

**Written Testimony in Support of
H.R. 40 - Commission to Study and Develop Reparation
Proposals for African Americans Act**

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**Submitted to the Subcommittee on
Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties**

Chairman Cohen and Ranking Member McClintock,

I am pleased to submit written testimony offering Ben & Jerry's support for H.R. 40 - Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act. I want to start by thanking the Committee for holding this necessary hearing. I want to specifically thank Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee for taking the baton from the late Congressman John Conyers and moving this landmark civil rights legislation forward.

Our company's co-founders Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield had a unique vision for their company when they opened a small ice cream shop in a dilapidated gas station in Burlington, Vermont. They had the crazy idea that their company could return value to shareholders while also returning value to society. They pioneered a model of business then that has become almost mainstream today.

Ben and Jerry's story is, in many ways, the story of America. Their parents were first-generation Americans who grew up poor. Both of their fathers went to night school and lived in low-income neighborhoods in New York City. After World War II, federally insured low-interest loans enabled their parents to move to the suburbs of Long Island. The equity they built up in those homes was their doorway to the middle class. They were able to send their children to private high school and then on to private colleges. Jerry was arrested for overloading his parents' car and Ben was arrested for marijuana possession. Both got away with minor slaps on the wrist. They finally decided to open a business together because they liked hanging out together and loved to eat. They were able to raise \$4000 in start-up funding, and despite having no business experience, they were able to secure a guaranteed loan from the Small Business Administration.

A classic American success story: two guys with a good idea who, with hard work and determination, built a successful business. Ben and Jerry now understand that their success was not solely based on their hard work and determination. They benefited from a system of white privilege that was the result of generations of legalized racism and segregation. For Black Americans, the post-WWII low-interest loans that were the gateway to the middle class

for white families like Ben and Jerry's were in many cases not accessible because of redlining in their communities. It meant the most important tool to build wealth in America, homeownership, was deliberately and strategically denied to communities of color. Had Ben and Jerry been Black entrepreneurs, their brush with the criminal justice system could have fundamentally altered the trajectory of their lives. But Because they were white, it didn't. Would two young Black men, one with a pre-med degree and the other a college dropout with no business experience, receive a federally guaranteed SBA loan to start an ice cream company? Not likely. Ben and Jerry's story is the story of white America. They were the beneficiaries of a system deliberately created and perpetuated for people like them. They had no hand in creating the system, but they benefited from it as surely as those who did.

I am now privileged to work at the company Ben and Jerry started 43 years ago. In my time at the company, I've come to learn that just like Ben and Jerry, the American economy, and by extension, its companies, have reaped financial reward and prosperity built on 250 years of enslaving Black bodies. The most powerful and wealthy nation on Earth was built on a foundation of stolen labor. The wealth amassed by white people and passed down from generation to generation was perpetuated by a legal system of segregation and discrimination that continued long after slavery ended.

The impacts of that system are still with us today. Our country's substantial racial wealth gap—where the net worth of a typical white family is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family—is the direct result of slavery and white supremacy and is the reason we must now commit ourselves to right the wrongs of our past.

None of us living today owned slaves or are responsible for the legacy of 400 years of systemic racism. However, we are the only ones who can do anything about it. The events of January 6 at the United States Capitol have shown us what ignoring our past means for our present.

H.R. 40 is our best chance today to begin the process of coming to terms with the full story of our country's founding. By looking closely and honestly at slavery's long legacy, including its direct link to our nation's prosperity and wealth inequity, we will finally be able to live up to our founding principle that all people are created equal. That's why we support its passage.

Thank you again to the Committee for holding this important hearing. We urge the committee to send H.R. 40 to the floor for a vote.