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Fort Snelling on the agenda

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This year's legislative session coincides with the sesquicentennial of our statehood, and the Minnesota Historical Society will make a bonding request to provide funds for revitalizing Fort Snelling. It is fitting then to examine this request in the context of the state's history. I believe it is time to reconsider the place of Fort Snelling as a historic landmark.

The location of Fort Snelling, high atop the bluffs at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, carries profound symbolic significance for different audiences. For most Anglo Minnesotans it represents, in the words of the Minnesota Historical Society, "the story of the development of the U.S. Northwest. While surrounded today by freeways and a large urban population, Fort Snelling was once a lonely symbol of American ambition in the wilderness." For the Dakota people it represents the coercive power that forced them from their ancestral homeland as well as the actual location of a concentration camp where many died in the harsh winter of 1862-63. Significantly, this site of genocide sits on sacred land for the Dakota that represents the source of creation. The Minnesota Historical Society might want to portray Fort Snelling as having once been an outpost of development in the wilderness, but this only reveals ignorance, shortsightedness and racism.

The decisions we make about Fort Snelling in this 150th anniversary year are consequential for the historic site, the Historical Society and the people of Minnesota. The genocide of the Dakota people is part of a larger story of violence and ethnic cleansing common to every state in the union. Anniversaries are useful for thinking about the past and learning from our mistakes. The decision of the Legislature whether to fund a project concerning Fort Snelling is a golden opportunity for Minnesota to take a leadership role in the nation in dealing with the legacy of the genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas. We can renovate the fort or we can imagine something better.

I propose that the state appropriate funds for the removal and reconstruction of Fort Snelling on more neutral ground and to turn the reconstructed site into the Minnesota Museum of Genocide. The original site would be turned into a state park in which the DNR and the Dakota communities of Minnesota, both federally recognized and non-federally recognized, would come to an agreement on the design and management.

If, in our 150th year, we refurbish Fort Snelling on sacred ground we will be demonstrating our ignorance of history as well as how far we have to go before we can all live together in peace and with respect. Before we can move on, we must first acknowledge and make restitution for the sins of the past. All of the wealth of Minnesota

was in an important way financed by the taking of lands from the First Nations at gunpoint. The least we can do after 150 years is to remove a concentration camp from the Dakota Garden of Eden and rebuild it as a monument to the living memory of the genocide that gave birth to our state and to suffering of other peoples who have also been victims of genocide.

Such an act will not make things right, but it would be a start and would give meaning to our sesquicentennial observance.

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