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News

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David J. Phillip / AP file

Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., has repeatedly sponsored legislation urging a federal study of slavery and its contemporary impact.

## Putting a price on slavery's legacy

**Call for reparations builds as blacks tally history's toll**

By **Michael A. Fletcher**  
THE WASHINGTON POST

FITZGERALD, Ga., Dec. 26 — People begin trickling into the ramshackle recreation center an hour before the program is slated to begin, drawn by a promise that many of them believe speaks to the core of their existence as African Americans. Leaning over the mismatched folding chairs, they buzz about the upcoming lecture. The speaker is Robert L. Brock, 75, a legal activist who for decades has been barnstorming the country spreading the word on reparations.

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The idea is catching on not just among those who could most use a financial windfall but also among civil rights groups, intellectuals and others who see reparations as the only way to get to the root of America's enduring racial problems.

HE CONTENTS that black people are eligible for special tax rebates and, if they pay him \$50 to fill out a claim form, they will one day collect a half-million dollars in compensation for all that slavery and state-sanctioned discrimination stole from African Americans.

The people eagerly awaiting Brock's message can hardly be called radicals. They labor on farms, in factories and at store counters, united in their belief that nothing shaped their often dour circumstances so much as the nation's history of slavery and racial discrimination. And although there is no assurance they will ever collect the promised \$500,000, those who come to hear Brock deeply believe in the reparations quest.

"We're glad to be in America," said Gary Grant, a Pentecostal minister who helped arrange Brock's visit here. "But the white man has been taking advantage of the black man all our lives. Now, we want to get paid."

It is a refrain being sounded increasingly across the country, from this small city nestled amid the pine forests and cotton farms of southern Georgia to the Ivy-covered walls of Harvard University. The idea is catching on not just among those who could most use a financial windfall but also among civil rights groups, intellectuals and others who see reparations as the only way to get to the root of America's enduring racial problems.

For many years, any discussion of reparations to compensate the descendants of African slaves for 246 years of bondage and another century of legalized discrimination was dismissed. Many whites and blacks alike scoffed at the idea, reasoning that slavery is part of the nation's past that would only unleash new demons if it were resurrected.

But that attitude is slowly changing. At least 10 cities, including Chicago, Detroit and Washington, have passed resolutions in the past two years urging federal hearings into the impact of slavery. Mainstream civil rights groups such as the NAACP, the National Urban League and the Southern Christian

Leadership Conference regularly raise the issue. And last summer, the Democratic Party for the first time adopted a plank endorsing the idea of establishing a federal commission to study the lingering effects of slavery.

## LEGAL TEAM GATHERS

A high-powered group of lawyers, including Harvard law professor Charles J. Ogeltree Jr., Alexander J. Pires Jr., who won a \$1 billion discrimination suit on behalf of black farmers, and Johnnie L. Cochran Jr., have been meeting to plot strategy for a possible class-action lawsuit seeking reparations.

“There is a lot more happening around this issue now than ever,” said Greg Moore, chief of staff for Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), who since 1989 repeatedly has sponsored legislation urging a federal study of slavery and its contemporary impact. “This used to be talked about only in isolated, black nationalist meetings. But that is not the case any more.”

The surging interest in reparations parallels a heightened sensitivity to the horrors of slavery, in which as many as 6 million Africans perished in the journey to the Americas alone. There also is growing attention being paid to the huge economic bounty that slavery created for private companies and the nation as a whole.

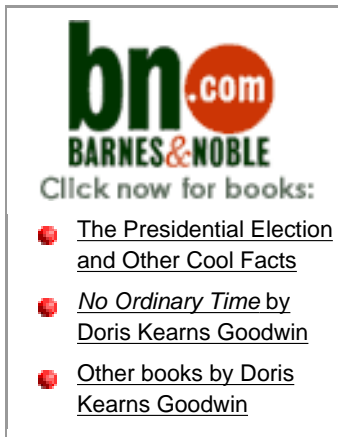
Earlier this year, Aetna Inc. apologized for selling insurance policies that reimbursed slave owners for financial losses when their slaves died. Last summer, the Hartford Courant printed a front-page apology for the profits it made from running ads for the sale of slaves and the capture of runaways. Next month, a new California law will require insurance companies to disclose any slave insurance policies they may have issued. The state also is requiring University of California officials to assemble a team of scholars to research the history of slavery and report how current California businesses benefited.

“As a result of the ravages of slavery and the racial strictures that followed it, blacks in America were consigned to this nation’s economic bottom,” TransAfrica president Randall Robinson said at a recent reparations conference held by the Washington lobbying group. “A yawning gap was opened. It has been a static gap since the Emancipation Proclamation. This condition can no longer be tolerated.”

## SLAVES’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Proponents of reparations argue that the nation owes African Americans for their contributions to the nation’s wealth and for the widespread discrimination they endured after slavery was abolished.

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Black slaves helped to build white wealth as they toiled as unpaid stevedores, servants, craftsmen and farm hands across the South, and for many years, in the North as well. Slaves also built some of the nation's most hallowed symbols of freedom: They cut stone for the U.S. Capitol, cleared trees for the National Mall and laid the foundation for the White House.

The exploitation did not end with emancipation in 1865. For nearly a century after that, blacks legally were excluded from many opportunities that became the cornerstones for today's white middle-class. Segregated schools limited their educational choices, restrictive covenants barred them from many neighborhoods and rampant loan discrimination prevented them from financing houses and businesses.

In a book published this year, "The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks," Robinson argues that slavery "produces its victims ad infinitum, long after the active stage of the crime has ended." The disproportionate numbers of blacks who are in prison, undereducated or living in poverty are all today's victims of slavery, he says.

#### **40 ACRES AND A MULE**

Reparations for slavery have been discussed since the conclusion of the Civil War, when President Andrew Johnson reneged on Union Army Gen. William T. Sherman's promise to furnish former slaves with 40 acres and a mule. In the early 1900s, several bills were introduced in Congress to provide former slaves small payments and a pension, but they all failed.

Ironically, the movement is beginning to gain mainstream credibility even as there seems to be a growing sentiment that the nation has gone too far in extending opportunities to African Americans.

In ballot initiatives that won overwhelming white majorities, voters in California and Washington state have outlawed government-sponsored affirmative action programs that gave an edge to minorities when it came to public contracting, university admissions and government employment. Likewise, Florida last year ended many of its affirmative action programs. Liberal mayors in cities such as Atlanta and Baltimore have restructured programs that set aside small portions of government business for minority-run firms.

**'This movement is counterproductive because it fixates African Americans on their victim status.'**

— **MYRON MAGNET**  
author of 'The Dream and the Nightmare'

**'The point is that there has been a series of arrangements, slavery, Jim Crow, discrimination, all of which were mechanisms that had the effect of transferring money from blacks as a class to whites as a class.'**

— **RICHARD AMERICA**  
Georgetown University economist

Opponents of reparations contend that the fledgling movement overlooks many important facts. First, they argue, reparations usually are paid to direct victims, as was the case when the U.S. government apologized and paid compensation to Japanese Americans interned during World War II. Similarly, Holocaust survivors have received payments from the Germans. In addition, not all blacks were slaves, and an estimated 3,000 were slave owners.

Also, many immigrants not only came to the United States long after slavery ended, but they also were confronted with discrimination. Should they pay reparations, too? Or should they receive them?

And regardless of how much slave labor contributed to the nation's wealth, opponents say, blacks benefit from that wealth today. As a group, African Americans are the best educated, wealthiest blacks on the planet.

"This movement is counterproductive because it fixates African Americans on their victim status," says Myron Magnet, whose book "The Dream and the Nightmare" argues that poor minorities suffer more from cultural problems than societal ones. "I think that what blacks most need now is not to be shackled to the past, but to recognize that this is a society and an economy which is filled with opportunity for them and for everybody."

None of this dissuades reparations advocates. "The point is that there has been a series of arrangements, slavery, Jim Crow, discrimination, all of which were mechanisms that had the effect of transferring money from blacks as a class to whites as a class," said Richard America, a Georgetown University economist who has written two books calling for reparations. "Even folks who came to this country in the last 100 years or so had an advantage in that their whiteness was an asset in the marketplace."

Although there is no agreement among proponents, America suggests that reparations take the form of grants for education, homes and black businesses. "This should go on for about two generations," he said. "If done right, this should just about do it."

### **ADVOCATES WARN AGAINST SCAMS**

As he has traveled the country, Brock has been promoting a compensation idea that is apparently striking a chord: a \$500,000 check from the federal government. The figure is drawn from an unsuccessful lawsuit Brock filed against the U.S. government in 1965.

In the past couple of months alone, several thousand people have come to churches and community centers in places such as

Waycross, Ga., and Lake Wales, Fla., to hear Brock's lectures. Many of them have paid \$50 to fill out his claim forms, which other reparations advocates, including Conyers, have condemned as an obvious scam because there is no settlement to claim. Similarly, the IRS in October issued a statement cautioning African Americans against being "misled" by offers related to reparations. The statement said that the IRS has received "a growing number" of reparations claims this year, even though there is no such provision in tax law.

Brock is elusive about where he would file his claim forms or precisely what happens to the money he collects. In his talk, he indirectly addresses the charge, telling people that "slavery was the scam."

That is enough for the people who come to hear Brock, often by the hundreds. Here in Fitzgerald, the turnout is smaller than most, no more than 75 people, but the audience is enthusiastic.

"We all deserve reparations," offered April Wilson, 38, a homemaker, as she waited for the talk to begin. "There was something to this years ago. We just didn't know anything about it."

After he takes the stage, Brock goes on for two hours. He offers angry lines about white and Jewish slave traders and chilling stories about the rape and torture endured by slaves. When he turns to his decades-long battle for reparations, the crowd is riveted. Before he finishes speaking, people are filtering to a table in the back of the room, where they can pay their \$50 and fill out his claim forms. No one seems particularly concerned that Brock has nowhere to file them or that the tax rebate he talks about does not exist.

"I have been hearing about this thing for a long time," Harold Coney, 50, a farm worker and logger said after buying a claim form. "I've been through hell making the white man rich. Now I want my money, interest and everything."

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