

Reparations, Or The Movement for Public Accountability for the African American Holocaust*

Late one afternoon, in May 2003, a California State University history professor received a phone call that he had long been expecting. The university, he was told, could no longer honor the terms of a scholarship that his family had established over a decade before to benefit African Americans. Over the years, he had received other messages from individual recipients reporting how the scholarship had transformed their lives. But the people of California had spoken in Proposition 209, a statewide ballot initiative designed to end Affirmative Action. He was informed that under its terms, in the name of "equality," state-administered scholarships designated specifically for African American are no longer allowed.

Meanwhile, in Florida, state-funded scholarships have been established for certain African Americans as a partial indemnity for past injuries suffered at a place called Rosewood. These scholarships are not "preferential treatment" but rather are part of a "reparations" property settlement. Violations of the 14th Amendment's mandate for "equal protection of the laws" occurred at Rosewood, and there is a debt to be paid.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic and racial diversity is a profoundly promising feature of American life. Realization of its promise, however, is blocked by deep resentments caused by past injustices. The natural resentment of victimized parties is exacerbated by the basic lack of understanding on the part of the dominant white community that continues to behave in ways that blame victims for what is in fact a matter of deep-seated societal disease.

Many groups have stories of past injuries. Full healing can never occur until all are genuinely heard and responded to in appropriate ways. One of the most horrific examples involves African-American slavery and the racial segregation that continued long after that institution's formal demise. The modern Reparations Movement may provide a stimulus toward deeper reflection about the past, which might lead to genuine repentance on the part of the white majority. If it does so, it may contribute to the reconciliation of long mutually alienated groups.

* This paper was written by members of the Reflections Committee of Progressive Christians Uniting, working in conjunction with regional African American leaders of the Reparations Movement who organized and led a town hall meeting on reparations at Los Angeles's First A.M.E. Church on Saturday, May 31, 2003.

II THE PRINCIPLE OF REPARATIONS

If past habits of collective wrongdoing are to be broken, there must be accountability for such actions. First must come a constructive public discussion of troublesome issues. When done properly, airing of unresolved grievances eventually leads to a meaningful settling of accounts. When addressed successfully, long-standing festering social wounds can be healed; human separation and hostility can be replaced with reconciliation and social integration. Any meaningful settling of such accounts commonly involves public apologies, memorializing with public monuments, and forms of recompense, whether as monetary payments, property transfers, and/or awards of compensatory actions of various sorts.

Knowledge of many past collective wrongs has been effectively erased by the sands of time. Their evils are left unrecorded in the pages of history and their memory no longer has a place in the conscious mind. Regarding forgotten past evils, nothing can be done. With some evils still remembered and documented in modern records, given the statute of limitations, the passage of time may have put them beyond legal recourse. Yet within families, communities, and nations, memories of known wrongs left unattended easily fester becoming breeding grounds of hatred and continuing human separation. While beyond legal remedy, this category of collective transgressions may still be addressed by means of creative legislation designed to heal past injuries.

The names given to movements organized to rectify these past injustices are varied—"redress," "reconciliation," and "reparations" are some of the terms that have been used. Reparations is the word used by the African American movement for a public accounting of slavery and its aftermath. This movement talks in terms of debts owed both by American governments at all levels and by corporations that became unjustly enriched at African-American expense. These debts were incurred primarily because of an unholy chronology of related events—(1) the kidnapping of Africans from their ancestral homelands, (2) the deadly transportation of these captives across the Atlantic, (3) the systematic deculturalization that occurred after their arrival on American soil, and (4) the physical and psychic damage done over many centuries by means of deliberate and conscious exploitation. Not only was the labor of African Americans taken without recompense, but also their natural right to exist as full human beings was violated over multiple generations.

These past actions are not over and "done." The tragic devastation left by past depredations continues to foul socio-economic conditions of many of the living descendants of American slaves. This devastation is compounded by the incomprehension of many Euro-Americans and their

continuing prejudice and discriminatory practices. The resulting economic and psychological wreckage left unattended negatively affects the lives of all Americans in multiple ways, making reparations a matter in which the entire American community has a stake.

The individual kidnappers, slave-ship owners, masters, and past corporate heads are all long dead. But some economic enterprises that profited from this brutal exploitation are still extant. Likewise, governments (local, state, and federal) that assisted these interests are culpable morally, if not always legally. The movement for black reparations seeks to make these living entities accountable for their actions.

The Reparations Movement also addresses racial mistreatments that occurred after slavery's formal end. Until relatively modern times, systematic white terror inflicted enormous damage upon specific African American communities. Additionally, black people at large suffered during many post-emancipation generations from practices of economic discrimination sanctioned in law (local, state, and federal). People still living today were directly affected by these actions. At least one commentator highlights the post-slavery treatment of African Americans as generating the strongest case for reparations. Robert K. Fullinwider of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland writes:

Had the federal government done nothing after 1865 except vigorously protect the civil and voting rights of blacks, the legacy of slavery would have faded considerably if not wholly by now through the industry of blacks themselves. That the legacy still persists owes much, if not all, to the post-Civil War oppression of African Americans and it is this wrong that offers the most direct and salient basis for reparations.¹

Large numbers of African Americans born in the modern era suffer from the multiple negative effects of this ugly history: unending poverty is reflected in abandoned families, juvenile criminal gangs, lack of meaningful employment for adults, and debilitating dependencies of many sorts. Brutal and widespread racism conditioned these modern realities. However, in the minds of many outside commentators (principally white) these negative results are today only the consequences of individuals making bad choices. One important objective of the Reparations

¹ Robert K. Fullinwider, "The Case for Reparations," *Philosophy & Public Policy* 20 (Summer 2000): p. 6.

Movement is to create a serious national discussion challenging this diversionary explanation of persistent social ills by seeking actual monetary recompense for damages done to an entire community. For many African Americans, the Reparations Movement constitutes the civil rights movement of the new millennium.

The subject of this essay concerns reparations for African Americans, but this topic is closely related to the issue of reparations for the continent of Africa itself. While being represented by different organizations, both movements are concurrent and are cooperative with one another. Debt cancellations for financially burdened African nations constitute the most immediate objective for the Africa Reparations Movement. The most pressing issue for the Reparations Movement focusing upon the United States is somewhat different. The latter seeks to confront America with the idea that indeed a debt remains to be paid to the descendants of former American slaves. First and foremost, the Reparations Movement seeks a public discourse on the issue, and a government study concerning the facts. Both should lead to a sense of publicly acknowledged accountability for the damage caused and the deep-seated social ills that remain. Apology, atonement and reparatory compensation in some form should follow. This should provide the necessary conditions for genuine reconciliation.

III. WHY REPARATIONS NOW?

Although the modern Reparations Movement has roots going back to the nineteenth century, the successes of several modern non-black groups have greatly encouraged it. Compensations for Americans of Japanese Ancestry (AJAs) and European Jews oppressed during World War II are key examples of similar movements that have succeeded in being heard. In 1988, the various branches of the United States government agreed that each AJA surviving the “Relocation” experience of World War II, which had imprisoned American citizens without due process of law and equal protection of the laws solely for their Japanese ancestry, was due a federal compensatory grant of \$20,000, amounting to a total expenditure of \$1.2 billion dollars. Over the last fifty years, several European governments have acknowledged their complicity in the Holocaust of World War II and have consented to payments of many billions of dollars to the victims.

The witness of the AJA struggle for “redress” has inspired many black activists. Johnita Scott Obadele, writing for N’COBRA (National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America) has written: Americans of Japanese Ancestry explained “the unquenchable need to have their suffering acknowledged and compensated even if the compensation is more symbolic than substantial. Because their suffering had been recognized, they felt recognized and no longer ashamed. Psychologists

have long pointed out the importance of an apology in the healing process.”²

Other developments also have stirred the Reparations Movement in modern times. One of these involves the retreat of Affirmative Action. While a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2003 has supported *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), upholding the use of race as one factor in choosing among qualified applicants for admission to public universities, several hostile state initiative propositions (beginning with California’s Prop. 209) have effectively outlawed affirmative action in certain states. Although only California, Washington, and Florida have outlawed affirmative action, the status of affirmative action in other states (such as Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi) has been marginalized under the withering attacks of affirmative action’s opponents.

Within the African American community, some commentators regard Affirmative Action as one aspect of reparations and therefore not separate from it. Others emphasize the differences in tone between Affirmative Action, which is often attacked as preferential treatment, and reparations, which cannot be labeled as such. Reparations is simply a debt due to a community that has been injured. As one legal scholar has noted: “Under reparations, blacks more readily may position themselves as creditors seeking payment of an overdue debt, rather than as racial supplicants seeking an undeserved preference.”³

The Reparations Movement is a grass-roots effort with both a legislative and judicial thrust. Pressure from community activism is intended to influence both legislators and jurists at the local, state, federal and international levels. Several congressional bills, state resolutions, and city ordinances regarding reparations have already been proposed, and many legal cases have been filed.

When the Reparations Movement heads into the courtroom, it is likely to be seeking monetary damages from specific legal entities. Some corporations are potentially liable in reparations lawsuits. The Mobile & Girard Railroad (now part of Norfolk Southern) was originally constructed in part by slave labor. Other modern railroad corporations, including the Union Pacific, are similarly liable. Some of these firms are held to account not by actions that they themselves initiated but rather because of their subsequent acquisition of firms that once did engage in offensive practices. Numerous financial and insurance companies still in operation once conducted business with the slave-owning interest and profited from

² Johnita Scott Obadele, “Reparations: Linking Our Past, Present, and Future,” <http://www.ncobra.com>, p. 2.

³ Robert Westley, “The Case for Black Reparations,” <http://academic.udayton.edu/race>, p. 5.

such transactions. J.P. Morgan, Chase Manhattan, Aetna, and New York Life are all singled out as enterprises in this category. Harvard, Yale, Brown, Princeton, and the University of Virginia were all endowed early on by wealthy slave owners, putting these leading universities on reparations lists. Well-known trial lawyers, such as Johnnie Cochran and Dennis Sweet, have signed on for these efforts.

A 1995 case entitled *Cato v. United States*, wherein the Reparations Movement sought \$100 million dollars in damages from the United States government for preserving and protecting the institution of slavery throughout early American history, resulted in failure. A subsequent case on behalf of black farmers discriminated against by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in recent years has successfully resulted in a one-billion-dollar settlement. The Reparations Movement intends to use a variety of tactics to apply pressure on corporations that became unjustly enriched by means of slavery. Pension funds and other big institutional investors will be lobbied to disinvest themselves of companies that benefited from slavery. Customers will be encouraged also to boycott these companies, unless the latter first acknowledge their accountability and provide acceptable settlements. Potential mergers will be opposed on the grounds that they will stain acquiring corporations with an accountability that might otherwise be avoided. African American job recruits will also be encouraged to shun employment offers from offending corporations. And, of course, formal suits involving these companies may also be brought to trial.

IV. THE HISTORICAL GROUNDING

The first African involuntary laborers arrived in British North America in 1619. As the British colonists then had no law concerning slavery, the Dutchmen bringing blacks to the Jamestown settlement sold them as indentured servants. Within two generations, a mixture of both greed and white racial preference transformed most black Americans into slaves in perpetuity. Colony by colony, legislation was enacted formally recognizing the institution.

The slave system as it existed throughout the New World encouraged raiding and kidnapping on a massive scale within Africa itself to feed a transatlantic trade renowned for its methodical brutality. European labor demands in the Western Hemisphere encouraged Africans to capture other Africans. Arab slave traders were also involved. Americans played prominent roles in transporting captives across the Atlantic. Slavery had a long history before Europe's "discovery" and exploitation of the Western Hemisphere. But this latter event heightened a tight focus upon Africans as slaves as never before.

New England slave ships bound for the Americas were crammed with as many persons as possible, with full knowledge that these sub-human conditions would produce many deaths during the Middle Passage. At voyage's end, the most physically fit, those who had survived the terrible ordeal, were sold as chattel. Under the complete control of white masters, imported Africans coming from different regions were commonly separated from others who shared their language and culture. Employing the old adage of "divide and conquer," the master commonly organized his slave community to ensure that his presence provided the only thing that all of his slaves held in common. Most importantly, within the slave culture the power of the master was complete. Biological fathers within slave marital unions had none of the traditional authority belonging to fathers. That was reserved to the white master alone, who also could invade any black marital union and take another man's wife or daughter for his own pleasure.

Many slave children were not effectively raised by their mothers, whose labor was needed in the fields. Others, old slave women past their prime, were given that job on large plantations. An African American husband, wife, and children who managed to be a family in any meaningful sense bucked unimaginable odds set against them by the system of slavery itself. Slave women were looked upon by the master class as breeding stock and were often paired with male slaves simply to produce future workers for the exploitative system. Moral norms commonly held within the white community were regularly violated because of the perceived economic necessities of the slave regime. The white community itself sanctioned this barbarism. If slavery was indeed a "school" that altered Africans culturally, a claim made by whites during and after slavery, then it taught many bad lessons with long-lasting negative effects.

The institution of slavery was widely practiced throughout the ancient world. The Spanish and Portuguese brought it to the New World long before the English codified its existence in their laws. Less than a century after the inauguration of the Anglo-American slave system, several trends suggested that its continued existence throughout western civilization was in jeopardy. Enlightenment ideas undermining all ancient tyrannies were then coming into vogue. In 1776, a new United States proclaimed in its Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," a highly abstract statement of universal human rights. While slavery then existed in all of the American states, it was commonly recognized that the Revolution's ideology was hostile to the continuing presence of the institution.

Many economic thinkers at that time expected that North American slavery would soon die out. In the southern states, slavery was primarily

associated with the production of selected crops that could only be grown in restricted coastal areas--sugar cane, rice, indigo, and long-fiber cotton. The one great exception to this climatic and geographic restriction involved tobacco, which could be grown in most inland areas. Tobacco was then being overproduced to such an extent that even some in the master class speculated that emancipation might eventually be forced upon them due to declining tobacco profits. This attitude was especially prominent in Virginia, then the most populous state in the Union. During and immediately after the Revolution, northern states not tied to agricultural slavery initiated various emancipation processes.

A decade after the War for American Independence, the invention of the cotton gin radically changed slavery's prospects, enabling a quick and easy deseeding of short-fiber cotton. Short-fiber cotton, unlike long-fiber cotton, is virtually impossible to deseed by hand, a fact that made the cotton gin a revolutionary invention. Similar to tobacco, short-fiber cotton can be grown far from coastal areas. Because of the invention of new spinning and weaving machinery, it was unlikely that a rapid rise in cotton production could ever glut the market. Accordingly, many southern farmers stopped growing tobacco and instead turned to short-fiber cotton. Early in the 19th century, a revolution in southern agriculture known as the "Cotton Boom" transformed the economies of both England and the United States. Early in the 19th century, slavery devoted to cotton production rapidly expanded into the southwest (then comprising Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana). Crossing the Mississippi River, it raced northward into Missouri Territory, creating in 1819 the first real sectional conflict over the unexpected revival of slavery. With fortunes to be made in cotton, slave owners became more exploitative than ever toward their involuntary labor force. Being "sold down river" into the cotton fields of the Deep South became a dreaded anticipation for many bondsmen.

Despite well-publicized national political compromises--the Missouri Compromise (1820), The Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)--the federal government failed to resolve mounting sectional hostilities over slavery's expansion westward. A threat of southern states seceding from the Union preceded each of these ineffectual sectional compromises. For over 40 years, the nation lived with the thought of disunion generated by the revival of slavery brought about by the cotton gin.

Northerners, whose emerging industrial economy was devoted to the mechanized production of inexpensive cotton textiles, increasingly gloried in the benefits of unrestricted industrial capitalism that included treating free labor as an impersonal commodity. Young women and insecure immigrants commonly provided a docile labor force in northern factories. In the 1850s, the Republicans, then a new northern sectional party,

declared a commitment to the ideology of "free labor" and characterized slavery as an inefficient and outmoded production system. Republicans called for restricting the expansion of southern slavery in the hopes that this alone would cause the "peculiar institution" to die out eventually. The Republican goal was to encourage a dynamic new industrial economy. Republicans saw the lethargic, forced southern slave agricultural economy as holding back rapid national development. They envisioned "free labor" and industrial expansion as harbingers of an American future characterized by unlimited possibilities.

Up to that point, the South had dominated American politics. Most of the new nation's early presidents had been southern slaveholders: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Jackson, Tyler, Polk, and Taylor. The Democratic Party, then controlled by the South, had dominated most congressional sessions, determining legislation directing the nation's course. Slaveholders predominated on the U.S. Supreme Court.

From the founding of the United States until 1860, the government of the United States served consistently as an agent for the slaveholding interest in relations with foreign nations. It negotiated treaties with Great Britain to compensate owners for slaves liberated by British troops during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. In this way, the U.S. government gained early experience in demanding "reparations" for white slave owners. At the insistence of southern slave owners, the U.S. government barred abolitionist literature from the southern mails, irrespective of the language of the First Amendment. And the government put the full force of federal law behind the apprehension of those accused of being fugitive slaves, providing for their expeditious removal to southern state jurisdictions. Before 1860, the Constitution was commonly interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court as guaranteeing multiple protections for the slave system, although nothing specific in that fundamental document required such proslavery interpretations.

In southern minds, Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 threatened to undo this long tradition of federal assistance to slavery. Rather than wait to see whether the incoming Republican administration really posed the serious antislavery threat that existed in paranoid southern imaginations, the states of the Deep South immediately began to enact ordinances of secession from the Union. Unlike all of his predecessors in the White House, Lincoln allowed war to come rather than compromise away the desires of his section. With the beginning of actual fighting, many states from the Upper South seceded as well, joining the new Confederate States of America, which in its constitution clearly identified protection of the institution of slavery as its central purpose.

The Civil War provided the necessary conditions to bring about a formal end to slavery. With northern armies marching through the South, slaves were encouraged to run away and follow Yankee soldiers to freedom. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the arming of runaway slaves and their induction into the Union forces, and the subsequent inclusion of the 13th Amendment in the Constitution finalized slavery's end, which was hastened by the surrender of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in April 1865. Lincoln's assassination followed days later, as the nation entered into a new period of post-war Reconstruction.

The failure of Reconstruction legislation to address successfully the issue of economic justice due African Americans underlies the modern Reparations movement. William T. Sherman's Field Order #15, which was issued late in the war to persuade masses of runaway slaves to stop following his army through Georgia, provided small grants of confiscated land to black heads of household. This military decree seemed to point the way toward an eventual larger land reform that would compensate all African Americans for their years in slavery.

Field Order #15 was subsequently rescinded. The land farmed by African Americans was returned to white claimants. Thaddeus Stevens's plan for "40 acres and a mule" for every African American nuclear family was rejected by a majority of the Pennsylvania congressman's Republican colleagues. The consistent opposition of President Andrew Johnson to any benefit directed to freedmen, and the passive reluctance of most Republicans to consider any land reform that might in some way injure presumably loyal white inheritors of confiscated land once held by Confederate relatives, undermined all efforts to bring about economic justice for African Americans.

African Americans had supplied the agricultural labor that fueled America's first industrial revolution, which focused upon the production of inexpensive cotton textiles. For this, they received very little--(1) a temporary federal Freedmen's Bureau (1865-1871) dispensing groceries, some schooling, and advice concerning how to survive in a white-dominated economy, and (2) federal pensions for black soldiers who had contributed to the Union victory. The first of these benefits was not dispensed to black people alone as recompense for their oppression as slaves. As many poor and displaced southern whites benefited from the Freedmen's Bureau as did poor and displaced blacks. And blacks, who made up about one-tenth of the northern military forces, received a much smaller fraction of pension moneys than their numbers deserved.

During Reconstruction blacks did win political rights temporarily, but this advantage was quickly undermined by their miserable collective economic condition, which the victorious Union did nothing to relieve.

Above and beyond the nation's failure to institute land reform, southern landowners conspired to prevent selling real estate to African Americans to ensure that the latter would remain in a servile economic status. The evolution of the sharecropping system, where landless farmers (usually black people) agreed to share part of their cotton crop with the owners of the land (invariably white people), chained the masses of African Americans to a new form of economic peonage. White terrorism (in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and other such violent white supremacist organizations), together with white threats of economic retaliation on the eve of critical elections, gradually defeated Republican Reconstruction state governments across the South.

By the time of the contested presidential election of 1876, only three southern states remained under Republican control. In a sectional compromise known as the Compromise of 1877, which was driven by an immediate desire to keep the Republican Party in control of the White House, the last three Reconstruction state governments were sacrificed. At that time, many white southern Democrats made promises that they would treat African Americans fairly under their white supremacist regimes. But, predictably, as white-supremacist control solidified, all of these promises were broken.

By the 1890s, "Jim Crow" became the order of the day. Named after a black-face character in minstrel shows, Jim Crow laws mandated racial discriminations in every aspect of life. That which before had been loose custom became tightly codified. This new era was in some ways even worse than formal slavery, as individual whites no longer had any economic incentive to protect African Americans from the brutal wrath of widespread white racism. Lynch law and the sporadic tyranny of white terrorist groups came to characterize a new disorder further degrading African American existence.

Any real hope of achieving meaningful citizenship for African Americans did not arise until after World War II. A new civil-rights movement, with an emphasis upon equal rights under the law, produced a revolution of rising expectations within the black community. In the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., galvanized the hopes of African Americans that a new day might indeed be at hand. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were written into law. The first of these landmark pieces of legislation guaranteed equal access to public accommodations, and the second guaranteed African American voting rights. These were fundamental changes that replicated similar ones that had been made almost a century before during Reconstruction. The difference in this case is that the U.S. Supreme Court, headed in the 1960s by Earl Warren, upheld the constitutionality of these acts, whereas the post-Reconstruction Court had voided their earlier counterparts.

Many permanent changes were won during the 1960s. Also at that time, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared his War on Poverty, raising hopes further that the economic status of African Americans might come to resemble that of the majority (i.e., white) population. By the end of the Johnson administration, political and social rights seemingly had become a permanent part of the American polity. Many black people were able to take advantage of these changes, and the numbers of African-American professional and middle-class people have steadily grown. But on the gritty level where most African Americans lived, economic conditions unimaginable in the middle-class white community continued even after civil-rights victories on the political front. Black unemployment, especially for males, encouraged criminal activities that further degraded African American life. Families disintegrated. For some, drug use and membership in juvenile gangs provided temporary solace.

Modern life in the black inner city remains bleak and foreboding and beyond the comprehension of most white Americans. Indeed, most whites show little inclination to become familiarized with the shocking story recounted in this section. When whites think of the Civil War, they typically nostalgically recall battles long frozen in American folklore. The dramas of Gettysburg and Appomattox Court House receive much attention. The nobility of white combatants on both sides is celebrated. The causes and long-range consequences of the conflict are generally ignored or, when they are given attention, misrepresented. And blacks--both their historic suffering and their contributions to the Union victory--are largely invisible in this white recounting of America's most bloody war.

Within the worldview of conservative white America, a belief in the opportunity of any free individual to take full advantage of abundant economic possibilities predominates. Meanwhile, the perspective of most black Americans is conditioned by individual experiences that reinforce a collective belief that being black is a serious handicap in a free marketplace dominated by whites. In this context, the Reparations Movement both finds its attractiveness for most African Americans and at the same time appears as incomprehensible to most whites.

V. WHAT DO AFRICAN AMERICANS WANT?

Queen Mother Audley Moore is widely considered as the mother of the contemporary Reparations Movement. In 1955, she founded the Reparations Committee of Descendants of United States Slaves, and in 1962, her organization filed its first claim in California. In 1963, a Detroit activist named Ray Jenkins formed a similar organization entitled "Slave Labor Annuity Pay" (SLAP). His grandfather, a former slave, had died in

1958 at the age of 103 without a penny to his name despite a hard life as a “free” sharecropper. His relatives had to pass the hat to raise burial money. That experience preyed on Jenkins' conscience, symbolizing for him a much wider injustice. Jenkins pushed his idea that black Americans deserved recompense for slavery's damages with such relentlessness that he became nicknamed "Reparations Ray" in the greater Detroit area. Later, he recalled, "People laughed themselves to death when I told them we were trying to get some money from the government. But when the Japanese got their \$1.2 billion, they stopped laughing."⁴

Some commentators argue that the movement for black reparations is different from redress for Japanese Americans, who were interned on racial grounds during World War II, as the latter sought compensation for individuals directly injured by a government action, whereas Reparations is generally focused upon the damaging legacies of injustices from centuries past. Other critics note that the AJAs were American citizens when they experienced unjust treatment at the hands of the federal government, whereas slaves were not citizens under the law. Such distinctions are seen as completely artificial within the African American community, where AJA redress is regarded as an opening wedge for black reparations.

Given the current political context, it is highly unlikely that the Reparations Movement will result in significant monetary payments to individual black Americans in the foreseeable future. Even if white attitudes were different, no sum of money can ever truly recompense the millions injured by slavery and its aftermath. But even making a case for reparations is a positive step forward in lifting the spirits of African Americans. The Reparations Movement is providing African Americans a voice that they intend for the rest of America to hear.

A number of reparations advocates admit that theirs is not the only historical crime of monumental proportions that deserves governmental recompense. Some black leaders emphasize that Native Americans should receive reparations even before African Americans. From the perspective of American Indians, recent concessions won from various levels of American government are long overdue recognitions of their sovereign tribal rights. But in the minds of many whites, these benefits have been granted as a form of reparations. Specifically, in a well-orchestrated campaign in March 2000, tribal groups in California persuaded that state's electorate to enact Proposition I-A, giving registered tribes a virtual monopoly on casino gambling. Other states have enacted similar provisions. In each case, many white supporters have sensed that past injustices warrant this special treatment. While not an argument made by

⁴ “Why Reparations,” p. 4 [<http://www.swagga.com/reparation.htm>].

Native Americans themselves, this reasoning is the same as that supporting African American reparations.

Blacks are not united regarding how reparations funds should be spent. Some look to black churches administering programs funded by reparations. Others call for the establishment of higher-education scholarships for African Americans. Still others insist that individual payments to all descendents of slaves are required. Despite this divergence of views, all are in agreement that first white America must wake up to the inherent justice of the Reparations Movement. Above all, African Americans want whites to recognize a debt that most whites now deny.

African American reparations spokespeople want progressive whites to organize local efforts to promote awareness of the justice of the Reparations Movement. Dr. Maulana Karenga of California State University, Long Beach, comments that the first step in making the Reparations Movement practical will be to generate a "conversation in which whites overcome their acute denial of the nature and extent of injuries inflicted on African people and concede that the most morally appropriate term for this utter destruction of human life, human culture and human possibility is holocaust."⁵

Because of white resistance to recognize the depths of the destructiveness caused by white actions over the centuries, blacks often emphasize that the problem of reconciliation is "a white problem." Hence, one primary goal of the Reparations Movement is to challenge directly the mentality of white Americans who view their own racial attitudes as realistic and normative. From the perspective of most African Americans, most white people are overly comfortable, privileged, complacent, and habitually conditioned to deny obvious realities, especially regarding matters of racial injustice.

In truth, this issue is neither only a "White Problem" nor only a "Black Problem." Rather, it is an American problem. It is as if several floods scarred the land, eventually retreating but leaving mud and debris in their wake. The "flood" of slavery ended in 1865. Another "flood" of systematic inequality under the law ended in federal legislation passed in the 1960s. But tangled debris left from these historic inundations remain to be cleaned up before these past disasters can truly come to be regarded as events better left forgotten. The serious problems related to these past "floods," left unattended, in many ways negatively affect all Americans. A conclusion from the Report on the Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission) of March 2, 1968, identified what is needed to find lasting

⁵ Dr. Maulana Karenga, "The Ethics of Reparations: Engaging the Holocaust of Enslavement," <http://www.swagga.com/reparation.htm>, p. 11.

solutions to these problems: "From every American it will require new attitudes, new understanding, and, above all, new will."⁶

Some commentators regard the white deaths in the Civil War as adequate reparations for African Americans. Certainly, that war liberated blacks from formal slavery. The Allied victory in World War II ended Nazi genocidal policies against European Jewry, but in that later case, few believe that stopping the genocide settled accounts. Instead, massive reparations have been paid by European governments, especially Germany. Neither should the fact of black liberation from slavery cancel a debt owed to African Americans. Huge profits were made at their expense. It was not only white southerners profited from slavery. New Englanders did so as well through their involvement in the international trafficking in slaves. The government of the United States itself worked consistently to protect and preserve slavery before the Civil War finally destroyed the institution. Furthermore, governments at all levels of the federal system incurred additional debts by sanctioning new injustices against the former slaves. It is a story of unending harm. Would that governments at all levels now show the same energy in undoing this damage as they once employed in preserving slavery and racial discrimination. Honest dialoging that is open ended, without any prearranged outcome, is needed. As embodied in Representative John Conyers' H.R. 40, this is one key initial proposal of the Reparations Movement.

The American Civil War encapsulated the full range of emotions and human possibilities that the modern Reparations Movement is now reviving. At the Lincoln Memorial in the nation's capital, a giant marble representation of the sixteenth president is flanked by his two most famous speeches engraved in stone. One is the Gettysburg Address, which in 1863 called for "a new birth of freedom" to arise from the ashes of slavery's destruction. The other is his Second Inaugural, which warned of the consequences of delaying and obstructing justice. Lincoln described his nation as under the wrath of God. This speech, which Lincoln regarded as surpassing even the more famous Gettysburg Address, foresaw that violence might continue "until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil" would be accounted for in some manner. The conflict of which Lincoln once spoke still continues. An open wound festers. In its call for reparations, the African American community has raised proposals that need to be taken seriously by concerned Americans of every race.

Former president Rutherford B. Hayes, the man who reluctantly consented to end the Reconstruction experiment in 1877 in order that he might be peacefully inaugurated following the most bitterly contested

⁶ Richard Hofstadter and Beatrice K. Hofstader, eds., *Great Issues in American History: From Reconstruction to the Present Day, 1864-1981* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 467.

election in U.S. history, noted thirteen years after this moral surrender that it had resulted primarily in a systematic degradation of black people and that any injury done to blacks would ultimately damage whites as well. In the 1890s, while the dark night of Jim Crow legislation and white lynch mobs were working to produce a new quasi-slavery for African Americans, Hayes called for his fellow whites to acknowledge their destructive course and their interconnectedness with their black brothers and sisters:

We are responsible for their presence
and
condition on this continent. Having
deprived
them of their labor, liberty, and
manhood, and
grown rich and strong while doing it,
we have no excuse for neglecting them.
In truth, their welfare and ours, if not
one and the same are inseparable.
These millions who have been so
cruelly degraded must be lifted up, or
we ourselves will be dragged down.⁷

VI. THE POLITICAL STRATEGY

A House of Representatives' bill (H.R. 40), first introduced in the 104th Congress (1989) by John Conyers (Democrat, Michigan), calls for the creation of a Reparations Study Commission to hold public hearings to investigate the need for reparations. For every year after 1989, Representative Conyers has reintroduced the measure, generating very little white interest even among the most liberal members of his own party. While most members of the congressional Black Caucus support the bill, some have refused, indicating that the issue can only divert attention away from what they see as more pressing practical matters.

White political leaders, with rare exception, express a range of emotions from disinterest to hostility concerning reparations. Vice President Albert Gore once commented, "At the end of the day, most agree that it's not a politically feasible idea." Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat, Vermont) has stated: "I suspect there are a lot of things we could have reparations on. Is it a debate that benefits anyone black or white? I don't know the answer to that question." Congressman Henry Hyde (Republican, Illinois) provided a far more negative response: "I never owned a slave, I never oppressed anybody. I don't know that I

⁷ Quoted in Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, completed and edited by Ward M. McAfee (New York, 2001), p. 342.

should have to pay for someone who did [own slaves] generations before I was born."⁸

Representative Tony Hall (Democrat, Ohio) authored a formal congressional apology for slavery several years ago, and for his efforts received bag loads of angry mail. Whites attacked him for potentially enflaming racial raw nerve endings; blacks reproached him for engaging in meaningless rhetoric with no funds attached. Hall concluded after this experience: "I'm not sure the country is ready for it. I couldn't believe the hate and anger that came about because of it, and I got it from both sides."⁹

In this context, Representative Conyers is reluctant to push his bill with any vehemence. When criticized for his caution, Conyers notes that matters of this sort commonly require slow percolation into the public consciousness before the political timing is right. He recalls that he wrote the first legislation calling for making Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a national holiday four days after the civil rights leader's assassination in 1968. At that time, he received no meaningful support. But over time, much education, and a softening of opposition, the idea steadily gained supporters and was enacted into law in 1983. He hopes that his reparations bill will follow the same course.

N'COBRA (National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America) advocates that all taxpayers be allowed to designate small sums on their IRS forms to contribute to the initial development of a reparations fund. Others stipulate definite dollar amounts required to resolve the matter. Ray Jenkins, who started the modern movement in the 1960s, began with a demand of \$1,000,000 for every African American. He admitted at the time that the figure was selected in an entirely arbitrary manner. All are in agreement that first there must be a purposeful and substantive public debate and discourse on reparations throughout this country to educate Americans on the legal, moral, religious and historical justification for African American reparations.

At least one aspect of the Reparation Movement, as shown in several local reparations' struggles, is very similar to the successful Redress Movement of AJAs and the various European commitments to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Several local reparations efforts focus upon recompense to living victims of past injustices that have occurred with the complicity of public authorities. The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 resulted in the systematic razing of the South's most successful black economic community at that time. The destruction occurred with the local and state

⁸ "Why Reparations," pp. 2, 7 { <http://www.swaga.com/reparation.htm> }.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

governments' acquiescence. Some victims of this devastation are still living. Descendants of victims who are now deceased are easily identifiable. In 1997, the Oklahoma state legislature created a special commission to research the event and report findings. Three years later, the commission made specific recommendations to the governor, state legislature, the mayor of Tulsa and the Tulsa City Council. The Tulsa Reparations Coalition is committed to pressuring responsible authorities to meet their obligations. The Coalition reports: "Time is short to make reparations to living survivors. They are elderly and frail, and several have died this past year." The Coalition seeks endorsements from potential supporters by means of their internet site:
[<http://www.tulsareparations.org>].

While Oklahoma's response to date has been only partial, the state of Florida has recognized its obligations regarding a similar ugly race riot in the 1920s. In 1923, a black settlement at Rosewood, Florida was systematically destroyed by a white mob as state officials looked the other way. In 1994, the Florida legislature enacted, and the governor signed, a reparations appropriation of several million dollars to Rosewood families who could demonstrate a property loss and/ or emotional trauma resulting from the event. Subsequently 172 persons have been compensated in various amounts according to the specific losses involved. The 1994 bill also established a state university scholarship fund for descendants of the Rosewood Victims.

The story of the Rosewood success may prove instructive as to how the Reparations Movement might operate eventually at the national legislative level. The first step in the Florida case was to persuade the Speaker of the Florida lower house to endorse an academic study of the Rosewood incident, the findings of which were reported to the Florida legislature. Once the facts of what had occurred at Rosewood in 1923 were verified, the Speaker appointed a Special Master who then conducted public hearings on the issue. Following these, the Special Master concluded that the state had a moral obligation to compensate the victims of this tragedy. At that point, political maneuvering came into play. Opponents to compensation argued that the incident happened long ago and that the statute of limitations eliminated any state responsibility. It appeared that this state-based Reparations Movement had reached an impermeable roadblock.

The house members of the Florida Conference of Black State Legislators then began to exercise their political muscle. They temporarily joined with Republicans in opposing the Democratic governor's pet health-care bill, all the while broadcasting that their strange alliance was motivated by the governor's lack of support for the Rosewood compensation bill. This ploy broke the roadblock. Ultimately a reparations

bill passed the Florida house by a vote of 74-41, with Democrats providing most of the "aye" votes, and Republicans providing most of the "nays." In the state senate, similar results were posted, and the governor signed the bill. The victory was won by a combination of moral righteousness and skill in playing political "hard ball."

VII. THE REPARATIONS MOVEMENT IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

The Reparations Movement focuses upon injuries done to African Americans. As such, it may appear to some as parochial, potentially divisive, and not in the interest of non-black groups that have suffered and are still suffering unjustly at the hands of others. But, as this essay has tried to show, the victories of Jews who won reparations from Germany and Americans of Japanese Ancestry who won reparations from the U.S. government are connected with the African American Reparations Movement. Every reparations victory is another link in establishing a civilized consciousness of social justice and of reconciliation between victims and victimizers.

Progress in establishing this consciousness is especially important now, as multi-national corporations are participating in unholy acts that are seemingly beyond the scope of any governmental accountability. A global economy is a most effective breeding ground for fresh human-rights atrocities. Just as Reparations Movement lawyers have come to hold corporations to account for past crimes committed against African Americans, human-rights lawyers are now pursuing suits to hold corporations to account in U.S. courts for new crimes being committed around the globe. A current suit against Unocal over human-rights abuses in Myanmar holds potential for moving into a future where social justice is the expected norm. [See Los Angeles Times, June 16, 2003, A-1]. In the broadest sense, this is what the Reparations Movement seeks to achieve. Seen in a global context, the Reparations Movement is not simply about past events engaging only one group and involving only one country but rather about establishing precedents necessary for better future for all of humanity.

VIII. THE WHITE CHURCH AND REPARATIONS

The churches are not exempt from the demand for reparations. In 1969, James Foreman, former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), presented a demand for \$500 million in reparations at New York's liberal Riverside Church. Since that time, other African Americans have argued that certain denominations should be held to account, in the form of heartfelt apology, if not in monetary

dispensation.¹¹ Although thus far no churches have paid reparations to blacks, some have seriously considered reparations for other wrongs. In Canada, churches are paying reparations to indigenous peoples whom they abused in church-run schools. The United Church of Christ has also made some gestures towards Native Hawaiians along similar lines. The UCC has apologized to Native Hawaiians and has committed some resources toward monetary reparations. The “Self Development of People” ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) works to similar ends for many historically oppressed groups.

That the white church should assume its share of responsibility for the horrors inflicted on blacks is made apparent by the history of its past involvement.. For centuries, Christians cited scripture to justify both slavery and racial discrimination. In 1436, Pope Eugene IV declared Africans “enemies of God” in his bull *Dudum cum ad nos*. Nineteen years later, Pope Nicholas V granted to the Portuguese crown “full and free authority over...enemies of Christ, ...to invade them, conquer them, defeat them and subdue them; to reduce [them] to perpetual slavery.”¹⁰ With the subsequent English adoption of African slavery, Protestants also contributed to theological justifications for the "peculiar institution." Yet, during the next two centuries, serious disagreements within the church began to appear. Before the American Civil War, many mainline Protestant denominations split over such issues. Yet, even after the abolition of American slavery in that war, some Christians continued to justify racial discrimination on the basis of the Bible.

IX. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Bishop Desmond Tutu has reminded us that all life is relational. When one person dehumanizes another, the damage cannot help but boomerang

¹¹ General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, The United Methodist Church, *Steps Toward Wholeness: Learning and Repentance: A Study Guide for United Methodist Congregations in Preparation for an Act of Repentance for Racism and Pan-Methodist Conversations on Union* (2001).

¹⁰ Luis Rivera-Pagán, *Evangelización y Violencia: La Conquista de América* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Editorial Cemi, 1990), pp. 155-157.

back on the offender. White Christians who have justified and participated in the institutions of slavery, segregation, and even lynching have had their hearts hardened and their vision of life distorted. These experiences have corrupted their characters. Those who have stood silently by have also suffered. The need of white Christians for reconciliation with blacks is not only for the solace of blacks, or the healing of a national wound; it is also for the sake of their own souls.

In light of our responsibilities, we can apply to our situation basic Christian teaching about individual behavior. For example, Matthew 18: 15-17 outlines an appropriate way to resolve issues of longstanding bitterness, wherein one party is deeply aggrieved by the actions of another. Scripture urges the offended party to present its case publicly in the presence of the perceived perpetrator(s) of wrongdoing. The aforementioned scripture does not guarantee agreeable results. There is no fail-proof mode of conflict resolution. Human choices will always be determinative of any outcome.

Jesus's admonition to love both God and neighbor requires mighty efforts toward human reconciliation. This is a Christian imperative. In the process of working for reconciliation, conflict cannot be avoided. Indeed, strife is a natural part of life. The Christian cross serves, on one level, as a symbol of inevitable human conflict and deep suffering that leads to healing. Disruption and disagreement, in this perspective, provide sacred space that can lead to positive transformation, not only of interpersonal relationships but of social structures as well. Resolution of conflict can break historic cycles of negative reactions and seemingly unending violence.

Awareness of past wrongs and an accompanying repentance must precede any attempt at apology and reparations. Without repentance, which is turning away from sin, apologies are empty and reparations are only made with a subterranean anger that inevitably resurfaces to restore new sinful patterns. As white privilege has been engrained in both civil and religious institutions for centuries, repentance for racism must be both corporate and on going. Study and discussion across racial boundaries must precede awareness, which must precede repentance, which must precede apology, which must precede reparations. The churches can help facilitate this process. Indeed, both churches and the seminaries that serve them need to play leadership roles in this matter.

X. INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITY IN BALANCE

The topic of reparations raises one issue that requires separate reflection. We have seen that many contemporary Euro-Americans feel

that they have no responsibility for past injustices inflicted on African Americans. They are willing to be accountable only for any acts of injustice they may have personally committed, but not for others. They believe that African Americans should similarly be accountable individually for their actions. Now that the law recognizes the equality of all, past inequalities do not seem to them to be relevant.

The Bible itself contributes to this individualistic approach. Jeremiah and Ezekiel argue that each generation is judged on its own merits, not those of its ancestors. The early Christian communities understood themselves to transcend historic boundaries among ethnic groups. Christians recognize the value of this individualistic understanding. A focus on individualism has been used to abolish laws based on race, insisting that all individuals have equal rights and no one should be prejudged according to race or national origin. Over against the extreme racism of American society through much of its history, great advances in implementing democratic principles have been achieved by emphasizing individualism. Indeed, much more social progress can be gained by pushing this doctrine, since racial prejudice is still rife.

On the other hand, a rigid and doctrinaire individualism is alien to Christianity. The church is not simply a group of like-minded individuals. It is a community that finds its unity in the living Christ. (Rom. 12:5). We are different, but through our differences we make up one body. In Paul's writings, membership in this community provides the primary identity of Christians, but this does not deny other identities as members of families or other social units. As time passed, and the church settled into the world, these other identities assumed greater, if still secondary, importance. Christians are now identified regularly by their place of residence, for example, and by their work. In the Middle Ages, urban society was organized in terms of guilds and other types of communities.

A balanced view must emphasize individuality within community. We are not self-enclosed individuals. On the contrary, we are what we are largely by virtue of our relationships with others. We who are Christian are bound to one another by our shared faith. Unfortunately, this precious connectedness also turns those who are not Christian into "others," separated from us by their different faiths. Ideally Christian love is directed particularly toward these others, so that they should be respected in their otherness. But history has taught us that such love is rare and that, in society in general, there is competition among groups, with the winners subordinating and exploiting the others. Our deep-seated sinfulness expresses itself in the great dichotomy of "us" versus "them".

In the United States this identity and "othering" was along many lines, but especially racial ones. The dominant Euro-Americans singled out

blacks, above all others, for othering. This othering was not done by individuals acting as individuals but by social custom and legal systems. Furthermore, Africans were not dealt with by society or law as individuals, but instead as members of a racial group. It was a gain, as noted above, when these racist laws (and to a lesser extent social customs) were overturned on the basis of individualistic ideology, but when this same ideology is now used to ignore the fact that white Americans collectively suppressed and exploited black Americans as a class, the results are unjust.

Of course, the question now is not so much about past practices in our nation as about whether those contemporary white Americans (who did not themselves participate in shaping a racist society) belong collectively to a group that did. Since racism is still a large factor in our social, economic, and political life, all whites continue to participate in, and gain advantages from, a racist society. But what of those whites who do not intend to do this and do not make decisions supportive of continuing these injustices? Indeed, some whites have worked actively to counter the injustice. Do they, nevertheless, share in responsibility?

The answer we propose is that to whatever extent one identifies oneself as white, and gains the subtle, and not so subtle, advantages of that identification, one shares in responsibility for the disadvantages of those who are identified as black, whether they choose this identity or have it imposed upon them. It is very difficult for a white in the United States to avoid this level of responsibility.

A second question is how are we related to past generations of our group? The answer is that our condition and even our beliefs and attitudes are conditioned by our history. If we are whites, we are constituted by one history. Those identified as blacks are constituted by another. What we become as individuals is not only created by us as individuals. To a degree, it is an inheritance from the past.

The Christian understanding is best expressed in the idea that we are persons-in-community. We are called to make decisions, and we have a special responsibility for those decisions. Some of us are free to make some decisions about what communities we identify with, and those are among our most important decisions. For example, we may identify ourselves as members of the Christian church and of specific embodiments of that church. This shapes our lives in very important ways. On the other hand, we have much less freedom with respect to our racial or ethnic identity.

As participants in community, whether voluntary or involuntary, we have a shared responsibility for the actions of that community. One may

oppose particular policies of the United States, but as a citizen one still participates in a collective responsibility for those acts. One is called to do what one can both to change those policies and to ease the plight of those who are harmed by them. Of course, those who shape and support those policies have a direct, individual, responsibility that is different from that of those who oppose them.

From this perspective, those who participate in the dominant Euro-American or white community have a responsibility to those communities that have been and still are, oppressed and exploited. The nature of that responsibility depends on the nature of the damage that has been done and especially the present character of that damage. There is no retroactive way to do away with the enormous injustices that characterize human history and especially the conquest and settlement of the Western Hemisphere by Europeans. But clear acknowledgment of the injustice is possible, and that acknowledgment should lead to whatever forms of recompense or reparation are now possible.

X. WHAT WE CAN DO

Much of what churches need to do is evident from what has been said. White churches need to repent of their own involvement in the abuse and exploitation of blacks. They can do so authentically only as they engage in serious study of the history that has shaped our present situation including the churches own involvement in that history. The churches have the capacity to engage in such reflection. White churches must recognize the gap between their current level of recognition of past wrongs and their professions of good will, on the one hand, and what is required before black forgiveness is possible, on the other..

As white churches move into genuine repentance, they will be in better position to reach out to black churches in the quest for reconciliation. Healing is at the core of Christian teaching. The white churches can seek their own healing through repentance. This can be attained only as blacks are able to respond with a forgiveness that expresses the beginning of their own healing as well.

The movement toward reconciliation will have to proceed at many levels. Individual white Christians need to come to new understanding and a change of heart. Congregations collectively need to learn and repent and to celebrate their new spirit liturgically. The same is true at denominational and ecumenical levels. In this process, theological education is of great importance. White ministers will be able to motivate and lead congregations into more realistic understandings only if their own understanding of the terrible history of white racism is clear. This can be

taught through theology, history, and ethics, as well as special events and lectures.

On the surface, encouraging churches to consider reparations may seem quite unrealistic. Many churches have diminishing resources and struggle for economic survival. Nevertheless, it is striking that Christian churches did contribute to reparations for Native Americans abused in their schools. The Roman Catholic Church has bound hundreds of millions of dollars to compensate those who were abused by priests. The abuse suffered by slaves and their descendants is not of less importance.

In the Civil Rights struggle, the leadership in thought, organization, and action came from the black church. Nevertheless, the support of many white churches was important to its success. The leadership of the Reparations Movement also comes from the black community. It challenges white Christians to go deeper into an understanding of what whites have done to blacks over centuries, not only materially but also psychologically. As white churches do this, they will be able to give leadership in the wider national scene. As in the instance of Civil Rights, this cooperation of black and white churches will be required to influence governmental actions.

Practically, then, let us summarize immediate steps that can be taken:

(1) Stimulate informed discussion in congregations. Some may find useful the United Methodist study, *Steps Toward Wholeness: Learning and Repentance*, cited earlier.

(2) Examine and modify seminary curricula to ensure that future ministers are well informed about the history of white racism in both church and society.

(3) Develop liturgies of repentance, and when it can be authentic, of reconciliation as well.

(4) Initiate public study and discussions and support such events when they are initiated by others.

(5) Advocate for Rep. Conyers' H.R. 40, and petition local representatives and senators to support this bill. A sample letter devoted to this end is attached to this paper.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In an increasingly pluralistic American community that is no longer primarily white and black, how can African American reparations be argued convincingly?

- To some degree, every person alive has been victimized to some degree by past events. Given that precedents have been established that individuals and groups suffering severely and unjustly at the hands of governmental and corporate entities are due monetary

recompense, what criteria should be applied to determine when reparations are warranted and when they are not?

- As the issue of African American reparations concerns payments by corporations and governmental entities within the United States, who among all living Americans are most due similar consideration from these same bodies?
2. Is the concept of reparations for past wrongs inherently silly?
- Were mistakes made in establishing precedents regarding governmental reparations to other injured parties? Or, are reparations a necessary aspect of “social justice?”
 - If the concept of reparations warrants serious attention, can an honest and meaningful argument be made why African Americans are not due reparations?
3. There is a legal statute of limitations, but is there a moral statute of limitations as well?
4. If reparations are due African Americans, what form should they take?
- Are all African Americans, irrespective of class status and income levels, due reparations?
 - In considering reparations, how should “African American” be defined? Are only those African Americans with deep roots in the American past due reparations or should recent black immigrants also be included?
 - How dark in skin color does an African American have to be to be due reparations?
 - Given issues tied to events that happened generations ago, should individuals or only groups receive reparations? Should historically black churches receive reparations to administer worthy programs in their communities? Should reparations take the form of enriched educational assistance, such as scholarships?
 - What other forms might reparations take? Should Affirmative Action be revitalized and fully restored as a necessary aspect of reparations? Should public assistance to the poor also be fully restored and expanded?
5. Is the argument that African American reparations are now not politically achievable reason enough to dismiss the subject?
- Are reparations a one-time event or a continuing matter until the wounds made in the past are finally healed?
 - Are governmental apologies without reparations meaningful?
 - Should governmental apologies be withheld until reparations are forthcoming?

- Can any good come from the Reparations Movement even if its goals of financial recompense and official apologies are never realized?
6. What role should white Americans take in the Reparations Movement?
- What can largely white churches do in self-education, in conducting interracial worship services, and in employing other means and methods, to help repair the historical damage reviewed in this paper?

TO LEARN MORE

A good analytical review of the reparations issue is: Robert K. Fullinwider, "The Case for Reparations," Philosophy & Public Policy, 20 (Summer, 2000) [This article is available on the internet].

Several basic books written from the perspective of African Americans involved in the Reparations Movement are: Randall Robinson, The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks (New York: Plume, Published by the Penguin Group, 2000), Roy L. Brooks, ed., The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice: When Sorry Isn't Enough (New York: New York University Press, 1999), and Raymond A. Winbush, ed., Should America Pay? Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations (New York: Amistad, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

Historical studies helpful for understanding the issue are: Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981), Don E. Fehrenbacher, The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery, completed and edited by Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and David W. Blight, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001).

SAMPLE LETTER

Date:
 Address to:
 Name of your Representative:
 The Honorable _____
 U.S. House of Representative
 Washington, D.C. 20515

(and/or)

Name of your Senator:
 The Honorable _____
 U.S. Senate
 Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear _____:

I am writing to let you know of my strong support for H.R. 40, authored by Congressman John Conyers (D-MI), which would establish a commission to study reparations proposals for the Black descendants of African slaves. This legislation is long overdue, and should be put into place as soon as possible. My hope is that during the present Congress you will sign on to this bill as a co-sponsor and do all that you can to ensure its enactment.

This legislation is an important first step in acknowledging the inherent cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery as practiced in the United States, and would help millions of Americans begin to heal the subsequent emotional wounds that have been festering for centuries. In confronting the ugly legacy of slavery, the commission created by H.R. 40 would examine the impact slavery has had on the racial and economic inequalities still suffered today. The commission would also be charged with reviewing reparations proposals to help black Americans regain some of the stature that was stripped from their forefathers and lost through no fault of their own.

I hope that you will join me in strongly supporting H.R. 40. Please let me know your thoughts on this legislation, your intended action to see that it is enacted, and what I can do to help.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

(Print Name)

(Address)

(City, State, Zip)