

Chapter 9

Compensation for Slavery

Suppose someone stole your freedom and that of your family, as well as their money, time, and the results of all of their hard work. Imagine that this did not only happen to you but to millions of people just like yourself. Would you believe that someone should have to pay for this crime, even if it happened 200 years ago? Should the people who benefited from this theft and still benefit from it be the ones who have to do something to compensate you and your family for their losses?

Suppose your family committed some great crime hundreds of years ago. Suppose that your family is still benefiting from the riches accumulated from that theft. Do you think that they should do something to compensate the family of the victims?

The preceding suppositions raise some of the same issues that have been debated recently by scholars, politicians, and students of American history. Based on a book by Randall Robinson, *The Debt*, the argument has been made that the combined loss to African-Americans due to slavery is in excess of 1.4 trillion dollars, and that Americans owe some kind of compensation to those whose ancestors suffered from slavery and the racism and discrimination which still exists. They cite the fact that Nazi victims of genocide and American victims of Japanese internment during World War II have been repaid in part for their suffering. Similarly, the argument goes, victims of this ugly period in American history should be compensated in some form.

On the other side of the debate, opponents of compensation argue that none of those who suffered from slavery are alive today, and none of the individuals who enslaved them are reachable. It would be unfair, the argument goes, to punish people just because their skin is white in order to make up for something done hundreds of years ago to someone whose skin is black.

Read the following excerpts from people who have taken a stand on this debate over compensation for slavery and decide for yourself with whom you agree.

DeWayne Wickham: Today's Blacks too Distant from Slavery? Think Again	Chris Wolski: Slavery Compensation Itself Rests on Racism
<p>You cannot measure the devastating impact of slavery without taking into account the damage done to African-Americans by its awful progeny. This unbroken chain of legal discrimination (which didn't end until the 1960s, when a series of laws passed by Congress outlawed most forms of de jure racial bias) has touched the lives of most of this nation's current generation of African-Americans.</p>	<p>The suit filed against the U.S. government and big corporations demanding "compensation" for the descendents of slaves is grotesque and should be dismissed without a hearing, said an Ayn Rand Institute Fellow.</p> <p>"Slavery was evil, but America atoned for it during the Civil War—a war that produced more than 600,000 casualties and ended slavery 135</p>

³³ DeWayne Wickham *USA Today*

Few people doubt the harm slavery did, but opponents of reparations question whether any of the guilty parties are still around.

Well, how about the federal government? From the U.S. Constitution's "three-fifth's clause," to the Fugitive Slave and the Kansas-Nebraska acts, the federal government played the central role in maintaining, policing and expanding slavery. It gave legal standing to slavery and later turned a blind eye to the laws that Southern states enacted to maintain African-Americans in a state of neo slavery.

In protecting slavery – arguably this country's greatest generator of wealth during the first half of the 19th century – the federal government made it possible for many families and companies to reap substantial financial benefits from the misery heaped upon slaves and the generations of dispossessed African-Americans that the Jim Crow period produced.

Some newspapers that are still around today profited from ads they once ran on the buying and selling of slaves or the apprehension of runaway slaves. More than a few people whose family's wealth is rooted in the antebellum economy and benefited from the enslavement of millions of Africans are well off today because of this connection. It's likely that some of this ill-gotten gain has been used to capitalize businesses or endow universities. Some insurance companies, such as Aetna, that insured slaveholders against the loss of their human property benefited from slavery.

They all owe much to the descendants of slaves. This debt should be paid in some fashion to all African-Americans regardless of the mix of their bloodlines. Miscegenation was a spoil of slavery. White slave owners routinely had their way with black women. The linear successors of these offsprings are the most obvious proof of the cruelty inflicted upon slave families.³³

years ago," said Robert W. Tracinski, whose editorials appear weekly in *Capitalism Magazine*. "For the descendents of black slaves to make demands for special privileges, compensation, and apologies from current Americans – who had nothing to do with slavery – is an ugly moral inversion that makes Americans who happen to be white guilty because of their skin color."

Tracinski said that the only standard that can be used to justify such an approach is *racism* – the idea that each member of the race is responsible for and can be blamed for the actions of every other member, that we are all just interchangeable cells of the racial collective.

"The proposed compensation consists of punishing random whites and 'white-owned' businesses because they're white in order to reward random blacks because they're black," said Tracinski. "The result of this approach is not racial harmony or a color-blind society, but racial warfare. Given the premise of racial collectivism, an injustice committed against any past or present member of your racial group entitles you to retaliate against any past or present member of the perpetrator's racial group. Individual justice is thrown out, replaced by racial vendettas.

"The only alternative to this kind of racial balkanization is to reject the notion of racial collectivism altogether and embrace the opposite principle: individualism. An individual should not be judged as representative of his racial group. He should be judged – and rewarded or punished – based on his ideas and actions. And he certainly must not be forced to pay for crimes committed by others, merely because those others have the same skin color.³⁴

³⁴ CAPITALISMMAGAZINE.COM, January 6, 2001

Results of a Poll on Compensation

Below are the results of a month long informal poll conducted by *Black Voices* with their readership on the issue of reparations.

Question:

In the past, the United States has paid reparations to other minority groups such as Japanese Americans. With this in mind do you think the country should pay reparations to African Americans.

Answers

Yes I do. Reparations for African American has been a long time in coming – 730 Votes, 75.4 %.

No, what's past is past and we should move forward instead of backwards, 64 Votes – 6.6 %.

No. I'm for the idea but I don't see any blacks living today can claim reparations for slavery – 117 Votes, 12.0 %:

I don't know enough about the issue yet to make a decision – 57 Votes, 5.8 %.

Question

How much do you think each individual should receive?

Answers

\$100 - \$1000 – 64 Votes, 10.1 %.

\$1000 - \$5000 – 73 Votes, 11.5 %.

92 Votes, 14.6 %: \$5000 - \$10,000

over \$10,000 – 401 Votes, 63.6 %.

Question:

How do think any reparations should be split amongst African Americans?

Answers

219 Votes, 37.5 %: Age should be the first determining factor (oldest to youngest), followed by economic standing (poorest to richest).

54 Votes, 9.2 %: Economic standing should be considered first, then age.

310 Votes, 53.1 %: It should be dispersed evenly.³⁵

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. State the problem and summarize the argument on both sides of the compensation debate.
2. Take a position on one side or the other of the debate.
3. If compensation were to be granted for slavery, should it take the form of:

- a. Direct payments to African-Americans based on financial need

³⁵ *Black Voices* <http://www.blackvoices.com/feature/reparations/main.html>

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www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

- b. Support for programs such as low income housing and free college or trade school tuition for needy African-Americans
- c. Other