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H.R. 40: Examining the Path to Reparative Justice in America

REPARATIONS STATEMENT

By Larry Elder

Reparations is the extraction of money from people who were never slave owners to be given to people who were never slaves.

It is also interesting that we have this hearing at time when racism, as a barrier to success, has never been so insignificant. In 1991, black Democrat and Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson said: "The sociological truths are that America, while still flawed in its race relations and its stubborn refusal to institute a rational, universal welfare system, is now the least racist white-majority society in the world; has a better record of legal protection of minorities than any other society, white or black; offers more opportunities to a greater number of black persons than any other society, including all those of Africa."

In 1997, Time/CNN did a broad survey of black and white teens. Asked whether racism is a major problem in America, both said yes. But, when black teens were asked whether racism was a big problem, small problem or no problem in their *own* daily lives, 89% said small or no problem. In fact, nearly twice as many black teens, compared to white teens, agreed that "failure to take advantage of available opportunities" was a bigger problem than racism.

During the 2008 race for the presidency, the major contenders were Democrats Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton; and Republicans Mitt Romney, a Mormon, and the late Sen. John McCain, who would have been 72 by the time he entered office, if elected. A 2007 Gallup poll found fewer Americans would refuse to vote for a black person (5%); than would refuse to vote for a woman (11%); than would refuse vote for a Mormon (24%); than would refuse to vote for someone who would be 72 upon entering office (42%).

In 2007, the year before he was elected president, Obama spoke at a black church on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday. He said: "The previous generation, the Moses generation (the generation of Martin Luther King), pointed

the way. They took us 90 percent of the way there, but we still got that 10 percent in order to cross over to the other side."

I thought that 10% remaining "to cross over to the other side" was a fair assessment. After all, a 2002 Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll that found that 8 percent of Americans believed that Elvis Presley was still alive -- or that at least there was "a chance." So, as to Obama's 10% remaining, I'm not sure how much more wiggle room we have left before running into the Elvis factor.

The reparations argument is based, in part, on the belief that but for slavery, America would not have become the prosperous nation it is today.

To the contrary, conservative scholar Michael Medved notes:

"It's not true that the U.S. became a wealthy nation through the abuse of slave labor: The most prosperous states in the country were those that first freed their slaves. ...

"At the time of the Constitution, Virginia constituted the most populous and wealthiest state in the Union, but by the time of the War Between the States the Old Dominion had fallen far behind a half-dozen northern states that had outlawed slavery two generations earlier."

About the difference in wealth between the north and the south, Frederick Douglass, after escaping from a plantation in Maryland to freedom in Massachusetts, wrote: "But the most astonishing as well as the most interesting thing to me was the condition of the colored people, a great many of whom, like myself, had escaped thither as a refuge from the hunters of men. I found many, who had not been seven years out of their chains, living in finer houses, and evidently enjoying more of the comforts of life, than the average of slaveholders in Maryland."

Douglass cites the example of an acquaintance who "live(s) in a neater house; dine(s) at a better table, (takes, pays) for, and read(s) more newspapers, better under(stands) the moral religious, and political character of the nation, than nine tenths of the slaveholders in Talbot County, Maryland."

Then there is the issue of who pays. Do African countries owe reparations to black Americans? After all, Harvard's director of the Hutchins Center for

African & African American Research, Henry Louis Gates wrote that 90% of those enslaved and shipped to the New World were sold by Africans to European slavers. All Whites? Only Whites? Non-Whites? Are payments owed before the United States became a country?

Former UCLA historian Roger McGrath writes:

"The reparacionists claim that the United States must compensate the descendants of slaves for 400 years of slavery. Since the United States was not established until 1788 (when the required three-fourths majority of the states approved the Constitution), slavery existed for only 77 years before the 13th Amendment abolished it." McGrath also writes about the number of whites who owned slaves:

"While the cotton economy enriched the owners of the large plantations and insured that millions of blacks would live as slaves, it didn't do much for most Southern whites, who saw the most fertile bottom lands owned by a small number of powerful families. Depending on the era, only 25 percent or so of Southern whites owned slaves or belonged to a family who did."

On former President Barack Obama's maternal side, there were slave owners. Obama's father came from Kenya, a slave-trading area. Does Obama get a check or does he cut a check? Similarly, Kamala Harris's Jamaican father has acknowledged slave owners in his family. Does Harris, whose mother is from India, get a check or cut a check?

Slavery, sadly, has been part of human history since the beginning. Muslim slave traders took whites out of the Mediterranean area and enslaved them in Northern Africa. European slavers took blacks out of Africa and shipped them to the New World. Europeans enslaved Europeans. Asians enslaved Asians. Africans enslaved Africans. Even native Americans enslaved other Native Americans.

Again, who pays whom? When and where does the pursuit of reparations stop, if ever?

The Arab slave trade took more blacks out of Africa and for a longer period of time than did the European slavers. In "Prisons & Slavery," John Dewar

Gleissner writes: "The Arabs' treatment of black Africans can aptly be termed an African Holocaust. Arabs killed more Africans in transit, especially when crossing the Sahara Desert, than Europeans and Americans, and over more centuries, both before and after the years of the Atlantic slave trade. ... African slaves transported by Arabs across the Sahara Desert died more often than slaves making the Middle Passage to the New World by ship."

As to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, historian Gates says:

"Between 1525 and 1866, in the entire history of the slave trade to the New World, according to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 12.5 *million* Africans were shipped to the New World. 10.7 million survived the dreaded Middle Passage, disembarking in North America, the Caribbean and South America.

"And how many of these 10.7 million Africans were shipped directly to North America? *Only about 388,000*. That's right: a tiny percentage."

And that tiny percentage has prospered to a far greater degree than did those who went to the Caribbean, Central and South America and in some cases to Mexico.

In 1940, 87% of American blacks lived below the federally defined level of poverty. By 1960, that number had fallen to 47%, the greatest 20-year period of economic expansion for Blacks in American history.

Who receives reparations? How is this determined?

Since slavery ended nearly 156 years ago, determining legal heirs to the stolen slave labor would be impossible.

When assessing the amount of reparations to be paid, is it relevant that the descendants of slaves here have prospered to a far greater degree than have the descendants of slaves shipped to Central and South America? If black America were a separate country, its gross GDP would make it the 17th wealthiest country in the world. The late economist Walter Williams says blacks have come further ahead from further behind -- and over a shorter period of time -- than any people in the history of the world.

And, frankly, why should anyone but Democrats pay?

Scholar Dinesh D'Sousa notes that all but a "handful" of slave owners were Democrats. The KKK, at its height of power and popularity, was known by the NAACP as the "terror wing" of the Democratic Party. The KKK was founded by Democrats, I did not say by the Democratic Party, but by Democrats.

As a percentage of their party, more House Republicans voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than did House Democrats. As a percentage of their party, more Senate Republicans voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than did Senate Democrats.

I recently re-read Martin Luther King's 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail, in which he takes fellow clergymen to task for asking him to wait. King wrote:

"Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters. ... When you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness' -- then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

We no longer live in that America.

In 1964, Martin Luther King Jr., gave an interview to the BBC where he predicted there could be a black president in "less than 40 years. I would think that this can come in 25 years or less." Just about right on the 40-year schedule, America elected Barack Obama.

King did not say that in less than 40 years time, there will have been a black female president of an Ivy League college -- which we have had. He did not say in 40 years, they'll be black CEO of a Fortune 500 company -- there have been several, including the former CEO of McDonald's. King didn't say in 40 years, there will be a black governor of a state like Virginia, the capital state of the Confederacy -- which has happened. He didn't say when 80% of blacks will no longer be poor, which is now the case.

No, King suggested that we will have reached the promised land when America elects a black president. Why? Because in the privacy of the voting booth or the mail-in ballot, one can vote however one wants. If a voter is racist, he or she can vote accordingly. King felt when Americans became fair-minded enough to elect a black person whom they felt qualified for the presidency, we then have reached a point where we are evaluating each other based on content of our character, rather than color of skin, to the fullest degree realistically possible.

Far more important than the issue of reparations, is this: Why has the rate of out-of-wedlock births in the black community nearly tripled from 1965 until now, when America is clearly less racist now than 56 years ago? Even during slavery a black child was more likely to live under a roof with his or her biological mother and biological father than today. This makes linking today's problems to slavery and Jim Crow all the more difficult.

In 1965, 24% of black children were born outside of wedlock. In 2018 -- the latest year available -- that number was 69%. On Father's Day in 2008, Barack Obama said: "We know the statistics -- that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it."

Finally, in 2016, when asked about reparations Obama said this:

"It is easy to make that theoretical argument. But as a practical matter, it is hard to think of any society in human history in which a majority population has said that as a consequence of historic wrongs, we are now going to take a big chunk of the nation's resources over a long period of time to make that right."

He was right.