

■ Opening Statement on Slavery Reparations before the House Judiciary Committee

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Author: Ta-Nehisi Coates

Genre: address; speech; testimony

Summary Overview

The topic of slavery reparations is often associated with progressive or liberal political discussion as well as with Black civil rights. It is a complex and debated issue that spans various political ideologies. Supporters, including many liberals and left-leaning policymakers, advocate for reparations as a means to address historical injustices, racial inequality, and economic disparities stemming from slavery and systemic discrimination. Opponents raise concerns about feasibility, fairness, and implementation, not to mention the question of responsibility for something that happened so long ago.

On June 19, 2019, the African American author and intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates spoke to the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary in support of H.R. 40, a bill first introduced to the U.S. House by John Conyers (D-MI) in 1989, on the reasons behind the calls for reparation payments to the African American descendants of slaves. Though controversial in the eyes of many, the idea of reparations, dating all the way back to 1865, when Union General William T. Sherman's gave "forty acres and a mule" to some 40,000 freed slaves, has been a consistent part of the discussions around creating social and economic justice for African Americans. Coates, however, expands on the justification, noting the legacy of Jim Crow laws and economic inequality for African Americans down to the present day as a reason why reparations are necessary.

Defining Moment

During 2019, the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary held hearings on H.R. 40, a decades-old bill, whose passage would lead to the establishment of a congressional committee to study the effects of African American slavery on the generations of Black Americans after the Civil War and would likely lead to the payment of reparations to the descendants of slaves in the United States. As a part of those hearings, a number of African American scholars and intellectuals testified, including Ta-Nehisi Coates. In his testimony on June 19, 2019, Coates concisely recounted the historical, economic, and social reasons for reparations. H.R.



Ta-Nehisi Coates. Photo by Eduardo Montes-Bradley, via Wikimedia Commons.

40 was originally introduced for consideration by the U.S. House of Representatives in 1989, by former Judiciary Committee chair, Representative John Conyers (D-MI), but had never been given any real consideration by the House as a whole, despite the fact that Conyers reintroduced the bill each year.

Author Biography

Ta-Nehisi Coates was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1975 to parents who had long been involved in movements in support of African American rights. Although he attended Howard University, he left before completing his degree in order to pursue a career in

journalism. Writing for various newspapers and magazines, Coates began writing for *The Atlantic* in 2015, eventually becoming a senior editor. He is the author of several books connecting his own background to the larger story of African American life and culture, as well as two of the best-known Marvel comic book series, *Captain America* and *Black Panther*. He has taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the City University of New York, New York University, and Howard University, and became increasing well-known during the late 2010s and 2020s as a public intellectual and advocate for reparations for the descendants of African slaves in the United States.



Historical Document

Yesterday when asked about reparations, Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, offered a familiar reply: America should not be held liable for “something that happened 150 years ago” since “none of us currently [living] are responsible.”

This rebuttal proffers a strange theory of governance—that American accounts are somehow bound by the lifetime of its generations. But well into this century, the United States was still paying out pensions to the heirs of Civil War soldiers. We honor treaties that date back some 200 years, despite no one being alive who signed those treaties. Many of us would love to be taxed for the things we are solely and individually responsible for. But we are American citizens, and thus bound to a collective enterprise that extends beyond our individual and personal reach.

It would seem ridiculous to dispute invocations of the Founders, or the Greatest Generation, on the basis of lack of membership in either group. We recognize our lineage as a generational trust, as inheritance; and the real dilemma posed by reparations is just that: a dilemma of inheritance.

It is impossible to imagine America without the inheritance of slavery. As historian Ed Baptist has written, enslavement, “shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics” of America, so that by 1836 more than 600 million [dollars], almost half of the economic activity in the United States, derived directly or indirectly from the cotton produced by the million-odd slaves. By the time the enslaved were emancipated, they comprised the largest single asset in America: three billion in 1860 dollars, more than all the other assets in the country combined.

The method of cultivating this asset was neither gentle cajoling nor persuasion, but torture, rape, and child trafficking. Enslavement reigned for 250 years on these shores. When it ended, this country could have extended its hallowed principles—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to all, regardless of color. But America had other principles in mind. And so, for a century after the Civil War, black people were subjected to a relentless campaign of terror, a campaign that extended well into the lifetime of [Senate] Majority Leader McConnell.

It is tempting to divorce this modern campaign of terror, of plunder, from enslavement. But the logic of enslavement, of white supremacy, respects no such borders, and the god of bondage was lustful and begat many heirs: coup d'états and convict leasing, vagrancy laws and debt peonage [or debt

bondage], redlining and racist GI bills, poll taxes and state—state-sponsored terrorism.

We grant that Mr. McConnell was not alive for Appomattox, but he was alive for the electrocution of George Stinney. He was alive for the blinding of Isaac Woodard. He was alive to witness kleptocracy in his native Alabama and a regime premised on electoral theft. Majority Leader McConnell cited civil rights legislation yesterday, as well he should, because he was alive to witness the harassment, jailing, and betrayal of those responsible for that legislation by a government sworn to protect them. He was alive for the redlining of Chicago and the looting of black homeowners of some four billion dollars. Victims of that plunder are very much alive today. I am sure they'd love a word with the majority leader.

What they know, what this committee must know, is that while emancipation dead-bolted the door against the bandits of America, Jim Crow wedged the windows wide open. And that is the thing about Senator McConnell's "something." It was 150 years ago. And it was right now.

The typical black family in this country has one-tenth the wealth of the typical white family. Black women die in childbirth at four times the rate of white women. And there is, of course, the shame of this land of the free boasting the largest prison population on the planet, of which the descendants of the enslaved make up the largest share.

The matter of reparations is one of making amends and direct redress, but it is also a question of citizenship. In H.R. 40, this body has a chance to both make good on its 2009 apology for enslavement and reject fair-weather patriotism, to say that a nation is both its credits and its debits; that if Thomas Jefferson matters, so does Sally Hemings; that if D-Day matters, so does Black Wall Street; that if Valley Forge matters, so does Fort Pillow; because the question really is not whether we will be tied to the somethings of our past, but whether we are courageous enough to be tied to the whole of them.

Thank you.



Glossary

Appomattox: the town in Virginia where in 1865 Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to Union general Ulysses S. Grant, portending the end of the Civil War

Jim Crow: an overall term for the laws and social customs that created and reinforced a segregated society in the United States after the end of the Civil War

Document Analysis

Coates begins his testimony by quoting then Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who argued against reparations by stating that the federal government and the American people should not be responsible for “something that happened 150 years ago.” Using McConnell’s statement as a foil, Coates first demonstrates how the United States had often paid out money to people many years after an injustice had been committed, citing the reparations paid by the federal government to the descendants of Japanese Americans who had been interned during World War II, without any rationale other than their ethnic heritage.

Coates also discusses the history of African American life in the years since the Civil War, demonstrating that the discrimination and segregation of the Jim Crow system of laws and social rules over approximately 100 years after the Civil War was a lasting blow to Black families and individuals, and it ended only comparatively recently in history. Bringing his argument down to the present day, Coates notes the social and economic disparity between Black and white Americans that has persisted despite the social and political gains made as a result of the civil rights movement that began in the 1950s.

Essential Themes

Calls for reparations to the descendants of African slaves in the United States have been made since the end of the Civil War and have been an important undercurrent of civil rights efforts ever since. As early as 1860, the value of the physical bodies of enslaved Black people in the United States were estimated to be some \$3 billion, and the value of their labor was the backbone of the American economy before the Civil War. Although the slaves’ bodies and labor were taken from them, they were never compensated for them after the Civil War.

Many modern advocates for reparations argue that the federal government is responsible to the descendants of slaves for the lost wages of their labor,

adjusted for inflation. Viewing slavery and the later Jim Crow laws, as well as the institutional racism present in American society, as the genesis of the wealth gap between Black and white families in the United States, where, as of 2016, white families had a median family wealth of approximately \$171,000, as compared to Black families’ median family wealth of approximately \$17,600.

A number of different means have been proposed to institute reparations to the descendants of former slaves, ranging from direct payments, to free college tuition, to grants for mortgage down payments and housing revitalization plans, to business grants that would allow Blacks to start new business or expand existing ones. However, reparations seem a long way from a reality when the United States Congress cannot even agree on a statement of apology for enslaving some 12.5 million Africans and African Americans during its first ninety-one years of existence. A bill to that effect passed the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008, but has never passed the U.S. Senate.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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