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Calls for reparations are growing louder. How is the US responding?

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12-15 minutes

As the American civil war reached its bloody end in 1865, the Union general William Sherman seized land from Confederates and mandated it be redistributed, in 40-acre plots, to newly freed slaves.

The promise of “40 acres and a mule” was never fulfilled. But a debate has raged ever since about what America owes to the descendants of slaves, and to the victims of racial terror and state-sanctioned discrimination that persisted long after emancipation.

“We helped build this nation. We built the United States Capitol. We built the White House. We made cotton king and that built the early economy of the United States,” the Texas congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, the sponsor of a House resolution to study reparations, said in an interview this week.

“We were never paid, never given insurance, never received compensation for the more than 200 years of living and working in bondage. And we continue to live with the stain of slavery today.”

Jackson Lee said the disparities exposed by compounding national crises – a pandemic, an economic collapse and widespread protests over police brutality, all of which have taken an unequal toll on African Americans – are helping to make the case for reparations.

In the weeks since George Floyd died pleading for his life under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, an act many saw as an embodiment of the violent oppression black Americans have endured for centuries, public support for the Black Lives Matter movement has soared.

“Look at the protests. Look at the protesters,” Jackson Lee said. “We are winning the hearts and minds of the American people. That’s why I think the time to pass reparations is now.”



▲ Sheila Jackson Lee speaks during a hearing about reparations for the descendants of slaves before a House judiciary subcommittee. Photograph: Pablo Martínez Monsiváis/AP

Reparations were once a lonely cause championed by black leaders and lawmakers. Now the debate has moved to the center of mainstream politics.

Several [states](#), [localities](#) and [private institutions](#) are beginning to grapple with issue, advancing legislation or convening taskforces to develop proposals for reparations. Progressive candidates running for Congress from [New York](#) to [Colorado](#) to [Texas](#) have declared their support for reparations. And earlier this month, at an AME church in Delaware, Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, listened as the state senator Darius Brown challenged him on the issue.

“It shouldn’t be a study of reparations,” Brown said. “It should be funding reparations.”

But for scholars and advocates who have been making the case for reparations for decades, Biden’s [support](#) for studying the issue represents a dramatic break from the past.

John Conyers, who died in 2019 and was the longest-serving African American in Congress, first introduced a bill to study reparations for slavery in 1989. The Michigan Democrat reintroduced it every cycle for nearly three decades, until he resigned in 2017. Even Barack Obama, when asked by the author, Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose influential 2014 [essay](#) in the Atlantic reintroduced the subject, said he was [opposed](#), arguing that reparations was politically impractical.

Jackson Lee reintroduced Conyers’ bill, which would develop a commission to study the legacy of slavery across generations and consider a “national apology” for the harm it has caused. The measure, designated HR 40 in reference to Sherman’s unmet promise, now has more than 125 sponsors, the blessing of Nancy Pelosi, the House speaker, and the New Jersey senator Cory Booker introduced a companion measure.

On Juneteenth last year, a congressional subcommittee convened a [first-of-its-kind](#) hearing to discuss how the nation might atone for its “original sin”, as well as the Jim Crow segregation that followed and the modern scourges of mass incarceration, persistent inequality and police violence that still plague African Americans.

Such a commission would have to grapple with profound moral and ethical questions as well as profane matters of money and politics. Proposals [vary widely](#), as do the cost estimates and suggested criteria for eligibility. But at their core is an attempt to make economic amends for historic wrongs.

William Darity, an economist at Duke University and the author of [From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century](#), argues that the wealth disparities between white and black Americans is the “most powerful indicator” of the cumulative economic toll of racial injustice in America.

The data paint a stark picture. Black Americans [hold](#) one-tenth of the wealth of white Americans. Just 41% of black families own their homes compared with more than 70% of white families. And black college graduates [have a lower homeownership rate](#) than white high school dropouts.

Darity says the objective of a reparations package should be to close the wealth gap, and that the best way to do that is by direct payments to eligible black Americans. As for political objections to the scale and expense of such a program, he notes that earlier this year Congress allocated \$2tn for a coronavirus relief measure that included direct payments to Americans.

Others have suggested compensation in the form of educational vouchers, health insurance or investments in programs that address disparities in education, housing and employment.

That the debate has expanded to include discussions over feasibility and mechanics is a sign of progress, Darity said.

“We’re finally moving away from the question of whether or not it’s the right thing to do – because more and more people acknowledge that, at least in principle, it is the right thing to do,” he said. “And that is a major step forward because the logistical questions can be resolved.”

Still the notion of compensating descendants of American slaves is not widely popular. But there are signs that is shifting.

According to a [Gallup Poll](#) conducted in 2002, 81% of Americans opposed reparations, compared with just 14% who supported the idea. In 2019, Gallup found that 29% of Americans agreed the government should recompense descendants of the enslaved, with support rising among white Americans from 6% to 16%. The most dramatic increase was among black Americans, whose support climbed from a simple majority in 2002 to nearly three-quarters in 2019.

At the same time, young Americans are significantly more likely to agree that the legacy of slavery still impacts black Americans today, while also being more likely to say the US government should formally apologize for slavery and pay reparations, according to an AP-NORC [poll](#) published in September.

And supporters are hopeful those numbers will rise amid a national reckoning over racism and discrimination. Public opinion on race has shifted dramatically in the span of a few weeks, with a majority of Americans now in agreement that racial discrimination is a “big problem” in the United States.

In California, assemblywoman Shirley Weber said the protests fueled interest in her bill to study reparations in the state, which the chamber [approved](#) overwhelmingly last week.

“Something dramatic is going on,” said Weber, who is the daughter of sharecroppers and a scholar of African American studies. “Folks now begin to realize just how extensively, how deeply, issues of race are embedded in our society and how that can produce what we saw happen to George Floyd in Minneapolis.”

Reparations have long been met with strong resistance from conservatives and some prominent black leaders, who have dismissed the idea as impractical and unnecessarily divisive.

“I don’t think reparations help level the playing field, it might help more eruptions on the playing field,” Senator Tim Scott, the lone black Republican senator, [told](#) Fox News earlier this month.

Coleman Hughes, a fellow at the free market thinktank Manhattan Institute, worries a renewed focus on reparations was a “distraction” from the more pressing issues, like police brutality and mass incarceration, that has devastated America’s black communities.

“How are reparations going to hold police accountable?” he said. “What is the added value of talking about reparations as opposed to talking about just good public policy that is going to address inequality and poverty?”



▲ Widespread protests fueled interest in Shirley Weber’s bill to study reparations in California. Photograph: Justin Lane/EPA

Yet recompense for historical injustices are not without precedent in America.

After the second world war, Congress created a commission to compensate Native American tribes for land seized by the US government, though many say the approach was paternalistic. Decades later, Ronald Reagan signed legislation that authorized individual payments of \$20,000 to Japanese Americans who were interned in the US during the second world war, and extended a formal apology from the US government.

In 2008, the House [passed](#) a resolution acknowledging and apologizing for slavery. The Senate [approved](#) a similar resolution a year later, but a disclaimer was appended to ensure the apology could not be used as a legal rationale for reparations.

Facing history is a necessary part of the healing process for nations cleaved by atrocity said [Susan Neiman](#), an Atlanta-born academic based in Berlin and the author of [Learning from the Germans](#).

She said it took time for Germany to confront the horrors of nazism and the Holocaust, Neiman said, and the process faced strong resistance. Since 1952, Germany has paid reparations, mostly to Jewish victims of the Nazi regime.

"It needs to be a multi-layered process, one involving schools, the arts, rethinking what values we want to honor in public space, and all manner of legal measures from reparations to ending police brutality," she said. "Ideally, a broad democratic discussion must accompany such a process, and once it's done, countries are actually better off for it."

The cruelty of the Covid-19 outbreak, the economic crisis and police brutality against black Americans must be understood as part of "a continuum that began with the Middle Passage", said the California congresswoman Barbara Lee, author of a new [bill](#) to establish a Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission.

"This is truth-telling time," she said. "We have to, as I say, break these chains once and for all."