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## Revisiting the Question of Reparations

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# Revisiting the Question of Reparations

by James Jennings

Recent congressional action to award Japanese Americans “reparations” for their internment during World War II, as well as the Florida state legislature’s act to award \$150,000 to black survivors of a white riot rampage of Rosewood, a black town, in 1923,<sup>1</sup> has contributed to a re-emergence of the call for black reparations. Several black state and local politicians and leaders across the United States have called for legislative action that would compensate blacks for three and one-half centuries of racial enslavement. The awarding of reparations to Japanese Americans is not the only precedent for indemnity to a group of people suffering within a political, economic, and military system seeking to do that group major harm: At the end of World War II, Jewish people were given financial assistance as recompense for Nazi atrocities committed against them.

The call for black reparations has a long history in the United States as illustrated in a recent book by Richard F. America, *Paying the Social Debt*.<sup>2</sup> The Freedmen’s Bureau, established by the federal government after the end of the Civil War, unsuccessfully sought compensation for recently freed slaves. On April 25, 1969, the National Black Economic Development conference meeting in Detroit, Michigan, called for reparations to be paid by churches and synagogues in the amount of \$500 million, or \$15 for every black individual in the United States at that time. Recently, a legislative bill calling for the appointment of a commission to study reparations was filed in Massachusetts. A similar bill has been filed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and no doubt, more reparations measures and initiatives will be filed with other governing bodies throughout the United States.

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Unfortunately, some of the major media outlets in this country have sought to sensationalize the reparations issue and thereby contribute to racial division among Americans. The matter of reparations does not have to be a “black vs. white” controversy. In fact, if approached a certain way, reparations for black people could benefit all Americans. Currently, one-third of all blacks live in poverty; almost one-half of all black children live in impoverished households. The black unemployment rate, especially among youth, continues at crisis levels—much higher than rates for whites. These kinds of statistics are

not only harmful to blacks and the black community, but to all Americans regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Reparations for blacks could be carried out in such a way that the economic productivity of black citizens would be enhanced. Reparations does not necessarily mean distributing a certain sum of money to all black individuals; this approach would be shortsighted and useless for both blacks and whites. But, if reparations were intended to assist blacks become more economically productive citizens, the entire society would benefit. What if reparations meant greater opportunities for the development of black businesses with a focus on black youth employment, or training programs specifically targeted for available and decent wage employment for

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black high school dropouts? Reparations could mean the utilization of public and private monies to help establish quality day care services and youth programs. More black economic productivity means more jobs, less crime, less poverty, and perhaps a reduction in the need for certain kinds of social welfare expenditures.

Reparations could also mean that America is ready to acknowledge the history of its unjust treatment of black people, and is now ready to develop partnerships between blacks and whites in order to move this society closer to its ideals of justice and equality. Although many citizens who feel that the U.S. has done no wrong against black people, or that all wrongs have been rectified, might be uncomfortable with this strategy, ultimately, this would have a major beneficial psychological and spiritual effect on all Americans.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Florida to pay 1923 survivors of racist mob,” *The Boston Globe*, 9 April 1994, 3.

<sup>2</sup>Richard F. America, *Paying the Social Debt* (New York: Praeger, 1993).