

# Opinion

From the Libertarian Party

2600 VIRGINIA AVE., NW, SUITE 100  
WASHINGTON DC 20037  
PHONE: (202) 333-0008 EXT. 222

## Cry Out for Tuskegee Justice

BY STEVE DASBACH

An apology isn't enough — the victims of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments deserve *justice*.

And considering the seriousness of the crimes committed, justice should include criminal prosecution and jail time for the politicians, bureaucrats, and scientists who are responsible.

Yet when President Clinton met five living survivors of the government's secret syphilis experiment at the White House on Friday, he talked not of prosecution but of forgiveness. The Tuskegee victims and their families, he said, are the only ones who have the "power to forgive."

Maybe. But only Clinton's Justice Department has the power to prosecute, and the president should use it. If equal justice means anything, politicians and bureaucrats must be held to the same standard as any other American. If a private citizen conducted a gruesome medical "experiment" in which at least 100 people with a potentially lethal disease were left to die, he would be prosecuted for murder.

That's exactly what happened at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, starting in 1932. Government physicians lured 399 poor black men infected with syphilis into an experiment by promising them medical treatment and free meals.

Instead, the doctors left them to die, untreated, years after a cure was found. Why? So they could cold-bloodedly study the long-term effects of this ravaging disease. Before a newspaper exposed the crime in 1972, thus bringing the experiment to a halt, the victims unknowingly infected 40 wives, and 19 children contracted the disease at birth.

Can these politicians and bureaucrats — who treated innocent American citizens like laboratory rats — be tracked down and punished? Yes.

Keep in mind that this disgraceful experiment ended just 25 years ago. This means the scientists who conducted it may *still* be employed by the government. The bureaucrats who administered it may *still* have their jobs. The politicians who voted to fund this barbarous project may *still* be in office — and getting paychecks from taxpayers.

Why is there no public outcry?

Because sadly, Americans are getting used to the concept of prosecution-proof politicians. The ruling class in Washington, DC, blithely commits horrendous crimes, covers them up as long as possible, and when caught, apologizes under a cloak of anonymity and pays off the victims with tax money.

Last November, for example, Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary apologized and paid \$4.8 million to the families of 12 people whom government officials secretly injected with radioactive

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uranium and plutonium during Cold War experiments.

Only one of the 12 still survives, 73-year-old Mary Jean Connell of Avon, NY. She was originally admitted to a hospital in Rochester with a dietary problem — then government doctors secretly injected her with uranium salts. Autopsies on the victims revealed that the doses of radiation caused their bones to look “like Swiss cheese,” according to Raymond Heslin, an attorney for the plaintiffs.

O’Leary tried to gloss over the government’s role in the crime and side with its victims instead. In a cruel twist, she co-opted the language of Holocaust survivors. “*Never again*,” she told reporters. “Never again should tests be performed on human beings.”

In Germany, one reason such gruesome medical experiments never occurred again was the Nuremberg trials. Nuremberg was about prosecutions and prison terms, not payoffs. At Nuremberg, the guilty were hunted down, and hanged. Here they’re still in hiding. Nuremberg was about accountability, not apologies.

In March, the government apologized yet again when O’Leary’s successor, Federico Pena, paid \$6.5 million to the families of 17 more victims who were intentionally exposed to uranium and plutonium without consent.

Meanwhile, lawsuits continue to pile up from as many as 20,000 other Americans who are demanding compensation by the government for biochemical experiments conducted in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s.

Even children weren’t safe. The Defense Department has admitted that it subjected up to 500,000 Americans — including mentally disabled children — to secret radiation and other tests between 1940 and 1974.

On September 28, 1994, a General Accounting Office official, Frank C. Conahan, told a congressional subcommittee hearing that the government’s covert experiments included exposing Americans to nerve gas, blistering agents, biological weapons, and hallucinogenic drugs like LSD and PCP.

“Healthy adults, children, psychiatric patients, and prison inmates were used,” Conahan testified, and “in some of the experiments, university researchers exposed mentally disabled children to low doses of radiation.” Researchers failed to inform the children’s families about the nature of the experiments, he said, but “a university official later apologized for the use of children.”

Keep in mind: The experiments that he is talking about happened in *America*. They occurred *this* generation, ending just 23 years ago. And they’ve been documented before Congress — shattering the myth that atrocities can’t happen here.

Now it’s time to put an end to the myth that the individuals responsible for these atrocities can’t be prosecuted. It’s time for the American people to cry out for justice.

*Steve Dasbach is national chairman of the Libertarian Party.*

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