

Testimony of

Nkechi Taifa

Co-Chair

Legislative Commission of

NCOBRA

The National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America

Before the

Maryland Senate Judiciary Proceedings Committee

In Support Of

Senate Joint Resolution 4

“Reparations for the Enslavement of African Americans

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The Legislative Commission of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (NCOBRA), appreciates this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Joint Resolution 4, “Reparations for the Enslavement of African Americans.”

NCOBRA, founded in 1987, is a mass-based coalition organized for the sole purpose of obtaining reparations for African descendants in the United States. Its work is organized through nine national commissions: Economic Development, Human Resources, Legal Strategies, Legislative, Public Information and Education, Membership and Organizational Development, International Affairs, and Youth and Education.

The mission of the Legislative Commission of NCOBRA is to work towards achieving a comprehensive award of reparations for African Americans in the legislative arena based on the period of enslavement and post-slavery discrimination, through support of reparations initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels. In support of this mission, NCOBRA’s Legislative Commission is an advocate for the introduction and passage of reparations legislation nationwide. I have served as chair of the Legislative Commission since the establishment of NCOBRA, and currently am joined by a co-chair.

The Legislative Commission of NCOBRA congratulates State Senator Nathaniel Exum for the introduction of Senate Joint Resolution 4, “Reparations for the Enslavement of African Americans,” and urges its swift passage by this Committee. Passage of this legislation will continue the support for the national effort for congressional hearings and a federal commission to study and consider reparations for African Americans, and to educate all Americans about the history of the period of enslavement and its current repercussions.

It is important to note that the U.S. government has never acknowledged, apologized, or otherwise taken responsibility for its role in slavery or segregation, and has never made reparation to African Americans for the generations of labor expropriated from them, deprivation of their freedom and rights, and terrorism against them resulting in widespread injury and death. This is all despite the fact that the federal government has lent its support to other reparations claims even where such claims did not originate on United States soil.

Although slavery was codified within many state statutes, Maryland included, this legislation addresses the role of the federal government. It must not be forgotten that Black people in America are the descendants of Africans who were kidnapped and transported to the United States with the explicit complicity of the United States government and every arm of the U.S. lawmaking and law enforcing machinery. The dehumanization and atrocities of the enslavement period were not isolated occurrences, but were mandated by formal laws that were codified and even enshrined within the U.S. Constitution.

Clause one, section nine of the first article of the U.S. Constitution, expressly guaranteed and sanctioned the importation of kidnapped Africans to every state that might desire their labor until the year 1808. Article one, section two, clause three, upheld the further dehumanization of the African by relegating their status to that of three-fifths of a white man. Clause three, section two of Article four, mandated that no enslaved person, even if he or she had reached a free state, was safe, and it was the constitutional responsibility of every white person to track her down for delivery to the government. Indeed, the travails of one of Maryland's own, Harriet Tubman, bears witness to this

terroristic policy change, as she and the Underground Railroad could no longer suffice by transporting escaped persons from Maryland to Pennsylvania and New York, but were constrained to cross the border of the United States into Canada to escape the reach of the U.S. government.

The role of the federal government in supporting the institution of slavery and subsequent discrimination directed against African Americans is an injustice which must be formally acknowledged and redressed. Such recognition could play a central role in the amelioration of racial discrimination in America. And just as the role of the federal government must be acknowledged, so too must the role the State of Maryland likewise played in the institution of slavery. The role of Maryland, however, exceeds the scope of Senate Joint Resolution 4 and, we submit, should be the subject of later legislative initiatives.

In 1989 Congressman John Conyers (D-MI) introduced a bill, later designated as HR 40, “to acknowledge the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality and inhumanity of slavery in the U.S. and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and to establish a commission to examine the institution of slavery subsequent de jure and de factor racial and economic discrimination against African Americans and the impact of these forces on living African Americans.” This commission would be charged with making recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies. It is a critical observation that HR 40, as important as it is, is a relatively mild and conservative bill. It does not call for the payment of reparations. It only calls for the creation of a commission to study the issue, and make recommendations to Congress.

The issue of reparations for African Americans was once, in the not too distant past, unthinkable by mainstream America as viable public policy. That all changed after the 1987 passage of the Japanese American Redress Bill, and the introduction by John Conyers of a reparations study bill for African Americans. Out of the Maryland Congressional Delegation, Congresspersons Albert Wynn and Elijah Cummings have both co-sponsored H.R. 40. In 1990 the Legislature of Louisiana passed a concurrent resolution to memorialize the Congress of the United States to enact the Conyers' bill, and eleven years later in 2001, the California State Assembly passed a similar resolution. In 1994 the Florida state legislature paid \$150,000 to each of the eleven survivors of the 1923 Rosewood Race Riot and created a scholarship fund for students of color. The state of Oklahoma is currently considering the issue of reparations for victims of the 1920 bombings which decimated an entire thriving Black community in Tulsa. There are also reparations resolutions pending in the states of New York, Texas, and New Jersey.

The municipal level has seen much activity within the legislative arena. In addition to Baltimore, Maryland; reparations-type legislation has been passed by the City Councils of Detroit, Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; Inglewood, California; East Palo Alto, California; Dallas, Texas; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Chicago, Illinois; Evanston, Illinois; Atlanta, Georgia; Paterson, New Jersey; Washington, D.C., Passaic County, New Jersey; and Burlington, Vermont. Other state and municipal legislatures have created or are considering creating a commission to investigate injustices committed against African Americans, assess their impact on living African Americans today, and recommend restitution.

A growing number of professional, civil rights, labor, and religious and civic organizations have officially endorsed HR 40 and the concept of reparations. These include the NAACP, the National Baptist Convention, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, the AFL-CIO, the Association of Black Psychologists, the National Conference of Black Political Scientists, the National Bar Association, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the International Association of Black Firefighters, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Communication Workers of America, the National Political Congress of Black Women, the National Association of Real Estate Brokers, the National Black United Front, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, TransAfrica Forum, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, to name a few.

We strongly urge this Committee to join the process of racial healing and repair by enacting Senate Joint Resolution 4 forthwith.

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