

Audible Originals presents:

Say You're Sorry

Hosted by Lux Alptraum

Episode 5: An American Apology

[intro music; electronic, thoughtful crescendo with guitar notes]

Lux Alptraum:

There are many ways to build a national identity. Countries create flags and compose national anthems; we tell stories about our collective history and invent a mythology of who we are as a people. And sometimes, even apologies can play a part in defining who we are as a nation, or at least who we'd like to be.

I'm Lux Alptraum, and this is *Say You're Sorry*, a show about public apologies.

October 3rd, 1995, was a momentous day in American history; the kind of day where, years later, everyone remembers exactly where they were and exactly how they felt, even if the date itself doesn't ring any bells.

[inquisitive electronic notes and percussion play in background]

[clip from [OJ Simpson trial](#)] "We the jury, in the above-entitled action, find the defendant, Orenthal James Simpson, not guilty of the crime of murder."

Yes, October 3rd, 1995, was the day of the OJ Simpson verdict. But that actually wasn't the only historic moment that took place that day. Something else happened — something you probably don't remember quite as well.

A few hours after the OJ Simpson verdict was delivered, Bill Clinton arrived at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC to celebrate the work of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments. As he accepted a nearly 1,000-page report compiled by the committee President Clinton said this:

***President Bill Clinton:** The United States of America offers a sincere apology to those of our citizens who were subjected to these experiments, to their families, to their communities. When a government does wrong, we have a moral responsibility to admit it. The duty we owe to one another to tell the truth, to protect our fellow citizens from excesses like these, is one we can never walk away from.*

Lux Alptraum:

Phil Caplan, who was the Special Assistant to the President for Cabinet Affairs, was with the president right after the speech.

Phil Caplan:

I got the privilege of walking back to the Oval Office with the president, just he and I together, surrounded by Secret Service and all that, and we chatted about it. And he felt it was very important that we did this. And he said to me, and I'll never forget, "This will prove to be an historical day in my presidency."

Lux Alptraum:

Those words were maybe a bit optimistic. When most people think of the Clinton presidency, this ceremony at the Mayflower Hotel isn't exactly what comes to mind. It's not even the most remembered Clinton apology.

But it still set a precedent for how America, as a nation, apologizes.

[uptempo electronic music]

When government officials issue an apology on behalf of a nation, they're doing something a little bit different from what you or I might be doing when we say the words "I'm sorry." A state apology isn't about the person standing at the podium. It's about the entire nation that they represent. Today, it's not that uncommon for a leader to issue an apology on behalf of their country. But the state apology is actually a pretty modern phenomenon. And not every country apologizes with the same frequency.

Dr. Juliette Schaafsma:

The US has actually offered a fairly large number of apologies for past wrongdoings. Canada has also offered quite a good number of apologies for past wrongdoings. Japan as well. Germany as well.

Lux Alptraum:

This is Dr. Juliette Schaafsma, a professor at Tilburg University who researches political apologies all over the world, from Israel to Australia. And she says there's one American president in particular who's especially apologetic.

Juliette Schaafsma:

Bill Clinton has offered quite a number of apologies for past wrongdoings.

Lux Alptraum:

During his tenure, Clinton apologized for the 1893 overthrow of Hawaii. He apologized to survivors of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. He apologized for America's inaction during the Rwandan genocide. He even explored the idea of apologizing for slavery. Some of those apologies were received well, while others were panned. But the apology we're talking about started with a journalist taking a trip to a New Mexico Air Force base in 1987.

Eileen Welsome:

I was working as a reporter at the *Albuquerque Tribune* and I was at the Air Force base. Kirtland Air Force Base is in Albuquerque.

Lux Alptraum:

That's Eileen Welsome, a long-time investigative journalist. In her reporting, she'd stumbled across some military documents that mentioned garbage dumps full of dead, radioactive animals. As an animal lover, she wanted to know more: Why were these animal carcasses radioactive? And what were they doing in Albuquerque? So she went back to the base to look at additional documents.

[contemplative electronic notes]

Eileen Welsome:

I went over to the base one day in late afternoon on a Friday to read them. And they escorted me into a basement area. And there was a huge '50s-style safe nearby, a walk-in safe with a big wheel that took two hands to turn. And I thought, "Wow, I wonder what's in there."

Lux Alptraum:

She never found out what was in that big safe. But she did discover something shocking. While carefully paging through a stack of decades-old scientific reports, reading stories about beagles that had grown deathly ill after being exposed to radiation, she spotted something weird.

Eileen Welsome:

My eye fell on a footnote and it made a reference to human beings that had been injected with plutonium. I jotted down the footnote. I closed my notebook. You know, I felt like I was doing something wrong, but I was not because they had left these reports for me to read. So I shut my notebook. I left.

It was a Friday afternoon. I went home. I was so blown away by this footnote that the next day, which was a Saturday, I remember really vividly, I went over to the library at the University of New Mexico and I started to look to try to find this report.

Lux Alptraum:

But the report wasn't at the library. It wasn't at any library. Eileen knew she was on to something big and she took the story idea straight to her editor.

Eileen Welsome:

He said, "Well, that's a really good story, Eileen, but you're the neighborhood writer." And I thought, "Well, okay. I'll just work on it in my spare time."

[contemplative electronic music continues throughout]

Lux Alptraum:

For six years, Eileen chipped away at the story; calling scientists, filing FOIA requests, paging through reams and reams of government documents.

Eileen Welsome:

Five, six o'clock tonight, seven, eight, nine, whenever I was done filing my stories for the day, I would take out that file. I would try to make a phone call. I'd look at it, read it, you know. I worked on it in my spare time.

Lux Alptraum:

Eventually, she managed to piece together a rough picture of what had happened. From 1945 through 1947, the US government injected 18 people with plutonium as part of a Manhattan Project study to determine the effects of the radioactive chemical on the human body. None of those people had consented to the experiment. They were treated as human guinea pigs, available to be used how the government saw fit, with no regard for their safety or wellbeing. But there was still one big question looming: Who were they?

Eileen Welsome:

My ultimate goal was to find these 18 people who had been injected with plutonium. But it seemed an impossible effort because they were known by code numbers only. I didn't know what the codes meant. The experiment had happened 50 years ago. Much of the information was classified. I knew in my heart that the patients were likely dead. But in my mind, I was envisioning them suffering like the beagles, you know, developing tumors, and radiation sickness, and death.

Lux Alptraum:

To find them, Eileen poured over her documents, looking for any spare clue she might have missed. And her big break came in 1992, five years after first starting on this story, when she was reviewing some documents she'd gotten from the Department of Energy for what felt like the 100th time.

Eileen Welsome:

And then one day I was reviewing the documents and I saw Italy, Texas in connection with one of the patients whose code number was CAL-3. And when I saw that, I mean, literally a light bulb went off in my head. I think I stood up.

Lux Alptraum:

Italy, Texas, is a small town that's not too far from Dallas. Eileen already knew that CAL-3 was an 80-year-old Black man whose leg had been amputated after it had been injected with plutonium. So she called up Italy's city hall.

Eileen Welsome:

I said, "I'm looking for a gentleman. He may have been a veteran. He's an African American who would be about 80 years old, who had his left leg amputated. And the lady said, "Oh, you're looking for Elmer Allen."

Lux Alptraum:

After five years of searching, Eileen finally had her first name: CAL-3 was Elmer Allen of Italy, Texas, a railroad porter.

Eileen Welsome:

Oh, my god. It was serendipity. It was like a miracle. It's hard to describe it. It was... I felt a moment of pure joy.

Lux Alptraum:

Unfortunately, Elmer Allen had died the year before, so Eileen was never able to talk to him personally. But she did manage to connect with Elmer's wife, Fredna, and his daughter, Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell.

Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell:

My mother called me one day and she said a young lady called me from Albuquerque, New Mexico and, "I don't know what she's talking about. Will you talk to her?" And she gave me Eileen Welsome's number at the *Albuquerque Tribune*. And from that point, she started sharing information with me that sounded bizarre, but she had enough factual information that I could say that was true. So, I talked with her and that's how it all started.

Lux Alptraum:

Elmerine and Fredna helped Eileen learn more about the man she'd known only as CAL-3. They told Eileen how he'd grown up in Texas, wanting to escape from the segregated South; how at the age of 29 he'd moved to San Francisco and begun working as a railroad porter. And they told her how his life was forever altered seven years later, when a doctor at the University of California hospital diagnosed him with bone cancer in his leg. At the time, amputation was one of the best ways to treat bone cancer — but for Elmer, losing a leg would mean losing his livelihood.

And then, someone at the facility decided Elmer was an excellent candidate for a plutonium injection.

[soft electronic notes playing in the background]

Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell:

I feel the doctors made my dad think that it was going to be something that could save his leg, keep it from being amputated. He had... I was like three years old; my brother was six months old. He had two little children. He was 36 years old.

And my dad had a good job. They thought they had it made. But they were talking about amputating his leg. He would have done anything to save his leg.

Lux Alptraum:

But three days after the injection, Elmer Allen's leg was surgically removed and his career as a railroad porter was unceremoniously brought to an end. He returned home to Texas. His only additional contact with the Manhattan Project came in 1973, when he was brought to Rochester, New York, for a follow-up study. The researchers who invited Elmer to travel across the country told him they were interested in learning more about the treatment he'd received for his bone cancer. No one said anything about plutonium.

Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell:

My dad was tracked 'til the day he died. There's a letter that I'm looking at right now that came from Dr. David Williams in Waxahachie, Texas, directly from his file drawer, from the Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago, the Center for Human Radiobiology, that's asking to note... they left a telephone number to be called should my dad show terminal signs at any time because they wanted to see if they could harvest his body parts.

Lux Alptraum:

Elmer Allen was the first name Eileen identified, but he wasn't the last. Over the next year, she uncovered the identities of four more subjects. CAL-1 became Albert Stevens, a Bay Area house painter. HP-3 was Eda Schultz Charlton, a housewife. HP-6 was John Mousso, a handyman. HP-9 was Fred Sours, the supervisor of a small town outside of Rochester.

According to the scientists who'd selected them, these were all people on the verge of death when they were injected with plutonium. But just like Elmer Allen, many of them lived for decades after they unwittingly became test subjects.

It had taken years of work and countless sleepless nights, but Eileen finally felt like she was getting somewhere. And her editor realized that this wasn't just a story; it was a *big* story. In November 1993, the *Albuquerque Tribune* published a 45-page exposé under the headline "The Plutonium Experiment." And people all around the world started talking about what Eileen had uncovered. Including some very important people in Washington, DC.

[clip from [Hazel O'Leary press conference](#):] "What I've read about the informed consent that the individuals had before they were subjected to these experiments lead me to understand, on the facts as they have been presented, that certainly by standards of today, it is apparent that informed consent could not have taken place.

Lux Alptraum:

This is Hazel O'Leary. When Eileen's story came out, she was the Secretary of Energy. And when she read it, she knew she had to do something. Hazel's predecessors had used the Cold War effort to justify scores of atrocities, many of them at the expense of America's most vulnerable citizens, including low-income, Black, and disabled people. As the first Black person and the first woman to serve as Secretary of Energy, Hazel was determined to undo that damage. As a first step, she started declassifying Cold War documents and releasing them to the public.

Phil Caplan:

This was early in the Clinton administration. We wanted to do the right thing and Hazel did do the right thing by releasing those records. And doing more the right thing would be to make it a more comprehensive effort.

Lux Alptraum:

That's Phil Caplan again. In order to make that more comprehensive effort happen, Phil and Hazel crafted a plan to go beyond just declassifying documents and holding press conferences. Within a few months, the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments had been created, headed up by bioethicist Dr. Ruth Faden.

Ruth Faden:

It was very clear from the beginning that a large part of what we could do for people was listen to them tell their stories and validate their experiences. We saw that responsibility as extremely important and almost sacred.

[soft electronic notes playing in the background]

Lux Alptraum:

The committee knew that the Cold War experiments extended beyond those eighteen people who'd been injected with plutonium. The question was, how far beyond? To find out, the committee opened their doors to anyone who might have been exposed to radiation by the government.

Here's Elmerine testifying before Congress:

[Elmerine Whitfield](#): On July 18th, 1947, three doctors and a nurse entered Ward B at the University of California hospital in San Francisco and injected plutonium into my father's left leg. Three days later, the leg was amputated. His hospital chart states that the limb was sent to pathology and radiological study. Elmer Allen was my father.

And here's Gerry Mousso, the nephew of radiation experiment victim HP-6, whose real name was John Mousso.

***Gerry Mousso:** I am Gerry Mousso from Rochester, New York. I am here to tell you about John Mousso, my uncle, who was one of the eighteen people injected with plutonium by government scientists at four different locations throughout the country in the mid-1940s. The injections were given without knowledge or consent of the people involved.*

Lux Alptraum:

These public testimonies were just the beginning. Thanks to the Department of Energy's Openness Initiative, the committee was able to access previously classified documents that outlined the government's participation in these radiation experiments. And they learned that this went way, way beyond the 18 people that Eileen had identified. In fact, there had been 4,000 government-affiliated radiation experiments.

There were women who'd been given drinks containing radioactive iron during pregnancy. Cancer patients who'd been given radiation therapy their doctors knew would not help them. People who'd lived downwind of places where the government had released radioactive material into the air. Veterans who'd stood and watched atomic bombs go off, unaware that the potential damage to their retinas was just the beginning of the danger to their health.

For Ruth, the most heartbreaking story took place at the Fernald School, a Massachusetts institution that housed developmentally disabled boys and a handful of orphans. The school was the site of a nutrition study that used radioactive trackers to assess whether nutrients in fortified foods were actually being absorbed into the body. As part of the study, the boys were fed radioactive oatmeal every morning.

Ruth Faden:

The boys that were enrolled in the study were told that they were now part of a science club. I choke up whenever I bring that anecdote to mind. It had almost, like, Dickensian elements

Lux Alptraum:

And again, the Fernald School was just one of thousands of experiments the committee eventually uncovered. And with all that information, they were tasked with figuring out what to do.

As the weeks wore on, it became clear to everyone on the committee that the victims of these experiments deserved an apology. And in their final report, they made a number of recommendations for how that apology should be delivered.

But the final call on apologizing was in someone else's hands.

[soft electronic notes playing in the background]

Phil Caplan:

I recall the briefing in the Oval Office before the event where we talked about it. And I recall the president being very emotional about it, and that it was the right thing to do, and that he was glad that this is what he was doing.

Lux Alptraum:

That's Phil Caplan again. He helped coordinate the ceremony where President Clinton gave his apology. But the actual speech was written by David Shipley.

David Shipley:

With Bill Clinton, your job as a speechwriter, I quickly found out, you know, was to be as simple as possible because his oratorical gifts were so significant that really all he needed was a framework. You could give him, like, eight different words and he would weave a speech together from that.

Lux Alptraum:

David drew inspiration for the speech from a number of sources, including the Hippocratic Oath. And then he injected a bit of his own personal insight into the apology.

David Shipley:

The apologies that tend to work for me, when I feel apologized to, is when someone has acknowledged responsibility and has not tried to shift it.

[quiet "I'm Sorry" plays within soft music]

Lux Alptraum:

Over the course of several days, the speech went through eight drafts, the language changing slightly with each revision. In the earliest draft, dated October 1st, 1995, the apology comes from President Clinton personally, with the text reading, "Taking my place in the chain of generations, let me say that I am sorry on their behalf."

By the third draft, someone's taken issue with the idea that the president, himself, is the one apologizing. The phrase "I take upon myself" is circled with an all-caps "NO!" written beside it in the margins. "Government owes an apology for these past acts," is offered up as an explanation.

This is one of the defining qualities of the state apology; they're not supposed to be about the individual delivering them. They're about how the nation, as a whole, responds to the ugly parts of its history. And as a result, they're inherently collective.

It took Eileen Welsome to raise awareness of the harm, Hazel O'Leary to take initial responsibility for it, survivors and their loved ones to testify about what they'd experienced, the members of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments to figure out the extent of the atrocities, the president's team to decide that they did want to apologize, and David Shipley to figure out how to express the nation's remorse. Each of these people played a part in moving the apology forward, devoting weeks, if not years, of their lives to the cause.

And finally, on October 3rd, 1995, 50 years after government-funded doctors began injecting plutonium into unwitting research subjects, and two years after Eileen Welsome had published the names of these victims in the *Albuquerque Tribune*, President Clinton issued that long-overdue apology.

President Bill Clinton: So today, on behalf of another generation of American leaders, and another generation of American citizens, the United States of America offers a sincere apology to those of our citizens who were subjected to these experiments, to their families, to their communities.

[soft, uplifting orchestral music plays]

Lux Alptraum:

For many of the survivors and their descendants, watching the president of the United States acknowledge the pain and hardship they and their loved ones had endured was deeply meaningful. Gerry Mousso, the nephew of John Mousso, one of the 18 people injected with plutonium, had spent years advocating for the families of these victims.

Gerry Mousso:

I thought it was an excellent process in that the president and some of his key cabinet members were involved in this in an intensive way. That ended up with some great recommendations to prevent this type of thing from happening in the future.

Lux Alptraum:

At the ceremony, Gerry was moved to see how many powerful people had come out to honor his uncle and other radiation experiment victims. And there was Gerry, in the front row, sitting right next to Clinton himself.

Gerry Mousso:

It was typical Bill Clinton. He was masterful, a masterful person as far as communications is concerned. Even his grimaces were orchestrated to help him get across this message. I remember him biting his lower lip when he apologized to us. He was very sincere. I think it sort of put a capstone on the whole experience.

Lux Alptraum:

The advisory committee members were in the room too. Here's how Susan Lederer, a historian who served on the committee, remembers the moment.

Susan Lederer:

It was very powerful when the president spoke. And also, I mean, at that point, I didn't realize he was going to offer this general apology, so it was all the more striking for that. And so, the recognition that the government was taking responsibility for what had been done seemed to me to offer the promise that people could have more trust in government agencies.

Lux Alptraum:

Other people watched the apology from afar. Eileen Welsome, the reporter whose Pulitzer Prize-winning story started this whole process, opted not to attend the ceremony. She worried that attending would seem too self-congratulatory.

Eileen Welsome:

I sat in my living room by myself, cross-legged, right where I'd put much of the story together and I watched him. *[clip repeating a portion of Clinton speech]*

And I'll never forget it. I was glad I was in the privacy of my living room watching this. It was the perfect spot for me because I think I would have burst out in tears. It was such an emotional moment that I was glad I was by myself.

Lux Alptraum:

Watching the speech at home on CSPAN, she was struck by hearing the President of the United States say that these experiments were wrong.

Eileen Welsome:

I thought, "That is exactly what I thought in that basement so many years ago when I saw that footnote. I thought this was wrong." And so for me to hear it coming out of the lips of the President of the United States. It was so humbling.

Lux Alptraum:

But not everyone feels that way.

Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell:

Clinton's apology was a joke to me.

Lux Alptraum:

That's Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell again, the daughter of Elmer Allen. What she saw unfolding at that ceremony was politicians being politicians; making fancy speeches and grand statements that didn't have any relation to her actual life.

Clinton may have stood up at a podium and professed his deep regret, but that wasn't nearly enough.

Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell:

My mother literally believed what he said, that he was going to offer an apology to all of the victims of the Manhattan Project. She died waiting for her letter of apology. She never got it.

Lux Alptraum:

Elmer Allen was the one who'd been injected with plutonium. But his wife, Fredna, had been hurt by the Manhattan Project doctors as well.

Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell:

The fact that she could not read through what these doctors were doing, made her look foolish. She said, "I should have asked more questions." And the fact that she lived with this man who was being duped by these scientists and these doctors, and whatever they told her, she believed. She was embarrassed. And I think the apology would have made her feel a little bit less guilty.

Lux Alptraum:

For Fredna, an apology from Clinton didn't mean a nationally broadcast speech. It meant an apology from Clinton himself. And she expected that apology to be personally delivered.

Elmerine Allen Whitfield Bell:

Somebody called my mother from some TV station in Dallas and said, "We're going to ask the president if he might even stop by your house to give you an apology." My mother was having me get her all spiffed up and make sure the house was ready for him to come. I'm going, "Mamma, don't do this to yourself. He's not going to do that." But he never even sent a letter of apology. So it was just a political ploy. He had to say something.

[soft electronic notes playing in background]

Lux Alptraum:

So which was it? Was Clinton's apology a sincere effort to rebuild trust in the American government, or just a politician's attempt to distract the public from the country's horrific crimes? There's really no correct answer to that question.

Juliette Schaafsma:

Political apologies are offered most of the time by people who were not involved in the harm, who were not responsible for the harm. And they do it on behalf of a state that's not even a person, you know. It's an institution, so it's unable to experience any emotions.

Lux Alptraum:

That's Dr. Juliette Schaafsma again.

Juliette Schaafsma:

So you know, that's, of course, a problem of political apologies; how to convey sincerity when you're not responsible and you can't express or can't experience any remorse or guilt. How do you do that? How do you convey sincerity?

Lux Alptraum:

As many people as it takes to craft a state apology, there are even more folks who get to hear the apology and decide if it actually meets their needs. And most of the time, they don't all agree.

Juliette Schaafsma:

What you often see in apologies is that countries will use the metaphor of the book. They'll talk about those dark chapters in the past, those dark pages in our country's history. And now is the moment where we are going to turn that page and we can now close the book of the past.

Lux Alptraum:

But not everyone wants an apology to close a book.

Juliette Schaafsma:

For a lot of the victims, we're at the beginning of something. And that's also why you see that in a lot of countries, people are disappointed in the apologies that have been offered because they expected more.

Lux Alptraum:

Clinton thought that this apology would be a marquee of his presidency. I probably don't have to tell you that it wasn't. Although the committee's recommendations ultimately strengthened protections for human research subjects and led to the establishment of the National Bioethics Advisory Committee, the apology they'd pushed for got very little attention. The OJ Simpson verdict bumped the story off the front pages of newspapers. Within days, it had largely been forgotten.

But there was one group that remembered what happened at the Mayflower Hotel. The survivors of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, a group of Black men who'd spent decades unwittingly enrolled in a study of the progression of untreated syphilis. The US government had already paid them a settlement, but most survivors thought that wasn't enough. And when they saw the apology Clinton offered to radiation victims, it inspired them to campaign for an apology of their own.

A year and a half later, in May 1997, President Clinton apologized to the survivors of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. This apology wasn't offered at a hotel, but in the East Room at the White House itself.

President Bill Clinton: The legacy of the study of Tuskegee has reached far and deep, in ways that hurt our progress and divide our nation. We cannot be one America when a whole segment of our nation has no trust in America. An apology is the first step and we take it with a commitment to rebuild that broken trust.

Lux Alptraum:

Just a few years earlier, there had been open debate about whether the American government could be expected to apologize for its role in unethical human experimentation. Now, it was a settled question. The Cold War radiation experiments and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study weren't just regrettable moments from the past that the nation had moved on from. They were atrocities that the American government had perpetrated and that the American government needed to set right.

[soft electronic notes]

Flags and national anthems show us what a country wants to be recognized for. History books tell us the way that nations want to remember the past. And state apologies tell us a great deal about their nation's priorities, revealing whose pain is valued, whose problems are taken seriously, and who is deemed worthy of receiving an apology from the government.

America isn't always apologetic. Bill Clinton really was a standout in that department, for better and for worse. And the apologies America issues don't always go over well or even address the root of the problem. But a country that is willing to apologize is a country that sees itself as responsible for the crimes of its past. And each moment of recognition opens the door for others, just like the radiation apology paved the way for an apology to the survivors of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

In America, apologies are one of the few tools we have to reckon with the legacy of cruelty that's etched into our nation's founding. Because apologies actually do something far more powerful than close a book or turn a page. They help update our national history to reflect a more complete understanding of our past.

[outro music; uptempo electronic percussion with guitar]

Say You're Sorry was created by me, Lux Alptraum.

This episode was written and hosted by Lux Alptraum, produced by Siona Peterous. Editing by Candace Manriquez Wrenn. Sound design and mixing by Ariana Martinez. Our theme music is by Michael Aquino. Episode art by Augusto Zambonato.

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