

Opinion: How to remember a stain on American history

Opinion by the Editorial Board

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A GUBERNATORIAL “pardon” is a poorly named mechanism to redress the terror deaths of Black lynching victims, conjuring as it does the idea of absolution in cases where guilt — which generally was never or poorly established in the first place — was beside the point. The indisputable crimes, and the irrefutable guilt, belong not to the victims of the lynchings but to their perpetrators, the mobs that killed with the active assistance or complicity of local officials and law enforcement.

So it struck some Marylanders as discordant when Gov. Larry Hogan (R) last Saturday granted pardons to 34 lynching victims, gruesomely murdered between 1854 and 1933. Still, Mr. Hogan, in using the mechanism available to him, transmitted an urgent and critical message: that these grisly acts of violence were loathsome episodes of injustice, and that the victims, their descendants and every other American deserve recognition of that plain fact.

No governor is empowered to hand down posthumous indictments of the killer mobs and their official accomplices who helped or stood idly by as African American men and boys were tortured, hanged, disfigured and dismembered. With his pardons, Mr. Hogan was seeking to provide a reminder and acknowledgment of what he called “these horrific wrongs,” roughly 40 of which occurred in Maryland.

Other states have sought to do the same and more, by one means or another. In Virginia, where mobs lynched more than 80 individuals, mainly Black men, in the decades after the Civil War, the state legislature two years ago expressed “profound regret” for those crimes. It is also documenting them online and with historical markers. In Maryland, an official body, the state Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is fleshing out the historical record.

The goal with these projects and acts of acknowledgment and contrition should be to inform and remind, loudly. For the sad truth is that the ghastly facts of nearly 6,500 lynchings between the Civil War and 1950 — their ubiquity in the South and elsewhere; the terror they transmitted; the impunity assumed by and conferred on perpetrators — are scarcely known by too many Americans. Nor have enough of our countrymen connected the dots between those 19th- and 20th-century extrajudicial killings, to use a too-polite term, and the ones carried out nowadays by law enforcement in episodes prolifically documented by video. Summary justice, or rather injustice, has been meted out in both cases, and in both cases there are those all too eager to excuse it on the grounds of the victims’ supposed transgressions, or their alleged failure to “comply.”

There cannot be enough reminders of this stain on American history. Historical markers, of the sort unveiled in Towson, Md., where Mr. Hogan announced his pardons, should memorialize the sites, details and victims of every lynching in the nation. Only by remembering and documenting that painful past, in all its shocking scale and senseless

depravity, can Americans fully assess the distance that must still be traveled to achieve real racial justice.

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