Case 15: Postponed Reparations

It all started in 1619 when a Dutch ship delivered twenty African slaves to the Jamestown colony in Virginia. The English settlers there were looking for a way to replace indentured servants, mostly poor Europeans, with a cheaper, more plentiful source of labor.

Over the next 254 years, an estimated 600,000 Africans were shipped to the United States and the slave economy boomed across the southern tier of states, from Delaware to Texas. These were states where cotton and tobacco farmers and others got rich off the backs of their chattel.

The Civil War was fought in large part over whether slavery should be allowed to continue. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, but slaves were not freed until two years later, at the end of the Civil War and passage of the 13th Amendment. By then, the numbers living in servitude in the United States stood at around four-million men, women, and children out of a total population of almost thirty-six million. But this was hardly the beginning of good times for former slaves.

Historian Jim Downs estimates that in the four years after the war former slaves without jobs or means of support and without medical care or other critical resources, faced disease, starvation and death. As much as a quarter of the black population is believed to have perished.

Those who survived found themselves in a familiar place—at the mercy of not just their former owners but also of a society based on racial privilege. Jim Crow laws in the South, convict leasing, sharecropping, itinerant farming, and other menial labor jobs trapped almost all non-whites and some lower class whites in a subsistence lifestyle.

What they needed, what they were promised by many in Congress and by President Lincoln, was simple enough: Forty acres and a mule to raise a livelihood from the land they had tilled before for free. In 1865, General William T. Sherman, following orders signed by President Lincoln, set aside 400,000 acres of coastal land to be awarded to former slaves. But, less than a year later after Lincoln’s assassination, his successor, Andrew Johnson, rescinded the order.

In 1896, the US Supreme Court’s Plessey v. Ferguson decision turned segregation and the “separate but equal” doctrine into the law of the land. Blacks were being lynched mostly in Southern states but elsewhere as well. At the same time, a movement arose, led by former slaves, to create a pension fund similar to the one for Civil War veterans, which would compensate freedmen for their indentured labor. But that too succumbed to resistance from Congress and from a trio of government agencies including the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Pensions, and the US Post Office.

By the end of the nineteenth century, only 21 percent of the black population had been born into
slavery and would thus have been eligible for reparation payments. Had the government decided to pay at that point, there would have been a relatively small number of recipients, roughly 1.89 million. Today the African-American population stands around 43 million.


Now, in the twenty-first century, there is a renewed effort to bring up the issue of reparations for slavery. By the time of his retirement in 2017, after thirty years in Congress, US Representative John Conyers, Jr., of Michigan had submitted a bill creating a commission to study the proposal in every Congress in which he served. Not until 2019 did it receive its first hearing under its current sponsor, Representative Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas. “I simply ask: Why not?” she says. “And why not now?”

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