Turkish government's insistence on denying the Armenian genocide – specifically article 301 of Turkey's penal code, which authorities have used to interpret discussion of the genocide as an insult to "Turkishness" – has garnered a great deal of attention here in the United States and in Europe. The press, lawmakers, and political pundits present such Turkish insistence as excessive, an assault on free speech and creative thought, and, most seriously, an assault on truth itself. Indeed, in October 2006, the French Assembly passed a law that makes denial of the genocide a crime, presumably to counteract and highlight the wrong of Turkish historical and moral denial. (The law must still be approved by the French Senate and president.) The press writes sympathetically of Armenians' desire to have their stories told and history known.

If these collective reactions are to be believed, it is as if Turkey's behavior is somehow incomprehensible to Europeans and Americans. But continuing debates in France about the Algerian War, for example, or the deafening silence about the experiences of Native Americans tell another story. Of course, most countries' behaviors are far closer to Turkey's than they or we would care to admit. Governments and citizenries have many reasons to ignore or deny historical injustices, and they have long done so, in perhaps more subtle but no less effective ways than Turkey has. Like many aggrieved groups, Armenians have long asked for acknowledgment and even apology. Their demands are

often met with mixed reactions. Why would an apology be desired or regarded as necessary?

My desire to better understand and explain official apologies motivates this book. Skepticism about apologies is well understood. After all, apologies serve as indicators of moral codes, illuminating what is considered "right" and "wrong" in social behavior and interactions. Coming from politicians, is this basic quality of apologies not violated from the start? What could an apology mean or accomplish? Yet, on the other hand, skepticism about apology is also puzzling. We recognize the importance of apologies in our personal lives and interactions. We value acknowledgment of wrongdoing and expressions of remorse. As importantly, we make judgments about the worth of apologies, usually on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes, we judge an apology to be sincere, warranted, and helpful in resolving disagreement. In other instances, we judge an apology less than satisfactory, exacerbating a disagreement rather than helping to resolve it. There are, of course, important differences distinguishing apologies between individuals from those made by governments to a segment of their citizenry or to other governments. But all apologies share basic characteristics: They require judgments and reflection, both ideational and moral, on what the apologies are being asked for and on what the expected consequences of the apologies are. What purposes are they going to advance?

In this book, I argue that apologies are desired, offered, and given in order to change the terms and meanings of membership in a political community. Membership in democratic polities provides citizens with the basic political language of rights, obligations, and responsibilities. They have certain expectations about the proper relationships between government and citizenry, and citizens press their claims accordingly. Group claims toward governments may also be rooted in grievances, not just expectations. These two sources of claims are here related: Grievances are connected to violated expectations of just treatment and respect, if not full inclusion. Yet grievances may be addressed without an apology as such. They may well simmer and even fuel group demands, but this does not mean that groups will ask for an apology. Instead, groups may demand simply that governments attend to their concerns without mention of apology. Governments may pass laws and implement policies but never apologize. What is it, then, that makes apologies desirable? Apologies, I argue, help to bring history into the conversation, providing justification for political and policy changes

and reforms. Central to the addressing of contemporary grievances is the focus on the historical injustices that created the grievances. Apologies focus on a neglected past and demand that moral reflection be bought to bear and that some attempt at remedy be undertaken.

But, if I am right in my intuitions, then the question still remains, why would governments apologize? I argue that certain political elites may also judge the current situation in need of reform. Furthermore, for ideological reasons, they are supportive of minority group rights and are responsive to group demands and claims. These elites also express a certain guilt and sense of responsibility for righting wrongs. Sometimes, these political elites will themselves initiate offers of apology, although as often they apologize when pressured. On the other hand, political elites will not apologize when they do not agree with minority group demands, do not favor group rights, and do not think that the past provides a way forward. But whether political elites support or oppose apologies, political ideology and moral reflection drive their interpretations of history and its political and moral obligations. Neither money nor electoral prospects are as influential as is often speculated, precisely because lawmakers hold the most powerful cards. They may pay nothing, if they choose, and they often choose this course of action. Also, and relatedly, indigenous issues are of little electoral salience, especially in national elections. In short, my theoretical proposition makes the perhaps obvious claim that big ideas and moral judgments matter in political life. I should state, finally, that I am careful not to overstate what apologies do or can do. They do not by themselves effect direct changes in political, economic, and social arrangements. Rather, they provide justifications for reforms today that are grounded in acknowledgment of historical injustices. As important as I think that ideas and specifically apologies are, my theoretical claims and their anticipated outcomes are intentionally modest. Apologies, as employed by political actors, play an important if underappreciated part in bringing certain views about history and moral obligation to bear in public life.

The beginnings of this book came with the frontpage headlines of a 1998 *New York Times* article reporting that the Canadian government had apologized to its indigenous citizens for historical mistreatment and decades of abuse at residential schools. At the time, I was admittedly suspicious of the Canadian government's motivations and skeptical of the apology's likely outcomes. But at the same time, I was pleasantly surprised because I was well aware of the evident discomfort

in public, and much scholarly, discussion about U.S. slavery, Jim Crow racial segregation, and the widespread silence about the dispossession and treatment of Native Americans. I thought then, as I think now, that whatever else the apologies managed to accomplish, a discussion about those events would not and could not be a bad thing. This is not to suggest that I thought the histories produced would be any less contentious; however, an effort at inclusion and the courage to address deeply troublesome but fundamental facts about national histories seemed to be an undeniably positive development.

This project has benefited from the assistance of many people. I began initial fieldwork in August 1999, when I traveled to Australia. There, Dr. Jan "Jindy" Pettman, then director of the Centre for Women's Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, generously provided me a desk, computer, and access to the university's resources. Jan also introduced me to one of the centre's graduate students, Tikka Wilson, who was enormously generous with her time and knowledge. She assisted me by making valuable introductions and contributed to my understanding of Australia, as one copatriot to another. (Tikka, an American, now calls Australia her home.) She had been involved in Link-Up, a New South Wales community organization of Aboriginal Australians dedicated to reuniting persons separated from their families, communities, and culture by the state policy of child removal. Tikka kindly introduced me to members of that organization, thus enriching my research. In 2000, I traveled to Ottawa and Vancouver, Canada. In Vancouver, I met with professors David Elkins, Arthur Ray, and Paul Tennant, all of the University of British Columbia, who all gave generously of their time and expertise.

This book has also benefited from my participation in various fora where I have presented my work in various stages of development. Of these many gatherings, participation in the following have been especially influential in shaping my thinking and sharpening my ideas: In May 2001, I presented my first ideas at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) MacArthur Transnational Security Seminar. In February 2002, I participated in an interdisciplinary conference, "Apologies: Mourning the Past and Ameliorating the Present," organized by Elazar Barkan of the Claremont Graduate University. The conference, dedicated specifically to apologies, proved especially useful in highlighting to all what political science is best able to explain:

the political motivations and likely outcomes of apologies. In March 2005, I presented certain of my ideas at an interdisciplinary conference at Brown University, "Historical Injustices: Restitution and Reconciliation in International Perspective," where I learned and received helpful feedback from British and Australian scholars. Finally, although I had not yet embarked on this particular project, I knew that I was interested in issues of retrospective justice. During the 1998–9 academic year, I was fortunate to participate in a yearlong seminar series, "Retrospective Justice," organized by Professor Jon Elster of Columbia University. There I was first introduced, through papers and stimulating discussion, to especially useful ways of coherently thinking about and studying an increasingly important topic.

I am grateful for the valuable financial support, time, and, most important, intellectual engagement provided by my appointments in 2000–2001 as a Fellow at Boston University's now defunct Institute on Racial and Social Division, led by Professor Glenn Loury, and in 2003–2004 at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, led by Professor Drew Gilpin Faust. Finally, I extend my appreciation to Josh Cohen for useful discussion about and comments on earlier chapter drafts, and to two anonymous readers for their careful and constructive reviews.