**Reparations for Slavery?**

Today, even after the success of the civil rights movement, the black American population on average has higher infant-mortality rates, lower life expectancy, higher rates of unemployment, lower income, and higher rates of imprisonment than the white population. Some argue that these problems are the "legacy of slavery" brought on by society's discrimination and racism.

Are the conditions really a "legacy of slavery"? If so, what should be done? Some African-Americans argue today for reparations--a sort of compensation for the free labor blacks were forced to render during 250 years of slavery.

**The Idea of Reparations**

Reparations for the slavery is not a new idea. Before the Civil War ended, General William Tecumseh Sherman issued an order in South Carolina. He wanted 40 acres and the loan of an Army mule set aside for each former slave family. This order was never carried out. After the war, Radical Republicans in Congress passed laws requiring confiscation of former-Confederate property to provide the ex-slaves with "40 acres and a mule." In 1866, President Andrew Johnson vetoed the legislation.

The next push for reparations took place at the turn of the century. Several black organizations lobbied Congress to provide pensions for former slaves and their children. One bill introduced into the U.S. Senate in 1894 would have granted direct payments of up to $500 to all ex-slaves plus monthly pensions ranging from $4 to $15. This, and several similar bills, died in congressional committees. The pension movement itself faded away with the onset of World War I.

During the 1960s, some black leaders revived the idea of reparations. In 1969, James Forman (then head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) proclaimed a “Black Manifesto.” It demanded $500 million from American churches and synagogues for their role in perpetuating slavery before the Civil War. Black nationalist organizations, such as the Black Panther Party and Black Muslims, also demanded reparations.

In the 1980s, a new call arose for black reparations. It was stimulated by two other movements that successfully secured payments from the U.S. government. The Supreme Court in 1980 ordered the federal government to pay eight Sioux Indian tribes $122 million to compensate for the illegal seizure of tribal lands in 1877. Then in 1988, Congress approved the payment of $1.25 billion to 60,000 Japanese-American citizens who had been interned in prison camps during World War II. In April 1989, Council Member Ray Jenkins guided through the Detroit City Council a resolution. It called for a $40 billion federal education fund for black college and trade school students. About the same time, a conference of black state legislators meeting in New Orleans backed the idea of a federally financed education fund for descendants of slaves. Shortly afterward, Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-MI) drafted a bill calling for the establishment of a congressional commission to study the impact of slavery on African-Americans.

**The Conyers Bill**

Rep. Conyers introduced his bill (HR 3745) in November 1989. The preamble of the bill declared its purpose:

To acknowledge the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865 and to establish a Commission to examine the institution of slavery, subsequent de jure and de facto and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans, to make recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies, and for other purposes.

This bill failed to make it to a House vote, but Conyers did not give up. In every session of Congress since then, he has introduced new legislation to establish a commission to study the issue and make recommendations to Congress. While none has succeeded, Conyers vows to keep trying.
Throughout the years, people have proposed different reparation plans. Some, like Robert Brock, a Los Angeles campaigner for reparations, argued for direct payments to descendants of slaves. "The government owes us money on a number of different fronts," the 66-year-old black activist declared, "... for labor, for loss of culture and of humanity." Some supporters of reparations, like journalist Ron Daniels, proposed government financing of a national fund to develop educational and economic opportunities for the entire African-American community. Daniels argued in an editorial that "America must own up to its responsibility to make a damaged people whole again."

Others, such as the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA), advocate a broader approach. They believe that government could satisfy the call for reparations by a variety of means, including land, ownership of companies, stock, money, and aircraft. The group also calls for a method of self-government for American blacks to give them autonomy.

Just as advocates are not unanimous about the form of reparations, neither are they united on the amount. Some favor direct payments to slave descendants ranging from $25,000 to $100,000 or more. Others, like N'COBRA, believe a final amount cannot be determined until more study has been done to determine the harm slavery has caused blacks. But they suggest the total amount could be in the "trillions."

Reparations, Pro and Con

Many people and groups have voiced their opposition to the whole idea of slavery reparations. Major arguments against reparations include:

- There are no black slaves living today. Slavery ended more than 160 years ago at the cost of several hundred thousand lives lost in the Civil War. It is unfair to ask American taxpayers, many of them from families that came to the United States after slavery ended, to pay for the wrongs of slavery.
- The problems faced by African Americans today are not the "legacy of slavery" or even racism. Many blacks have succeeded very well in American society. The problems of poor African Americans are caused by social ills within the inner city, such as the breakdown of families, high crime rates, and dependence on welfare.
- Federal and state governments have already spent billions of dollars on social programs such as welfare, subsidized housing, health care, employment development, affirmative action, and education. These programs have benefitted African Americans.
- African Americans, particularly the young, need to overcome their problems through their own efforts and not depend on more government handouts and benefits.
- Reparations would be too expensive, depriving the country of the opportunity to fix the Social Security and Medicare systems and meet other budget needs that benefit all Americans.
- Any reparation plan would lead to unfairness and huge administrative costs. Who would receive reparations? Descendants of slaves? All blacks? Would well-off African Americans receive payments? If a fund were set up, who would administer it? Would those unhappy with the plan call for even more reparations or file lawsuits?

Advocates for reparations reject these arguments. They contend:

- The claim for reparations is not against white Americans or even individual Americans. It is a claim against American government and society, which has continued from the time of slavery. As all members of society share in society’s benefits, they also must share the burdens in the form of taxation. Through slavery, African Americans were terribly wronged and modern blacks were robbed of their inheritance. Further, blacks face racism every day. They deserve to be compensated.
The problems faced by many blacks today come from slavery and society's ongoing racism. Blacks were uprooted from their homes in Africa and brutalized in America by a system that destroyed the family structure and degraded the individual. When slavery ended, African Americans owned nothing. Isolated and discriminated against, they were denied education, contacts with society, and economic opportunity. Compared to whites, blacks remain in a disadvantaged position and will remain so until they receive compensation and society's racism ends.

Welfare, subsidized housing, affirmative action, and other previous efforts to address socio-economic problems of the black underclass have been too little and too late. They failed because society has failed to come to grips with the central problem—its own racism and discrimination. In some cases, social programs, though well-intentioned, actually increased black isolation and further degraded the black community. In addition, these programs benefitted other groups, not just blacks. By doing so, they failed to address the unique claims based on slavery that African-Americans have.

Reparations will not promote dependency. Instead, they will give individual African Americans and the community as a whole a chance to create their own economic base and become self-reliant.

The cost of reparations may be great, but a debt is owed and must be paid. The moral claim for reparations at least equals that of any other government program. America is a rich country, and if the will exists, the money can be found.

Just as it is too early to decide how much is due in reparations, it is too early to agree on how to distribute the reparations. Fair methods can be worked out once society acknowledges its obligation to provide reparations in the first place.

While it is unclear whether those advocating reparations for slavery ever will be successful, it is likely the debate will go on.

**Points of Inquiry**

1. After the passage of the 13th Amendment following the Civil War, should the former slaves have been granted reparations?
2. How are reparations for black slavery similar and different from the following:
   a. reparations paid by the U.S. government to the Sioux Indians for lands illegally confiscated in 1877?
   b. reparations paid by the West German government to Jewish survivors of Nazi concentration camps?
   c. reparations paid by the U.S. government to Japanese Americans interned unconstitutionally in prison camps during World War II?
3. Do you agree or disagree that many problems faced today by the African-American community are the "legacy of slavery"? Why or why not?