

Reparations for Slavery
Posted On:December 31, 1969

The original American sin, slavery, was abolished by law by Abraham Lincoln. There was a brief attempt to provide former agricultural slaves with Forty Acres and a Mule, in hope that this would give them a start in being self-sustaining farmers. This measure was proclaimed by General Sherman under his authority as a military governor, but was quickly rejected when the Southern States regained their political independence.

Many slaves hoped to obtain ownership of at least a part of the plantations in which they labored, but without capital, they soon lost their farms. This truth has haunted many Americans who would like to see us live up to our values and to undo the injustice of slavery, a racial and class bias still with us. Idealists have promoted a program of reparation, a money settlement to the descendants of slaves, an idea opposed by many of us who have sympathy with the intent, but think the execution would be impracticable.

If we want reparations for former slavery, how about considering women, still suffering this status in much of the world? If this were proposed, there would not be enough money in the world to repay women who, until the 20th century in the modern world, were the property of men, either as wives, daughters, or servants. Shall we women line up?

Cooler heads are considering how to address the injustices that have plagued the development of Black citizens other than a one-time payoff. We only need to look hard at our society and see the solution right in front of us. Those Black Americans who have entered the mainstream of American society have something the others do not have: an education.

After slavery was abolished, domestic slaves who were literate became the first class of Black professionals: doctors, lawyers, ministers, and teachers. Other Black citizens found their way into the working and middle classes through government jobs, such as the US Postal Service, and through Black unions such as the union of railway porters. They earned enough money to educate their children, who then became genuinely middle class or professional.

Two problems have stood in the way of complete Black access to the middle class: housing (rules excluding Black homeowners from good neighborhoods with good schools) and good schools. When successful Black professionals were able to move from inner cities into the suburbs, they effectively joined the middle and sometimes upper classes. This left inner cities to rot, models of success no longer around. Popular inner-city Black culture has done them no favors either. Money for individuals alone (and how will we select them?) will not change the cultural problem: housing and education.

For real reparations, block grants should be used to establish boarding schools that promote the habits and behaviors of success: diligence, study, courtesy to one another, and then scholarships into the universities that have enabled the rest of us to successful careers.

My own graduate schooling was payed for by a government grant for women returning later to finish their educations. This is smart use of money, and qualified women, Black or White, have benefitted. A one-time payment wouldn't have done this.

We only need to look at the doers in our society to see how many Black men and women have entered their ranks. Experts who happen to be Black (professors, generals, FBI and CIA operatives, and Federal prosecutors), serve in every panel discussion. The US military has played an important role in promoting Black soldiers into the upper ranks, including such generals as Colin Powell. I remember the Nixon impeachment hearings when a Black Congresswoman from Texas, Barbara Jordan, a woman who a generation before might have been toiling in the fields, electrified audiences with her brilliance and eloquence.

Congressman Elijah Cummings, who chairs the House Oversight Committee, awed me with his decent, passionate appeal to his committee's better angels. His committee actually does its Constitution-mandated duty, oversight of a dangerous presidency. Cummings rose to this position without "reparations." A one-time payment cannot address what well designed programs can. And it cannot pay for character.

680 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.