

## Case 14

In his recent book, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, civil rights activist and Harvard-educated attorney, Randall Robinson, argues that the U.S. has an obligation to provide reparations to African Americans for slavery and legal discrimination. Robinson notes that the initial proposal by the U.S. government to provide restitution for slavery, i.e., giving each freed slave 40 acres and a mule, failed when it was vetoed by President Andrew Johnson after the Civil War. In addition to the losses of well-being brought about through the obvious physical and emotional suffering, Robinson estimates that slaves lost \$1.4 trillion in unpaid wages in today's money.

According to Robinson, even after slavery was abolished, legal discrimination extended the debilitating effects slavery. Education was, for the most part, denied to African Americans. Since people without education cannot compete for jobs, African Americans became trapped in poverty. Similarly, discriminatory housing practices further interfered with the economic growth of African Americans. For instance, home ownership is an important method of building wealth. Robinson claims that discriminatory mortgage policies and redlining, the practice under which real estate brokers only sell property located in certain neighborhoods to Blacks, cost African Americans as much as \$90 billion over the years. As a result of such unjust treatment, says Robinson, African Americans have suffered significant economic disadvantage that continues up to the present time.

However, the idea of reparations for slavery (and subsequent legal discrimination) has met with much criticism. For instance, if reparations were to consist in monetary payments, how much should those payments be, and who, specifically, is entitled to receive them? Since not all African Americans are direct descendents of slaves, it may be difficult to argue that they are entitled to reparations. While reparations advocates, such as Randall Robinson, propose figures, the critics reject all such proposals as hopelessly speculative and arbitrary.

David Horowitz, author of *Uncivil Wars: The Controversy over Reparations for Slavery*, asserts that in the pre-Civil War period only approximately 20% of Whites owned slaves. This would mean, argues Horowitz, that most White U.S. citizens who fought in the Civil War, a war many believe was fought over the permissibility of slavery, died to free the slaves. Hence, opponents of reparations argue that it would be unfair for their descendents to have to pay for reparations. Indeed, given America's diverse citizenry, many U.S. citizens are descendants of families that came to the U.S. long after the abolition of slavery. Requiring them to contribute to reparations for slavery would be unjust, says Horowitz.

© Association for Practical and Professional Ethics 2003