



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on August 5, 2019

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Correction, Please!

Reparations Won't Mend the Past, but They Might Buy Some Future Votes

Item: *The New York Times* for June 18 reported that “with the support of a string of 2020 Democratic presidential candidates,” the idea of “reparations for African-Americans is gaining traction among Democrats on Capitol Hill, where Speaker Nancy Pelosi backs the establishment of a commission that would develop proposals and a ‘national apology’ to repair the lingering effects of slavery.”



On the presidential campaign trail, noted the Times, “most of the leading Democratic candidates — including [Senator Cory] Booker; Senators Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren; and Representative Julián Castro — have embraced [some type of reparations].... But even backers of reparations acknowledge that there is no set definition about what it actually means, and that creating a plan for reparations on a national scale would be extraordinarily complicated.”

Item: On May 23, Patricia Cohen wrote in the *New York Times* that the attaching of “a dollar figure to a program of reparations resembles a ‘Wheel of Fortune’ spin, with amounts ranging from the piddling (\$71.08 per recipient under [James Forman’s 1969 “Black Manifesto” plan] to the astronomical \$17 trillion in total.”

Item: Among those attending the June 19 hearing by the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties on legislation to establish a reparations commission was Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose 2014 essay in the *Atlantic* calling for reparations has been credited for reviving the issue. His piece, “The Case for Reparations,” argued this action would drive a “national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.” Vox, in a lengthy article on June 19, pointed to the impact of the Coates essay and also to “a new wave of activism around racial inequality and increased calls for reparations from black activists,” including the Movement for Black Lives in 2016.

Item: The website for the American Descendants of Slavery declares: “If America truly hopes to heal from the tragedy of slavery and the systemic racism that followed, the country will need to pay a multi-trillion dollar debt to American descendants of slavery in the form of both cash payments and large scale programs” — cash payments to the tune of about \$2.6 trillion — and reparations “should come in the form of a large cash payment to African Americans,” as well as “debt free college, home ownership assistance, business financing support, fully endowing all historically black colleges (and incentivizing those schools to admit descendants of American slavery), guaranteed government contracts for black businesses, and free medical care.”

Correction: With all of the pressing issues facing us today, mandating reparations for slavery that



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ended in this country many generations ago — and was prohibited nationally by the 13th Amendment in 1865 — should be very low on the list.

Let's be clear: Criticizing reparations is not an excuse for the evil of slavery. But it does recognize reality. It also takes into account the myriad difficulties relating to the nebulous eligibility for such payments; the infeasibility of such massive outlays (up to \$17 trillion or more at a time when the U.S. budget is \$4.7 trillion, with \$3.6 trillion in revenues); and the lack of fairness about who should be responsible for paying the bill.

The fact that multiple Democratic presidential candidates publicly favor some (often vague) idea of reparations says more about their current eagerness to buy votes than it does about making amends.

In the meantime, consider two prominent Democrats who are not (at least at this writing) on board. As one has put it, he finds it

hard to find a model in which you can practically administer and sustain political support for those kinds of efforts. And what makes America complicated as well is the degree to which this is not just a black/white society, and it is becoming less so every year. So how do Latinos feel if there's a big investment just in the African American community, and they're looking around and saying, "We're poor as well. What kind of help are we getting?" Or Asian Americans who say, "Look, I'm a first-generation immigrant, and clearly I didn't have anything to do with what was taking place."

Another was more blunt, declaring to a home-state newspaper:

I do not buy the concept, popular in the '60s, which said, "We have suppressed the black man for 300 years and the white man is now far ahead in the race for everything our society offers. In order to even the score, we must now give the black man a head start, or even hold the white man back, to even the race." I don't buy that. I don't feel responsible for the sins of my father and grandfather. I feel responsible for what the situation is today, for the sins of my own generation. And I'll be damned if I feel responsible to pay for what happened 300 years ago.

The former speaker was Barack Obama, speaking with the *Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates on October 19, 2016. The other comments were made in September 1975 by Obama's subsequent running mate, then-Delaware Senator Joe Biden (as reprinted in the *Congressional Record* the following month). Biden, not surprisingly, has not expressed himself in this fashion during the current presidential race, which is a multi-candidate sprint of Democrats to the extreme left.

For most of today's candidates, this is an excuse for opening up the tax sluices as a way to gain or keep political support. Kamala Harris, for example, has suggested that "reparations" could be used to pay for mental health treatment for black Americans. In her words on NPR (March 14, 2019), she said: "You can look at the issue of untreated and undiagnosed trauma. African-Americans have higher rates of heart disease and high blood pressure. It is environmental. It is centuries of slavery, which was a form of violence where women were raped, where children were taken from their parents — violence associated with slavery." She went on: "You need to put resources and direct resources — extra resources — into those communities that have experienced that trauma."

Apparently one can pick a grievance, and the government will provide. Well, some hurts count more than others: There's no reparations program for descendants of, say, vilified Chinese railroad workers; miserable Italian child laborers in textile mills; or immigrants from Ireland who faced signs that



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declared “No Irish Need Apply.” On the other hand, as noted by Michael Tanner in National Review (online), Senator Elizabeth Warren “has extended her call for reparations to include Native Americans and members of the LGBTQ community.”

Today’s pandering grievance industry is flexible — and well suited for paying off a political base. As Senator Harris told a public radio interviewer, she would “deal with the racial wealth gap” with a \$100 billion federal program that would, as described by *Politico*, “help black people buy homes.” The program would provide down payments and closing cost assistance of up to \$25,000 for some four million homebuyers, with HUD grants for “families with incomes up to \$100,000, or \$125,000 in high-cost areas.”

Duke economist William Darity, whose work is favored by the reparations movement, says there should be a cash handout to 30 million Americans eligible for reparations — which would work to around \$80,000 for each presumed descendant of ex-slaves. But the payoff should not just be cash, according to Darity. As *Vox* noted, the economist is demanding a “portfolio of reparations,” made up of “a combination of individual payments and race-targeted proposals like vouchers for financial asset building, free medical insurance or free college education for black people, or a trust fund exclusively for black Americans.”

A critic of paying off blacks for the socio-economic condition they find themselves in today is Jason Riley, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, who observed in a column this spring that the condition of American blacks is not largely the result of slavery. He says that plans such as that apparently favored by Kamala Harris ignore the progress made by blacks who were living much closer to the slavery era. Riley also observed that the “soaring violent-crime rates that produce so much ‘trauma’ in poor black communities today did not exist in those communities in the first 100 years after emancipation, even though poverty rates at the time were much higher and racism was still legal and widespread.”

Riley cites studies backing up his contentions. For instance, he points to the findings of Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson, who wrote that “in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970s.”

Asks Riley, pointedly: “Did the ‘legacy of slavery’ and Jim Crow skip over a couple of generations and then reassert itself in the mid-1970s? Or is it possible that something else is primarily responsible for the outcomes we see today?”

Riley, as it happens, is a black man. So is Burgess Owens, a Super Bowl champion with the Oakland Raiders and the author of *Liberalism or How to Turn Good Men Into Whiners, Weenies and Wimps*; his great-great-grandfather came to America in the belly of a slave ship and became an entrepreneur. Owens also describes himself as an “entrepreneur who has lived the American dream.” He has written about how he does not want “free stuff” from “progressives” that was taken from others. In a *Wall Street Journal* article in May (also the written testimony he made before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties on June 19), Owens blasts the reparations movement for conveniently forgetting “the 150 years of legal, social and economic progress attained by millions of American minorities.” He goes further, saying that the notion of reparations



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demeans America's founding ideals. A culturally Marxist idea promoted by socialists, reparations denies the promise granted by an omnipotent God that we are truly equal and that regardless of race we are capable of overcoming obstacles and past injustices. By indoctrinating others into this cynical ideology, an elitist class of progressives exploits past differences and ensures that they will divide us in the future.

Another black man, George Mason economist Walter Williams, addressed this general issue in 2014, when the *Atlantic* article by Ta-Nehisi Coates was causing a stir. What moral principle, asked Williams, "justifies punishing a white of today to compensate a black of today for what a white of yesterday did to a black of yesterday?" Such actions become even more questionable when one's ancestors were not even in this country.

Williams pointed out in his syndicated column that a large percentage, if not most

of today's Americans — be they of European, Asian, African or Latin ancestry — don't even go back three or four generations as American citizens. Their ancestors arrived on our shores long after slavery. What standard of justice justifies their being taxed to compensate blacks for slavery? For example, in 1956, thousands of Hungarians fled the brutality of the USSR to settle in the U.S. What do Hungarians owe blacks for slavery?

There's another thorny issue. During slavery, some free blacks purchased other blacks as a means to free family members. But other blacks owned slaves for the same reason whites owned slaves — to work farms or plantations. Are descendants of these slaveholding blacks eligible for and deserving of reparations?

Yes, there are plenty of pitfalls and complications involved.

All too many seek to make Americans reliant on big government. At the same time, differences in race, ethnic backgrounds, and sex have become tools for identity politics — to use a prevalent trendy phrase. This serves would-be political overseers. As a result, the welfare state is becoming the new servitude.

Rather than digging up insoluble issues that will tear open old wounds, we should be breaking the chains of dependency.

— William P. Hoar

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