

## REMARKS

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We read and hear a lot about how the country has moved to the right and how so many ambitious politicians try to find the political center. The work we're doing is the beginning of moving them back from being on the right to DOING right. With the help of the Creator, we're going to show that standing in the moral center is superior to being weak-kneed in the political center. Being politically in the center with moderate views on everything when radical change is needed, is like being neutral and taking positions to try and please everybody. I believe it was Dante who said the hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, choose to maintain their neutrality.

Among our many great men and women who are with the ancestors, I have chosen the wisdom of two, Malcolm X and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, to show us how to get HR 40 passed in a timely manner.

Brother Malcolm told us that, of all the disciplines, history was best suited to reward our research. For our purposes, I take that to mean that as long as we place our views in the context of history, our argument to pass HR 40 and obtain a reparations settlement is irrefutable. Brother Malcolm also said that he believed in doing anything that was intelligently directed and designed to get results. Those should be out litmus tests for action: Is it intelligently directed? Is it designed to get results?

In his brilliant work of genius, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Brother Martin spelled out a blueprint for action that is designed to get results. There are four basic steps, he said. (1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action.

Nonviolent direct action, Dr. King explained, "seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue ... the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."

Today we want to talk about the possibilities of working together with our friends in Congress, and working together against our adversaries in Congress, to get a bill of monumental significance passed: HR40. HR40 has languished in the House Judiciary Committee since it was first introduced in 1989. **When** HR40 is passed, a discussion will begin with the government, for the first time in the nation's history, about reparations and

restitution for Black people. We will talk, for the first time, about a debt due because 60 to 100 million of our ancestors were snatched from their African homeland into captivity. We have indeed been strangers in a strange land. In 1865, the captors of our ancestors claimed to set them free — free without any land, free without any funds, free without any education, free without any property and, as it turned out, free without any freedom. In other words, free without reparations for irrefutable crimes against humanity that had lasted 246 years.

We're here to begin a dialogue about these issues because they are being ignored by most of the policymakers here inside the Beltway. There's a need for a Black Agenda and that's not even being discussed. Any sensible Black Agenda must discuss reparations because it must place the problems facing African-Americans within the context of history. Conservative politicians and policymakers who are currently dominating the dialogue in Washington can only make the arguments they make by ignoring or distorting history. We must not let that happen.

Some critics say, "We never enslaved anybody. You've never been enslaved. All the slaveholders and slaves are dead. Why should we pay anything?" I say to those critics, you weren't here when the Constitution and Declaration of Independence were written, and all the people who wrote them, and all the people who lived then, who benefited and suffered under them, are dead, so why should you benefit from them?

But I also tell them the country was so steeped in the racism that the United States government was incapable of doing what was right in 1865 and 1875. If the country had not ended Reconstruction with a new Reconstruction, the reconstruction of the evil ideology of white supremacy, if the country had not held white privilege and white supremacy in place with presidents like Rutherford Hayes and Woodrow Wilson and senators like Strom Thurmond and Jesse Helms (members in good standing in that all-white club known as the United States Senate), if the government had acknowledged its debt for the crimes committed against our ancestors, then we wouldn't have to be here today having this conversation about reparations.

Furthermore, the crimes didn't stop in 1865. Slavery was modernized when a racist Supreme Court provided the backbone for white supremacy with a ruling that said "separate but equal" was the law of the land, knowing full well that everything — ownership of property, jobs, education, health care, housing, the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — would be as unequal as they could possibly make it. So those who say it happened way back then have historical amnesia and need to check themselves with that idiotic argument.

So since we never had that discussion, we need to have it today and we are going to have it with our elected representatives. The United States needs to explain to the world why they never even considered paying restitution as reparation for the most horrendous crimes committed against an enslaved people in human history.

The man who currently sits in the White House, a house reserved throughout history for

white males, had an opportunity to tell the world and set the record right in September 2001, at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. But instead President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell, with an astonishing display of arrogance, told the world that the kidnapping, murder and rape of 60 to 100 million Africans across two and a half centuries, the unpaid labor across the same span of time, the lynching and degradation and discrimination across another century, did *not* constitute crimes against humanity. Bush told Powell he couldn't go to the conference and Powell stayed home. Neither man said whether they do not consider kidnapping, murder and rape crimes, or whether they do not consider our ancestors human. In Powell's case, they're his ancestors, too, and I feel sad that he dishonored them.

When our ancestors were snatched to the ships, slavery was not new. Enslaving people goes back almost to the dawn of recorded history. What was new was the forcible stripping of a people of virtually everything that enables a human being to know him or herself as a human being. Left spiritually naked without their identities, their names, their language, their religion, their family structure, their own laws, their culture, our forebears were then told to toil to build a new nation in which they would have no voice. Those who did have a voice in this new nation, the Washingtons and Jeffersons and Franklins and Andrew Johnsons and Robert E. Lees and Jefferson Davises, would enforce this relationship, this Holocaust of enslavement, with violence and terror, as would their successors, the Richard Russells and Ross Barnetts and George Wallaces and Strom Thurmonds and Jesse Helmses and J. Edgar Hoovers and Richard Nixons and Ronald Reagans.

HR 40 is still in committee 14 years after it was first introduced because there are policymakers, virtually all of them conservatives, who do not want the bill to see the light of day.

As I said before, most conservatives have historical amnesia. When this bill is passed, something unprecedented will happen. For the first time in the nation's history, its government would look at that history with an eye, not on white supremacy and white privilege, but with a formal acknowledgment, in the words of HR40's preamble, of "the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity" of the Holocaust of African captivity and enslavement.

We say it's time for that acknowledgment. It's time for this government to answer some fundamental questions: Was an injury committed against our ancestors? What was the nature of that injury? Did that injury exist overtly and by illegal means up until at least 1965? Has the nature of that injury had an impact on living African-Americans?

We're here today to talk about the language of reparations. The when, where, what, who, why and how of reparations. In looking at using the right language, we can determine several things. First, we can determine where we are on the subject. We can also decide what needs to be done to move this process forward. And finally, we can decide what we can do TOGETHER to try and transform and heal the racial divisions that have existed on these shores since twenty of our ancestors were forcibly taken ashore at Jamestown in

1619.

Opponents of reparations claim that reparations for African-Americans will be divisive. The same argument was used at the dawn of the civil rights movement. The same argument was used during Reconstruction. And the ones making this argument are usually the ones who will be divisive because they defend the status quo, a status quo that already has us divided. They want to keep it that way.

Reparations can be healing to this nation. It should seem obvious that if Black communities improve, the nation will improve. If the time, money and effort spent incarcerating our young for selling drugs imported into this country by others, if this effort is spent on education instead, it will be healing and the country will be better for it.

Beginning in the 1960s, the entire world started looking and borrowing the techniques and tactics developed by African-Americans to bring progressive change. So, as we have in the past, let's be the vanguard in repairing the global damage done by racism. But even though there is unquestionably global damage, let's start here at home by establishing a dialogue between the government and the people.

The WHAT is the passage of HR 40 and, just as important, making certain that we have a voice in who sits on the Commission. The WHEN and WHERE of working on HR40 is an easy one. HERE and RIGHT NOW is where it begins. NOW, this year, is when the bill should be passed and a commission established to study the reparations issue.

The WHO is also easy. It's you, and folks like you, as N'COBRA builds a nationwide movement to tell the government it demands redress. A YEAR OF BLACK PRESENCE may have to take more than a year. If you think we worked hard to get here, I have to tell you that the hard work begins today.

The WHY is to honor our uncounted millions of ancestors whose voices still scream silently for justice and remembrance, and to use every fiber of our being to see that those not yet born will grow to adulthood in schools that we provide to teach them about their beautiful Black selves, in neighborhoods free of poisonous drugs and violence, in communities bright with infinite promise and hope, with health care available to all who need it. In the words of Dr. Maulana Karenga, when we honor our ancestors, we honor not only them but all that is good in ourselves, and when we dishonor our ancestors, we dishonor ourselves.

Finally, a word about the president who was selected, not elected. When the president took time, on the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., no less, to tell us how he was opposing affirmative action because it's discriminatory and discrimination is unconstitutional, I saw a man who was (a) insulting the intelligence of Black folks (b) pandering and doing all that he can to sustain white privilege by perversely invoking the Constitution (c) perverting attempts, however mild, to bring justice to Black people with odious phrases like "states rights" and "separate but equal," and this latest one, "reverse discrimination" or "reverse racism" or (d) all of the above. I pick (d).

During the century of Jim Crow laws that were supported by violence and terror, if any one president had been as concerned about the Constitution as George W. Bush claims he is now, then racists like Thurmond and Helms would not have ascended to power in violation of the Constitution. We wouldn't have to be talking about reparations in 2003 because the justice of reparations would have been dealt with in 1873 or 1903. I believe, if he had been alive, that George W. Bush would have pandered to the forces of white supremacy then and violated the Constitution just as he panders to white supremacy now in his urgency to claim to be the guardian of the Constitution. We hope he will overcome his historical amnesia and be a guardian of justice.

I did not forget the HOW of what we're doing to come to that day when this government will do right instead of just being on the so-called "right." We will continue to do what we started today. We will build mass support for reparations and the passage of HR40 in every Black community in the country. For anyone, Republican or Democrat, at the local, state or federal level, we will have questions: Where do you stand on reparations? What are you doing to help establish a Federal Reparations Commission, a commission that we will have a voice in establishing? Are you working to educate the American people about this issue or are you trying to poison their views about the truth of this nation's history?

If we like the answer, we will vote for that politician, regardless of his color or his political affiliation. If we don't like the answer, we will do all we can to defeat him or her. If both so-called major party candidates for a position have answers we don't like, we will stand strong with a Black agenda and creatively find an alternative. We will no longer vote for "the lesser of two evils." We can no longer afford to vote for any evil, lesser or otherwise.

Reparations must be a part of the presidential campaign in 2004. If you can't support reparations with a position of substance, don't come to our community asking for our vote. No lip service. And please, no diluted, watery suggestions that sound like a variation on affirmative action. Come correct or don't come at all.

We will win because our cause is a just one. Dr. King reminded us that the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice. We will win because we will give the nation no rest until they confront this issue. We will win because we will define the issues through the prism of truth while our adversaries continue to use euphemisms and outright lies to disguise their true intentions: sophisticated language that will maintain white privilege without it appearing to. We will win because God don't like ugly, and ugly is the appropriate word to describe the heinous conditions that have existed in America for 384 years. We will win because what we are proposing is just and can heal this nation and overcome the forces of divisiveness who are trying to taking us back a century to separate and unequal. Resist with everything in your being and we will win!  
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