



Some of you will already be familiar with Ta-Nehisi Coates, who writes for *The Atlantic*. I was not familiar with his writing until Elaine Johnson invited me to read his LONG essay, “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration”¹

The essay begins with Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 “Moynihan Report”² and moves from that report to consider the state of black culture in these United States in 2015. Virtually every word that follows comes from Coates’ essay, which I have tried to excerpt to show the general thrust of his argument.

Contiguous paragraphs below deal generally with the same subject, though they may or may not have been contiguous in the original essay. I’ll insert breaks to indicate a change of subject.

After a while, I’ll also add excerpts from another long essay Coates has written in *The Atlantic*, and will make a comment or two at the end.

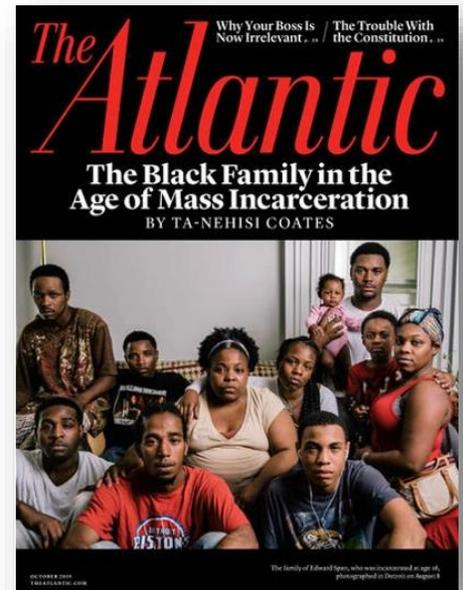
For those of us who are African-American, what follows is likely not news, but more of the nature of a painful reminder. For those of us who are not African-American, some of what follows may be news, and should be painful to us as well.

Moynihan’s (originally) Unpublished Essay

Daniel Patrick Moynihan stayed on at the Labor Department during Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration, but became increasingly disillusioned with Johnson’s War on Poverty. He believed that the initiative should be run through an established societal institution: the patriarchal family. Fathers should be supported by public policy, in the form of jobs funded by the government.

Moynihan believed that unemployment, specifically male unemployment, was the biggest impediment to the social mobility of the poor. He was, it might be said, a conservative radical who disdained service programs such as Head Start and traditional welfare programs such as Aid to Families With Dependent Children, and instead imagined a broad national program that subsidized families through jobs programs for men and a guaranteed minimum income for every family.

Running against the tide of optimism around civil rights, “The Negro Family” argued that the federal government was underestimating the damage done to black families by “three



¹ Although this *Laptop* is long, the essays excerpted here run to more than 100 pages, single-spaced. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/

² www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm
www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/

centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment” as well as a “racist virus in the American blood stream,” which would continue to plague blacks in the future:

That the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary—a lesser people might simply have died out, as indeed others have. . . . But it may not be supposed that the Negro American community has not paid a fearful price for the incredible mistreatment to which it has been subjected over the past three centuries.

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

Moynihan had lots of ideas about what government could do—provide a guaranteed minimum income, establish a government jobs program, bring more black men into the military, enable better access to birth control, integrate the suburbs—but none of these ideas made it into the report. “A series of recommendations was at first included, then left out,” Moynihan later recalled. “It would have got in the way of the attention-arousing argument that a crisis was coming and that family stability was the best measure of success or failure in dealing with it.”

President Johnson offered the first public preview of the Moynihan Report in a speech written by Moynihan and the former Kennedy aide Richard Goodwin at Howard University in June of 1965, in which he highlighted “the breakdown of the Negro family structure.” Johnson left no doubt about how this breakdown had come about. “For this, most of all, white America must accept responsibility,” Johnson said. Family breakdown “flows from centuries of oppression and persecution of the Negro man. It flows from the long years of degradation and discrimination, which have attacked his dignity and assaulted his ability to produce for his family.”

America’s Jail Culture

In absolute terms, America’s prison and jail population from 1970 until today has increased sevenfold, from some 300,000 people to 2.2 million. The United States now accounts for less than 5 percent of the world’s inhabitants—and about 25 percent of its incarcerated inhabitants. In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcerated—10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers.

Our carceral state banishes American citizens to a gray wasteland far beyond the promises and protections the government grants its other citizens. Banishment continues long after one’s actual time behind bars has ended, making housing and employment hard to secure. And banishment was not simply a well-intended response to rising crime. It was the method by which we chose to address the problems that preoccupied Moynihan, problems resulting from “three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment.” At a cost of \$80 billion a year, American correctional facilities are a social-service program—providing health care, meals, and shelter for a whole class of people.

America’s closest to-scale competitor is Russia—and with an autocratic Vladimir Putin locking up about 450 people per 100,000, compared with our 700 or so, it isn’t much of a competition. China has about four times America’s population, but American jails and prisons hold half a million more people. “In short,” an authoritative report issued last year by the National Research Council concluded, “the current U.S. rate of incarceration is unprecedented by both historical and comparative standards.”

Among all black males born since the late 1970s, one in four went to prison by their mid-'30s; among those who dropped out of high school, seven in 10 did. "Prison is no longer a rare or extreme event among our nation's most marginalized groups," Devah Pager, a sociologist at Harvard, has written. "Rather it has now become a normal and anticipated marker in the transition to adulthood."

Ex-offenders are excluded from a wide variety of jobs, running the gamut from septic-tank cleaner to barber to real-estate agent, depending on the state. And in the limited job pool that ex-offenders can swim in, blacks and whites are not equal. For her research, Pager pulled together four testers to pose as men looking for low-wage work. One white man and one black man would pose as job seekers without a criminal record, and another black man and white man would pose as job seekers with a criminal record. The negative credential of prison impaired the employment efforts of both the black man and the white man, but it impaired those of the black man more. Startlingly, the effect was not limited to the black man with a criminal record. The black man *without* a criminal record fared worse than the white man *with* one. "High levels of incarceration cast a shadow of criminality over all black men, implicating even those (in the majority) who have remained crime free," Pager writes. Effectively, the job market in America regards black men who have never been criminals as though they were.

From America's very founding, the pursuit of the right to labor, and the right to live free of whipping and of the sale of one's children, were verboten for blacks. Antebellum Virginia had 73 crimes that could garner the death penalty for slaves—and only one for whites.

Before Emancipation, enslaved blacks were rarely lynched, because whites were loath to destroy their own property. But after the Civil War, the number of lynchings rose, peaked at the turn of the century, then persisted at a high level until just before the Second World War, not petering out entirely until the height of the civil-rights movement, in the 1960s.

Despite Giuliani's claim that aggressive policing is justified because blacks are "killing each other," Fagan found that between 2004 and 2009, officers recovered weapons in less than 1 percent of all stops—and recovered them more frequently from whites than from blacks. Yet blacks were 14 percent more likely to be subjected to force. In 2013 the policy, as carried out under Giuliani's successor, Michael Bloomberg, was ruled unconstitutional.

To reiterate an important point: Surveys have concluded that blacks and whites use drugs at roughly the same rates. And yet by the close of the 20th century, prison was a more common experience for young black men than college graduation or military service.

This was penal welfarism at its finest. Deindustrialization had presented an employment problem for America's poor and working class of all races. Prison presented a solution: jobs for whites, and warehousing for blacks.

Our Unredemptive Parole System

On the evening of December 19, 1973, Odell Newton, who was then 16 years old, stepped into a cab in Baltimore with a friend, rode half a block, then shot and killed the driver, Edward Mintz. The State of Maryland charged Odell with crimes including murder in the first degree and sentenced him to life in prison. He has now spent 41 years behind bars, but by all accounts he is a man reformed. He has repeatedly expressed remorse for his crimes. He has not committed an infraction in 36 years.

The Maryland Parole Commission has recommended Odell for release three times since 1992. But in Maryland, all release recommendations for lifers are subject to the governor's approval.

In the 1970s, when Odell committed his crime, this was largely a formality. But in our era of penal cruelty, Maryland has effectively abolished parole for lifers—even juvenile offenders such as Odell. In 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that life sentences without the possibility of parole for juveniles found guilty of crimes other than homicide were unconstitutional. Two years later, it held the same for mandatory life sentences without parole for juvenile homicide offenders. But the Court has yet to rule on whether that more recent decision was retroactive. Fifteen percent of Maryland’s lifers committed their crimes as juveniles—the largest percentage in the nation, according to a 2015 report by the Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative and the state’s ACLU affiliate. The vast majority of them—84 percent—are black.

In 2006, Martin O’Malley (who’s currently vying to be the Democrats’ nominee for president in 2016) defeated Ehrlich to become governor, but he took an even stricter stance on lifers than his predecessor, failing to act on even a single recommendation of the Parole Commission. Recognizing that the system had broken down, the Maryland legislature changed the law in 2011 so that the commission’s recommendations would automatically be carried out if the governor did not reject them within 180 days. This changed almost nothing. After the law’s passage, O’Malley vetoed nearly every recommendation that reached his desk.

This is not sound policy for fighting crime or protecting citizens. In Maryland, the average lifer who has been recommended for but not granted release is 60 years old. These men and women are past the age of “criminal menopause,” as some put it, and most pose no threat to their community. Even so, the Maryland Parole Commission’s recommendation is not easily attained: Between 2006 and 2014, it recommended only about 80 out of more than 2,100 eligible lifers for release. Almost none of those 80 or so men and women, despite meeting a stringent set of requirements, was granted release by the governor. Though Maryland’s Parole Commission still offers recommendations for lifers, they are disregarded. The choice given to judges to levy sentences for life either with or without parole no longer has any meaning.

Baltimore’s Racial Zoning

Born in the late 1950s, Odell Newton was part of the generation that so troubled Moynihan when he wrote his report on “The Negro Family.” But Odell had the very bulwark that Moynihan treasured—a stable family—and it did not save him from incarceration. It would be wrong to conclude from this that family is irrelevant. But families don’t exist independent of their environment. Odell was born in the midst of an era of government-backed housing discrimination. Indeed, Baltimore was a pioneer in this practice—in 1910, the city council had zoned the city by race. “Blacks should be quarantined in isolated slums,” J. Barry Mahool, Baltimore’s mayor, said. After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled such explicit racial-zoning schemes unconstitutional, in 1917, the city turned to other means—restrictive covenants, civic associations, and redlining—to keep blacks isolated.

These efforts curtailed the ability of black people to buy better housing, to move to better neighborhoods, and to build wealth. Also, by confining black people to the same neighborhoods, these efforts ensured that people who were discriminated against, and hence had little, tended to be neighbors only with others who also had little. Thus while an individual in that community might be high-achieving, even high-earning, his or her ability to increase that achievement and wealth and social capital, through friendship, marriage, or neighborhood organizations, would always be limited. Finally, racial zoning condemned black people to the oldest and worst housing in the city—the kind where one was more likely to be exposed, as Odell Newton was, to lead. A lawyer who handled more than 4,000 lead-poisoning cases across three decades recently described his client list to *The Washington Post*: “Nearly 99.9 percent of my clients were black.”

Generational Peril

That families are better off the stronger and more stable they are is self-evidently important. But so is the notion that no family can ever be made impregnable, that families are social structures existing within larger social structures.

If generational peril is the pit in which all black people are born, incarceration is the trapdoor closing overhead. “African Americans in our data are distinct from both Latinos and whites,” Robert Sampson told me. “Even when we control for marital status and family history of criminality, we still see these strong differences. The compounded deprivation that African Americans experience is a challenge even independent of all the characteristics we think are protective.” Characteristics such as the one Daniel Patrick Moynihan focused on—family.

For African Americans, unfreedom is the historical norm. Enslavement lasted for nearly 250 years. The 150 years that followed have encompassed debt peonage, convict lease-labor, and mass incarceration—a period that overlapped with Jim Crow. This provides a telling geographic comparison. Under Jim Crow, blacks in the South lived in a police state. Rates of incarceration were not that high—they didn’t need to be, because state social control of blacks was nearly total. Then, as African Americans migrated north, a police state grew up around them there, too.

The lesson of Minnesota is that the chasm in incarceration rates is deeply tied to the socioeconomic chasm between black and white America. The two are self-reinforcing—impoverished black people are more likely to end up in prison, and that experience breeds impoverishment. An array of laws, differing across the country but all emanating from our tendency toward punitive criminal justice—limiting or banning food stamps for drug felons; prohibiting ex-offenders from obtaining public housing—ensure this. So does the rampant discrimination against ex-offenders and black men in general. This, too, is self-reinforcing. The American population most discriminated against is also its most incarcerated—and the incarceration of so many African Americans, the mark of criminality, justifies everything they endure after.

Mass incarceration is, ultimately, a problem of troublesome entanglements. To war seriously against the disparity in unfreedom requires a war against a disparity in resources. And to war against a disparity in resources is to confront a history in which both the plunder and the mass incarceration of blacks are accepted commonplaces. Our current debate over criminal-justice reform pretends that it is possible to disentangle ourselves without significantly disturbing the other aspects of our lives, that one can extract the thread of mass incarceration from the larger tapestry of racist American policy.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report on “The Negro Family” was explosive for what it claimed about black mothers and black fathers—but if it had contained all of Moynihan’s thinking on the subject, including his policy recommendations, it likely would have been politically nuclear. “Now comes the proposition that the Negro is entitled to damages as to unequal favored treatment—in order to compensate for past unequal treatment of an opposite kind,” Moynihan wrote in 1964. His point was simple if impolitic: Blacks were suffering from the effects of centuries of ill treatment at the hands of white society. Ending that ill treatment would not be enough; the country would have to make amends for it. “It may be that without unequal treatment in the immediate future there is no way for [African Americans] to achieve anything like equal status in the long run,” Moynihan wrote.



This essay, “The Case for Reparations,”³ builds from the conclusion of the previous one.

Federal Discrimination & Oppression

Clyde Ross had tried to get a legitimate mortgage in another neighborhood, but was told by a loan officer that there was no financing available. The truth was that there was no financing for people like Clyde Ross. From the 1930s through the 1960s, black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through means both legal and extralegal. Chicago whites employed every measure, from “restrictive covenants” to bombings, to keep their neighborhoods segregated.

Their efforts were buttressed by the federal government. In 1934, Congress created the Federal Housing Administration. The FHA insured private mortgages, causing a drop in interest rates and a decline in the size of the down payment required to buy a house. But an insured mortgage was not a possibility for Clyde Ross. The FHA had adopted a system of maps that rated neighborhoods according to their perceived stability. On the maps, green areas, rated “A,” indicated “in demand” neighborhoods that, as one appraiser put it, lacked “a single foreigner or Negro.” These neighborhoods were considered excellent prospects for insurance. Neighborhoods where black people lived were rated “D” and were usually considered ineligible for FHA backing. They were colored in red. Neither the percentage of black people living there nor their social class mattered. Black people were viewed as a contagion. Redlining went beyond FHA-backed loans and spread to the entire mortgage industry, which was already rife with racism, excluding black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage.

A 1939 Home Owners’ Loan Corporation “Residential Security Map” of Chicago shows discrimination against low-income and minority neighborhoods. The residents of the areas marked in red (representing “hazardous” real-estate markets) were denied FHA-backed mortgages.

“A government offering such bounty to builders and lenders could have required compliance with a nondiscrimination policy,” Charles Abrams, the urban-studies expert who helped create the New York City Housing Authority, wrote in 1955. “Instead, the FHA adopted a racial policy that could well have been culled from the Nuremberg laws.”

Locked out of the greatest mass-based opportunity for wealth accumulation in American history, African Americans who desired and were able to afford home ownership found themselves consigned to central-city communities where their investments were affected by the “self-fulfilling prophecies” of the FHA appraisers: cut off from sources of new investment[,]

³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

their homes and communities deteriorated and lost value in comparison to those homes and communities that FHA appraisers deemed desirable.

In Chicago and across the country, whites looking to achieve the American dream could rely on a legitimate credit system backed by the government. Blacks were herded into the sights of unscrupulous lenders who took them for money and for sport.

Federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877. The dream of Reconstruction died. For the next century, political violence was visited upon blacks wantonly, with special treatment meted out toward black people of ambition. Black schools and churches were burned to the ground. Black voters and the political candidates who attempted to rally them were intimidated, and some were murdered. At the end of World War I, black veterans returning to their homes were assaulted for daring to wear the American uniform. The demobilization of soldiers after the war, which put white and black veterans into competition for scarce jobs, produced the Red Summer of 1919: a succession of racist pogroms against dozens of cities ranging from Longview, Texas, to Chicago to Washington, D.C. Organized white violence against blacks continued into the 1920s—in 1921 a white mob leveled Tulsa’s “Black Wall Street,” and in 1923 another one razed the black town of Rosewood, Florida—and virtually no one was punished.

The omnibus programs passed under the Social Security Act in 1935 were crafted in such a way as to protect the southern way of life. Old-age insurance (Social Security proper) and unemployment insurance excluded farmworkers and domestics—jobs heavily occupied by blacks. When President Roosevelt signed Social Security into law in 1935, 65 percent of African Americans nationally and between 70 and 80 percent in the South were ineligible. The NAACP protested, calling the new American safety net “a sieve with holes just big enough for the majority of Negroes to fall through.”

Whereas shortly before the New Deal, a typical mortgage required a large down payment and full repayment within about 10 years, the creation of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation in 1933 and then the Federal Housing Administration the following year allowed banks to offer loans requiring no more than 10 percent down, amortized over 20 to 30 years. “Without federal intervention in the housing market, massive suburbanization would have been impossible,” writes Thomas J. Sugrue, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania. “In 1930, only 30 percent of Americans owned their own homes; by 1960, more than 60 percent were home owners. Home ownership became an emblem of American citizenship.”

That emblem was not to be awarded to blacks. The American real-estate industry believed segregation to be a moral principle. As late as 1950, the National Association of Real Estate Boards’ code of ethics warned that “a Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood ... any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values.” A 1943 brochure specified that such potential undesirables might include madams, bootleggers, gangsters—and “a colored man of means who was giving his children a college education and thought they were entitled to live among whites.”

The federal government concurred. It was the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, not a private trade association, that pioneered the practice of redlining, selectively granting loans and insisting that any property it insured be covered by a restrictive covenant—a clause in the deed forbidding the sale of the property to anyone other than whites. Millions of dollars flowed from tax coffers into segregated white neighborhoods.

“For perhaps the first time, the federal government embraced the discriminatory attitudes of the marketplace,” the historian Kenneth T. Jackson wrote in his 1985 book, *Crabgrass Frontier*, a history of suburbanization. “Previously, prejudices were personalized and

individualized; FHA exhorted segregation and enshrined it as public policy. Whole areas of cities were declared ineligible for loan guarantees.” Redlining was not officially outlawed until 1968, by the Fair Housing Act. By then the damage was done—and reports of redlining by banks have continued.

From the White House on down, the myth holds that fatherhood is the great antidote to all that ails black people. But Billy Brooks Jr. had a father. Trayvon Martin had a father. Jordan Davis had a father. Adhering to middle-class norms has never shielded black people from plunder. . . . Some black people always will be twice as good. But they generally find white predation to be thrice as fast.

When we think of white supremacy, we picture Colored Only signs, but we should picture pirate flags.

Making Things Right

The lives of black Americans are better than they were half a century ago. The humiliation of WHITES ONLY signs are gone. Rates of black poverty have decreased. Black teen-pregnancy rates are at record lows—and the gap between black and white teen-pregnancy rates has shrunk significantly. But such progress rests on a shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere. The income gap between black and white households is roughly the same today as it was in 1970. Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University, studied children born from 1955 through 1970 and found that 4 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks across America had been raised in poor neighborhoods. A generation later, the same study showed, virtually nothing had changed. And whereas whites born into affluent neighborhoods tended to remain in affluent neighborhoods, blacks tended to fall out of them.

This is not surprising. Black families, regardless of income, are significantly less wealthy than white families. The Pew Research Center estimates that white households are worth roughly 20 times as much as black households, and that whereas only 15 percent of whites have zero or negative wealth, more than a third of blacks do. Effectively, the black family in America is working without a safety net. When financial calamity strikes—a medical emergency, divorce, job loss—the fall is precipitous.

And just as black families of all incomes remain handicapped by a lack of wealth, so too do they remain handicapped by their restricted choice of neighborhood. Black people with upper-middle-class incomes do not generally live in upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Sharkey’s research shows that black families making \$100,000 typically live in the kinds of neighborhoods inhabited by white families making \$30,000. “Blacks and whites inhabit such different neighborhoods,” Sharkey writes, “that it is not possible to compare the economic outcomes of black and white children.”

But while the people advocating reparations have changed over time, the response from the country has remained virtually the same. “They have been taught to labor,” the *Chicago Tribune* editorialized in 1891. “They have been taught Christian civilization, and to speak the noble English language instead of some African gibberish. The account is square with the ex-slaves.”

Not exactly. Having been enslaved for 250 years, black people were not left to their own devices. They were terrorized. In the Deep South, a second slavery ruled. In the North, legislatures, mayors, civic associations, banks, and citizens all colluded to pin black people into ghettos, where they were overcrowded, overcharged, and undereducated. Businesses discriminated against them, awarding them the worst jobs and the worst wages. Police brutalized them in the streets. And the notion that black lives, black bodies, and black wealth

were rightful targets remained deeply rooted in the broader society. Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising, “Never again.” But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us.

Broach the topic of reparations today and a barrage of questions inevitably follows: Who will be paid? How much will they be paid? Who will pay? But if the practicalities, not the justice, of reparations are the true sticking point, there has for some time been the beginnings of a solution. For the past 25 years, Congressman John Conyers Jr., who represents the Detroit area, has marked every session of Congress by introducing a bill calling for a congressional study of slavery and its lingering effects as well as recommendations for “appropriate remedies.”

A country curious about how reparations might actually work has an easy solution in Conyers’s bill, now called HR 40, the Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act. We would support this bill, submit the question to study, and then assess the possible solutions. But we are not interested.

“It’s because it’s black folks making the claim,” Nkechi Taifa, who helped found N’COBRA, says. “People who talk about reparations are considered left lunatics. But all we are talking about is studying [reparations]. As John Conyers has said, we study everything. We study the water, the air. We can’t even study the issue? This bill does not authorize one red cent to anyone.”

That HR 40 has never—under either Democrats or Republicans—made it to the House floor suggests our concerns are rooted not in the impracticality of reparations but in something more existential. If we conclude that the conditions in North Lawndale and black America are not inexplicable but are instead precisely what you’d expect of a community that for centuries has lived in America’s crosshairs, then what are we to make of the world’s oldest democracy?

To ignore the fact that one of the oldest republics in the world was erected on a foundation of white supremacy, to pretend that the problems of a dual society are the same as the problems of unregulated capitalism, is to cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying. The lie ignores the fact that reducing American poverty and ending white supremacy are not the same. The lie ignores the fact that closing the “achievement gap” will do nothing to close the “injury gap,” in which black college graduates still suffer higher unemployment rates than white college graduates, and black job applicants without criminal records enjoy roughly the same chance of getting hired as white applicants *with* criminal records.

Scholars have long discussed methods by which America might make reparations to those on whose labor and exclusion the country was built. In the 1970s, the Yale Law professor Boris Bittker argued in *The Case for Black Reparations* that a rough price tag for reparations could be determined by multiplying the number of African Americans in the population by the difference in white and black per capita income. That number—\$34 billion in 1973, when Bittker wrote his book—could be added to a reparations program each year for a decade or two. Today Charles Ogletree, the Harvard Law School professor, argues for something broader: a program of job training and public works that takes racial justice as its mission but includes the poor of all races.

Perhaps no statistic better illustrates the enduring legacy of our country’s shameful history of treating black people as sub-citizens, sub-Americans, and sub-humans than the wealth gap. Reparations would seek to close this chasm. But as surely as the creation of the wealth gap required the cooperation of every aspect of the society, bridging it will require the same.

Perhaps after a serious discussion and debate—the kind that HR 40 proposes—we may find that the country can never fully repay African Americans. But we stand to discover much about ourselves in such a discussion—and that is perhaps what scares us. The idea of reparations is frightening not simply because we might lack the ability to pay. The idea of reparations threatens something much deeper—America’s heritage, history, and standing in the world.

THE EARLY AMERICAN ECONOMY was built on slave labor. The Capitol and the White House were built by slaves. President James K. Polk traded slaves from the Oval Office. The laments about “black pathology,” the criticism of black family structures by pundits and intellectuals, ring hollow in a country whose existence was predicated on the torture of black fathers, on the rape of black mothers, on the sale of black children. An honest assessment of America’s relationship to the black family reveals the country to be not its nurturer but its destroyer.

And this destruction did not end with slavery. Discriminatory laws joined the equal burden of citizenship to unequal distribution of its bounty. These laws reached their apex in the mid-20th century, when the federal government—through housing policies—engineered the wealth gap, which remains with us to this day. When we think of white supremacy, we picture COLORED ONLY signs, but we should picture pirate flags.

On some level, we have always grasped this. “Negro poverty is not white poverty,” President Johnson said in his historic civil-rights speech. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences—deep, corrosive, obstinate differences—radiating painful roots into the community and into the family, and the nature of the individual. These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice.

We invoke the words of Jefferson and Lincoln because they say something about our legacy and our traditions. We do this because we recognize our links to the past—at least when they flatter us. But black history does not flatter American democracy; it chastens it. The popular mocking of reparations as a harebrained scheme authored by wild-eyed lefties and intellectually unserious black nationalists is fear masquerading as laughter. Black nationalists have always perceived something unmentionable about America that integrationists dare not acknowledge—that white supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.

And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. The recovering alcoholic may well have to live with his illness for the rest of his life. But at least he is not living a drunken lie. Reparations beckons us to reject the intoxication of hubris and see America as it is—the work of fallible humans.

Won’t reparations divide us? Not any more than we are already divided. The wealth gap merely puts a number on something we feel but cannot say—that American prosperity was ill-gotten and selective in its distribution. What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt.

What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling “patriotism” while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of

the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.

John Conyers's HR 40⁴ is the vehicle for that hearing. No one can know what would come out of such a debate. Perhaps no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America. Perhaps the number is so large that it can't be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed. But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future. More important than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America's maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders.

And Now . . .

So how do we—how do you, how do I—respond to all this? What should we do now? Is H.R. 40 a place to start? We at CBF, whatever our cultural background, are the fortunate ones. What does God require of us?

Dave

H.R. 40: Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act

Introduced: Jan 6, 2015

Status: Referred to Committee on Jan 6, 2015

This bill was assigned to a congressional committee on January 6, 2015, which will consider it before possibly sending it on to the House or Senate as a whole.

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John Conyers Jr.

Representative for Michigan's 13th congressional district

Democrat

Text:



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Last Updated: Jan 6, 2015

Length: 11 pages

Prognosis: 0% chance of being enacted

⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/40/text> ; attached with *Laptop*