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Juneteenth Is Now a National Holiday. Are Reparations Next?

By Janell Ross : 21-26 minutes

On June 21, 1865, just two days after federal troops came ashore at Galveston Island, then a major Texas port, the editors of the Galveston *Daily News* printed on the front page a national prescription.

The troops had arrived in the wake of the Civil War to restore U.S. control of the far-flung Confederate holdout. It quickly became clear they would have to begin by proclaiming what had already been true in other rebel territory for two and a half years: “[all slaves are free](#).” The Union Army declaration set off a wave of jubilee celebrations that from that day forward would be celebrated by the once enslaved as Juneteenth. But mere days after that emancipation in Texas, the very last in all the [territory controlled by the United States](#), the Galveston editors revealed much by publishing—just to the left of an advertisement for annual *Daily News* subscriptions (\$12 a year)—this idea: Freedom for the enslaved had been forced by the army of the United States, but the people who had provided the still young nation with nearly 250 years of lucrative, unpaid labor had to be contained in some other way.

“[The] attempt to set the negro free from all restraint and make him, politically, the equal of the white man,” they wrote, “will be most disasterous to the whole country and absolutely ruinous to the South.” The editorial insisted that it would be essential that Black Americans be disabused of the idea that “freedom” would involve free movement, free association, economic autonomy, social inclusion, or anything approximating actual equality. However, the editors of the Galveston *Daily News* were “a good deal encouraged” to see that a new infrastructure for exploitative Black labor had in other parts of the South already become the norm.

Read more: [The Best Way to Honor Juneteenth, According to Activists Who Helped Make It a National Holiday](#)

In other words, almost as soon as enslavement met its death, the country got to work delineating what freedom must not, should not, could not mean for Black Americans. Yes, there was [a period after the war when it seemed things might go a different way](#). But in the years that followed, a thinly disguised continuation of the thinking of those Galveston editors has dominated life in the United States. They wanted to keep Black Americans as the nation’s permanent underclass—those who provided the labor that made others rich, those who built but did not own, those who crafted but received no credit. And as civil rights lawyer Lisa Holder put it when I called her this week, that’s a logic that has effectively rendered white supremacy “omnipresent,” a core organizing principle of the United States.

“It’s not something that is unique to the Klan,” says Holder, a member of California’s Reparations Task Force, which earlier this month issued [a report](#) containing hundreds of pages examining a broad array of specific harms—past and present—inflicted on Black Americans. “You don’t have to belong to a white nationalist group to adhere to white supremacist principles because it’s everywhere. That’s our history. That’s the underpinning.”

But, to Holder, the country now has a chance to “correct that underpinning.” The drumbeat for reparations for Black Americans—an idea floated during the final stages of the Civil War and again during doomed resurgences in both the [1890s](#) and [1980s](#)—is sounding again, perhaps louder than ever before.

In October 2021, 62% of American adults—including 54% of white Americans, 83 % of Black Americans, and 71% of Latino Americans—told researchers with Gallup’s Center on Black Voices that the government should take action to reduce the continuing impacts of

slavery. And cities, states, and federal elected officials are expressing support for reparations research, reparations programs, or their still-not-entirely-uncontroversial cousin, racially targeted social aid.

That this surge in interest happened amid the nation's so-called racial reckoning, prompted by the gruesome death of a Black man under a police officer's knee, is no coincidence. Nor is the simultaneous rise of Juneteenth, from a day recognized primarily by the descendants of once enslaved Texans to a federal holiday. What else is Juneteenth but a celebration of the instant—if ultimately incomplete—shift in the status of Black people in the United States?

"This is so sad but with the death of George Floyd we saw massive groundswell support for reparations from the public at large," says Kennis Henry, co-chair of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA)'s Legislative Commission. Floyd's murder forced the world to recognize the brutal reality of racial injustice, and—at least for some—the case for taking concrete steps to redress its origins.

As Henry points out, reparations for Black Americans wouldn't be the first such payments made in U.S. history. President Benjamin Harrison, a Republican, granted \$25,000 payments to the families of [11 Italian-Americans lynched in New Orleans in 1891](#). ([Congress later slashed the payouts](#). Feeling that not enough had been done, Harrison also created [Columbus Day](#).) And in 1988, following decades of activism, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill that prompted the U.S. government to pay reparations of \$20,000 to "every surviving U.S. citizen or legal resident of Japanese ancestry incarcerated" during World War II due to "racial prejudice, wartime hysteria and a lack of political leadership," as an accompanying apology read.

Of course, opposition to the idea of reparations is not hard to find—not at a moment when parents are [waging war on schoolbooks](#), not at a moment when the [logic](#) that allegedly prompted a gunman to target and kill 10 Black people in a Buffalo, N.Y., grocery store also has traction in Congress and gets regular support on night-time TV.

Read more: [The Surprisingly Progressive Promises of General Order No. 3, Which Ended Slavery in Texas](#)

Some opponents insist that they and their hard-earned personal holdings do not descend from slaveholders. That argument conveniently overlooks the way key policies that created the white middle class—everything from [homesteading programs](#) to the [GI Bill](#)—were for decades, explicitly or effectively, open to [white Americans only](#), says William Darity, an economist and director of the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University, and a consultant to the California reparations task force. Other critics of reparations are fully aware of that history, but insist that reparations represent an obsessive focus on race that unfairly disadvantages white Americans today, or that executing such a plan would simply be too complicated, too expensive. And in 2022, much as 1865, there are those who simply do not pretend. For them, the proper economic and social order is the one that has existed for centuries.

But if numbers are the only truth tellers, then the net effect of those ideas, policies, and actions is plain. The Federal Reserve's 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances, the most recent such survey, found that [the average white family had about \\$983,400](#)—that's cash savings and other assets, minus debt—compared to \$142,500 for the average Black family. (Smaller but similar gaps also exist between white Americans and every other racial and ethnic group.) Despite the constant drone of conversation about the value of hard work, homeownership, and, of course, making one's coffee at home, the largest portion of that wealth, particularly among the top 25%, derives from inheritance. (For the middle class it's homeownership that makes the biggest contribution.) That 2019 Fed survey also found that nearly 30% of white families report having received an inheritance or gift, compared to about 10% of Black families, 7% of Hispanic families, and 18% of "other" families. Simply put, inequality in the past very easily morphs into inequality in the future.

In 1865, not long after Union General William Tecumseh Sherman made his infamous march across Georgia to the sea, [he issued a Field Order](#) that aimed to leave the area's formerly enslaved with their own inheritance to bequeath: the promise known as 40 acres

and a mule. [The order was effectively rescinded before it could be put into action.](#) So in 1989, when then Congressman John Conyers Jr., a Black Democrat from Detroit, first introduced a bill calling for a study examining the need for and potential impact of federal reparations, that bill eventually became H.R. 40, a nod to that promise of land. The bill died that year, as a version of it would do in every session of Congress since. After Conyers left Congress amid a sexual harassment scandal in 2017 (and [died in 2019](#)), Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, a Democrat from Texas, took up the matter.

The nation has never paused to take a deliberate and detailed study of slavery and its impacts, Lee says. The current iteration of H.R. 40 demands just that. First there would be hearings, she says, and from them would emerge a carefully crafted, official U.S. government response.

"I hope Americans can see that this is not me, or African Americans, knocking on our neighbor's door," Lee says. "These actions were government-sanctioned. And government is always supposed to remedy wrongs."

Read more: [What a Florida Reparations Case Can Teach Us About Justice in America](#)

But Lee says she need look no further than the halls of Congress to grasp the amount of work required to overcome aversions to reparations for Black Americans. In 2019, then Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican from Kentucky and [a man directly descended from slave holders](#), dismissed the idea as essentially unnecessary. "We," [McConnell said](#), have already enacted civil rights laws and "elected an African American president."

"That's obviously someone who is not reading the depth of disparities in this country," Lee says.

Then came the summer of 2020. By the end of the following year, H.R. 40 had collected a record 215 co-sponsors and professed supporters.

In 2021, H.R. 40 reached a place that it has never reached before. It was voted out of a House committee and rendered eligible for debate and a binding vote on the House floor. But Democratic leaders in the house, including House Majority Whip James Clyburn—often described as the most powerful Black elected official in the United States and one of the bill's official co-sponsors—have not acted to bring its promise closer to fruition.

Of late, the rationale for leaving the bill to languish is the November midterms, says Henry, of N'COBRA. But she's tired of hearing that Democrats can't touch reparations because they have to be careful about whatever the next election happens to be. In two more years, a presidential election will be pending.

That don't-even-say-reparations vibe on Capitol Hill constrains what those who support reparations can do, says Rev. Mark A. Thompson, a podcaster and long-time reparations activist. He was part of the successful push in the 1980s to prompt Congress to implement economic sanctions against the racist apartheid regime in South Africa and to recognize Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a holiday. Today, Thompson is still part of N'COBRA and the reparations movement, pushing for Congress to act and for President Joe Biden to sign by Juneteenth an executive order that would accomplish H.R. 40's aims. "We can make the same amount of noise we made back then but today the Congress no longer functions."

A White House official told TIME in a statement that President Biden supports a study on reparations and the continued impact of slavery, but that he does not believe such a study is needed to get about the work of advancing racial equity. That's why Biden, the official said, has taken actions like signing an executive order on his first day in office requiring a "whole-government approach to addressing racial inequality and making sure equity is a part of his entire policy agenda."

But Holder, of the California task force, is hopeful that the national appetite for racial justice will drive Americans to engage with Black reparations anyway. A self-described "long-game" player, she points out that during the 2020 election, the issue was seen as pertinent enough that every Democratic candidate for President weighed in on it.

And while federal action is still theoretical, local action has already begun.

“There are at least 11 municipalities that have undertaken a process of reparations,” she says. “California is the first government to go statewide with this process but Illinois is fast behind us on our heels. This is an emerging concept that has penetrated the mainstream. We are not going anywhere but forward.”

That statewide process in California began to bear fruit in June, with the release of the Reparations Task Force report, detailing the myriad ways the state now known as a bastion of liberal politics actively participated in the kind of ideas expressed in the *Galveston Daily News*, circa 1865.

Yes, California entered the Union as a so-called free state where slavery was banned. But, in practice, the task force found, some California residents brought with them to the region enslaved people they continued to hold in bondage; the state also passed a version of the Fugitive Slave Act. And in the centuries that followed, California has pioneered some of the root causes of the nation’s yawning racial wealth gap. Restrictive covenants forbidding homes in certain areas to be sold to Black residents, effectively segregating schools without segregation policy, were a product of the Golden State. [The report details the way in which KKK penetrated the Los Angeles police force](#) and made similar inroads in other police departments around the state. More recently, the state’s entertainment and [tech sectors](#) have fed stereotypes and unequal treatment into the systems and even the software that control their output—and who gets to profit from what they create.

Read more: [Juneteenth Isn’t Just a Celebration of the End of Slavery. We Also Honor the Black Americans Who Helped Create Their Own Freedom](#)

The report also includes the stories of human beings purchased elsewhere and brought to California in bondage, says Kamilah Moore, a task-force member who considers reparations a matter of human rights. When one enslaved man who was brought to California under just such conditions learned that California was a free state, she tells me, he escaped and joined with others in the same situation to create a gold-mining enterprise that generated more than \$250,000 in profits in today’s dollars. But California’s fugitive slave law allowed the Black prospectors to be deported to the Deep South and re-enslaved. [\(The men’s experiences have become the subject of the ACLU of Northern California’s podcast *Gold Chains*.\)](#)

And crucially, the report found that practices and policies in the state “have inflicted harms, which cascade over a lifetime and compound over generations, resulting in the current wealth gap between Black and white Americans.”

That finding will help to form the basis of a second report expected next year, which will focus on present-day remedies. The report captures some of the truth at a moment when more people are willing and able to hear it, Moore says. She knows not everyone in the United States is there, but California is not alone.

In the Chicago suburb of Evanston, Ill., city officials have already launched a reparations initiative, often described as the first of others to come. They will fund the program with what city officials have described as the first \$10 million in the city’s share of revenue from legal cannabis sales. Its first goal, starting with a pot of \$400,000, is to narrow the massive gap between the share of Black and white residents who own a home and to reduce the impact of uneven drug-war related policing on Black residents, by offering up to \$25,000 for home repairs or down-payment assistance, paid to banks or organizations on behalf of anyone who in Evanston was “subjected to housing discrimination between 1919 and 1969.”

And in Buffalo, N.Y, the targeted racist attack last month inspired what’s now known as the Buffalo Together Community Response Fund. The fund, coordinated by the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo and the United Way of Erie County, aims to “address community needs in the wake of the horrific racially motivated mass shooting,” says the foundation’s Felicia Beard, Senior Director of Racial Equity Initiatives. Since the mass shooting, donation commitments from about 60 corporations and organizations and about 1,200 individuals in the Buffalo area and elsewhere had, by June 10, reached over \$3 million. (A separate fund has been established to help the families of shooting victims.)

This month, the Buffalo Together Community Response Fund opened an initial round of funding to Black-led nonprofit organizations serving needs in the area of East Buffalo where the attack took place. The first round of grants to 80 organizations amounted to about \$580,000 and ranged from \$5,000 to \$20,000 each. Among the organizations funded were a number of food-aid groups and those offering mental-health services. A steering committee is developing to spearhead the process of distributing subsequent grants.

“It will be community-led,” Beard emphasizes. “We’ve been doing a lot of listening and what we have heard and what we want to be respectful of and mindful of is that the community wants to lead the longer term systemic change that needs to happen.”

Much of it sounds promising, says Darity, the Duke scholar. Then you do the math. Evanston’s initial program is working with enough money for just 16 of those \$25,000 grants—grants that will only go so far in a city where, in May data gathered by [Zillow](#), the online real estate platform, the median home price was around \$510,000. Plus, given that the grants will be disbursed by banks, he says, the program is a boon to the very institutions that helped to create some of the conditions the program seeks to redress. (Even with all of that, interest in the program was so intense, the city had to set up a lottery.) In Buffalo, the intentions likewise sound good to Darity, but the program’s scope falls short of the massive scale of slavery’s lingering legacy.

The California case is quite clear too, he says. A reparations program that focused only on Black Californians descended from American slaves would require \$650 billion to \$700 billion to close the racial wealth gap in that state, Darity says. The state’s entire annual budget is about \$270 billion, with [\\$196 billion in General Fund spending](#).

“The problem we have is not so much claiming that California shouldn’t do anything,” he says. “Quite the contrary. The problem we have is with calling what they are doing reparations.”

Smaller-scale initiatives, to Darity, risk creating a piecemeal project that could bolster the objections of those opposed to a massive federal plan, he says. Anything that seeks to label itself reparations, Darity believes, must be sufficient in size to address the collective [at least \\$14 trillion Black-white racial wealth gap](#) in the United States. California, like other states and cities, he believes, should consider putting its efforts into addressing atrocities specific to the state and perhaps labeling it racial equity or restitution work. Only the federal government’s spending is not constrained by tax revenue, so only the federal government is in a place to make what he sees as true reparations.

But to activists like Henry, what she sees as the need for a large-scale program doesn’t negate the benefit of smaller initiatives. Reparations should be thought of not as a federal or state, local or national responsibility, she says, but all of the above.

“Every single person, place, and thing that benefited from this kind of wholesale mistreatment owes a debt,” Henry says. “It’s well overdue.”

On Thursday, some reparations advocates gathered on the Ellipse, the site of former President Donald Trump’s pre-insurrection Jan. 6 speech, to demand reparations. They left behind a floral re-creation of [the red, black, and green Pan-African or Black Liberation flag](#).

When future generations look at what America had to say about reparations, about the state of Black life in America, it now seems that Juneteenth 2022 will be a crucial moment to study. Whether proponents of reparations leave behind more than flowers may be determined in the months and years to come—but what slavery left behind is no longer in question.

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