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Time to Honor Our Black Patriots

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The Black Patriots Memorial got a big boost recently when Essie Mae Washington-Williams, the daughter of the late Senator Strom Thurmond, agreed to become involved with the project. The memorial, to be built on a site between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, will honor the more than 5,000 black soldiers who helped win the American Revolution, along with the tens of thousands of men, women and children who fled bondage in response to five words in the Declaration of Independence -- "all men are created equal."

Williams agreed to help with the memorial's fundraising because she saw it as a continuation of the work of my aunt, Lena Santos Ferguson, the project's co-founder. In 1984 my aunt fought to be admitted to a Washington chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Her effort led to an amendment to the DAR bylaws barring discrimination. The DAR also was required to identify every black soldier who served in the Revolutionary War.

Williams's challenge now is to raise more than \$12 million to construct the memorial. But the project needs President Bush's help too. Under an agreement with Congress, construction on the memorial must begin by next October or the site could be lost. Because this memorial does not have living advocates to tell the story of the black patriots with the immediacy that touches donors, the nonprofit group that my aunt and I created needs help opening doors.

This administration could provide that help by creating a presidentially appointed commission with the authority to augment the foundation's work and raise funds privately to complete the memorial. This approach has been used before -- and successfully. Congress created a government entity to build the Korean War Veterans Memorial when a private effort proved inadequate. The U.S. Holocaust Museum also was spearheaded by a presidentially appointed panel and received several appropriations. The John Pershing memorial was built by a federal agency, as was the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial. Congress appropriated public funds to jump-start those projects. A case could be made that the black patriots deserve as much or more from a nation that forgot they had ever lived. Not only did they fight for our freedom and independence, they toiled as slaves without compensation or the protection of the Constitution.

Over a decade ago Congress declared the deeds of black soldiers of the American Revolution to be of "preeminent historical and lasting significance to the nation," which made the memorial eligible for a site on the Mall.

Williams is doing her part to make this memorial a reality, while perhaps undoing some of the harm that her father inflicted during the '50s and '60s -- before he came to understand that America is for "we the people."

In the mid-1980s, Thurmond, the former segregationist, co-sponsored the legislation authorizing the Black Patriots Memorial.

President Bush, whose party inherited the mantle of Thurmond and Lincoln, could heal racial wounds by resurrecting a defining history and showing that Americans are united as one nation based on principles that endure.

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