

# AP Language Synthesis Essay: Reparations for Slavery

## Prompt

Carlton Waterhouse, a professor of law and writer at Indiana University, argues that the United States government should pay reparations to African-Americans to pay for the historical wrongs of slavery and discrimination. He writes:

Race-based social dominance has furthered racial inequality in every generation since blacks arrived in this country, despite the legal restrictions against racial discrimination ushered in by the civil rights movement. Institutional practices of tokenism and formal equality continue to hide the private attitudes and biases of the white majority ultimately responsible for America's hyper-segregated schools and neighborhoods, a school to prison pipeline for black children, mass incarceration, discrimination against upper- and middle-class black mortgage applicants, and the unpunished killings of unarmed African-Americans by police.

Reparations would not solve all our racial ills but they do strike at their core. Meaningful reparations would acknowledge that victims of racial injustice were worthy of equal regard and that whites gained immense and unfair advantages by denying that through centuries of mistreatment and discrimination. This would challenge the narrative that whites "deserve" the group-based advantages and privileges they enjoy.

In a well-developed essay that uses at **least five of the included sources**, defend, refute, or qualify Waterhouse's assertion that the government of the United States should pay reparations for slavery to African-Americans.

You may refer to the sources by their titles (Source A, Source B, etc.) or by the description of each.

## Requirements

- You should write at least 800 words and no more than 1500 in your response. Please review the Synthesis Essay handout before beginning your work.
- Include at least two naysayers in your response.
- Make sure to have a STAMPY introduction and conclusion that bookends it.
- Do not use outside research, but you may use your own knowledge.
- Try to use the organizational strategy we discussed before Christmas break.

## Source A. The Case for Reparations

[Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 17 Aug. 2017]

Broach the topic of reparations today and a barrage of questions inevitably follows: Who will be paid? How much will they be paid? Who will pay? But if the practicalities, not the justice, of reparations are the true sticking point, there has for some time been the beginnings of a solution. For the past 25 years, Congressman John Conyers Jr., who represents the Detroit area, has marked every session of Congress by introducing a bill calling for a congressional study of slavery and its lingering effects as well as recommendations for "appropriate remedies."

A country curious about how reparations might actually work has an easy solution in Conyers's bill, now called HR 40, the Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act. We would support this bill, submit the question to study, and then assess the possible solutions. But we are not interested.

"It's because it's black folks making the claim," Nkechi Taifa, who helped found n'cobra, says. "People who talk about reparations are considered left lunatics. But all we are talking about is studying [reparations]. As John Conyers has said, we study everything. We study the water, the air. We can't even study the issue? This bill does not authorize one red cent to anyone."

That HR 40 has never—under either Democrats or Republicans—made it to the House floor suggests our concerns are rooted not in the impracticality of reparations but in something more existential. If we conclude that the conditions in North Lawndale and black America are not inexplicable but are instead precisely what you'd expect of a community that for centuries has lived in America's crosshairs, then what are we to make of the world's oldest democracy?

One cannot escape the question by hand-waving at the past, disavowing the acts of one's ancestors, nor by citing a recent date of ancestral immigration. The last slaveholder has been dead for a very long time. The last soldier to endure Valley Forge has been dead much longer. To proudly claim the veteran and disown the slaveholder is patriotism à la carte. A nation outlives its generations. We were not there when Washington crossed the Delaware, but Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's rendering has meaning to us. We were not there when Woodrow Wilson took us into World War I, but we are still paying out the pensions. If Thomas Jefferson's genius matters, then so does his taking of Sally Hemings's body. If George Washington crossing the Delaware matters, so must his ruthless pursuit of the runagate Oney Judge.

*Ta-Nehisi is an American journalist.*

## Source B. The New Abolitionism

[Hayes, Chris. "The New Abolitionism." *The Nation*, 6 July 2015]

Before the cannons fired at Fort Sumter, the Confederates announced their rebellion with lofty rhetoric about "violations of the Constitution of the United States" and "encroachments upon the reserved rights of the States." But the brute, bloody fact beneath those words was money. So much goddamn money.

The leaders of slave power were fighting a movement of dispossession. The abolitionists told them that the property they owned must be forfeited, that all the wealth stored in the limbs and wombs of their property would be taken from them. Zeroed out. Imagine a modern-day political movement that contended that mutual funds and 401(k)s, stocks and college savings accounts were evil institutions that must be eliminated completely, more or less overnight. This was the fear that approximately 400,000 Southern slaveholders faced on the eve of the Civil War.

Today, we rightly recoil at the thought of tabulating slaves as property. It was precisely this ontological question—property or persons?—that the war was fought over. But suspend that moral revulsion for a moment and look at the numbers: Just how much money were the South's slaves worth then? A commonly cited figure is \$75 billion, which comes from multiplying the average sale price of slaves in 1860 by the number of slaves and then using the Consumer Price Index to adjust for inflation. But as economists Samuel H. Williamson and Louis P. Cain argue, using CPI-adjusted prices over such a long period doesn't really tell us much: "In the 19th century," they note, "there were no national surveys to figure out what the average consumer bought." In fact, the first such survey, in Massachusetts, wasn't conducted until 1875.

In order to get a true sense of how much wealth the South held in bondage, it makes far more sense to look at slavery in terms of the percentage of total economic value it represented at the time. And by that metric, it was colossal. In 1860, slaves represented about 16 percent of the total household assets—that is, all the wealth—in the entire country, which in today's terms is a stunning \$10 trillion.

Ten trillion dollars is already a number much too large to comprehend, but remember that wealth was intensely geographically focused. According to calculations made by economic historian Gavin Wright, slaves represented nearly half the total wealth of the South on the eve of secession. "In 1860, slaves as property were worth more than all the banks, factories and railroads in the country put together," civil war historian Eric Foner tells me. "Think what would happen if you liquidated the banks, factories and railroads with no compensation."

*Chris Hayes is an American journalist and writer.*

## Source C. The Case Against Reparations for Slavery

[Epstein, Richard. "The Case Against Reparations for Slavery." *The Libertarian* 27 July, 2014]

Coates is most evasive when discussing a proposed system of reparations. He notes quite properly that "broach the topic of reparations today and a barrage of questions inevitably follows: Who will be paid? How much will they be paid? Who will pay?" These are indeed fair questions, and yet at no point does he attempt to answer them. He endorses John Conyers proposal to form a Congressional committee to seek out "appropriate remedies" for the lingering effects of slavery and segregation, but offers few clues about its mission.

Nor are there easy analogies at hand. One possibility is to try to design some system based on the model of reparations for the internment program of 110,000 Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. But there, the payments were made to specific persons who were direct victims of wrong by the government. No program that seeks to remedy the wrongs of the past 350 years could hope to duplicate that level of precision.

Nor is the analysis of black reparations informed, as Coates suggests, by comparison to the decision of the German government to pay reparations to Israel in 1952 for the unspeakable sins of the Holocaust. Those payments of course could do nothing for the millions of individuals who lost their lives, but they did help the newly-founded Israel to gain strength in the first decade of its life. But the differences between these two cases overwhelm the similarities. Death by lynching in the South deserves emphatic condemnation. But let's keep the numbers in perspective. We know that "nearly 3,500 African Americans and 1,300 whites were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1968, mostly from 1882 to 1920." The Holocaust took nearly 1,700 times as many lives in a four-year period. For that wrong, the payment to a new state was a sensible if incomplete remedy. But to whom should the payments be made here?

Rather than speaking of reparations, we should consider the many constructive steps that could, and should, be taken right now as part of our ongoing social commitments to black Americans. It is striking that Coates makes no mention of the charter school movement, which is working overtime to give less fortunate children of all races opportunities that would be otherwise denied to them. Nor does he ask how to remove the barriers to entry that progressive legislation has placed in the path of minority workers, including such statutes as the anti-discrimination laws and minimum wage laws that Coates presumably supports. These laws make it more difficult for African Americans to get jobs in today's labor market. Deregulation, by contrast, knocks down barriers to entry instead of erecting them in the name of greater racial or economic justice. Coates should embrace the libertarian principles that explain the injustices of racism to forge a new set of forward-looking policies.

*Richard Epstein is an American lawyer.*

## Source D. The Impossibility of Reparations

[Frum, David. "The Impossibility of Reparations." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 3 June 2014]

If "reparations" means remembrance and repentance for the wrongs of the past, then let's have reparations. Americans tell a too-flattering version of their national story. They treat slavery as ancillary rather than essential. They forget that the work of slaves paid this country's import bill from the 17th century until 1860. They do not acknowledge that the "freedom" championed by slaveholding Founding Fathers, including the author of the Declaration of Independence, included the freedom to own other human beings as property. They can no longer notice how slavery is stitched into every line of the Constitution and was supported by every single early national institution. The self-reckoning we see in Germany and other European countries does not come easily to Americans—and is still outright rejected by many.

If "reparations" means intensifying the nation's commitment to equal opportunity for all its people—and most especially for the descendants of those once enslaved—then (again) let's have reparations. Better schools, more jobs, some form of universal health coverage, an immigration policy that does not exert endless downward pressure on the wages of America's least skilled workers, improved nutrition especially in early childhood, higher taxes on alcohol, more effective and less punitive enforcement of drug laws—there's a program of group betterment awaiting the right advocates at the right time.

But if "reparations" means what most Americans reasonably interpret it to mean—cash flowing from some Americans to others in race-conscious ways meant to redress the racial wrongs of the past—then it's a disastrous idea for all groups in society.

And if, when you advocate reparations, you aren't sure which of the above things it does mean, then your advocacy should be postponed until you are.

*David Frum is a political commentator and former speechwriter for George W. Bush.*

## Source E. What's Wrong With Reparations for Slavery

[Spath, Stefan. "What's Wrong with Reparations for Slavery | Stefan Spath." FEE, Foundation for Economic Education, 30 June 2010.]

It should not be overlooked that the greatest irony of American slavery is that the descendants of those brought across the Atlantic from Africa are demonstrably better off than the descendants of those who remained. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to some of the poorest countries with some of the most appalling living conditions in the world. Disease, war, and famine are commonplace, and corrupt governments led by military dictators and kleptocrats ensure that economic growth and development for the masses is a low priority. In his book *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*, American reporter Keith Richburg concludes that black Americans should consider themselves lucky to have escaped the squalor of what is contemporary Africa.

Not only blacks, but all Americans should feel lucky to be born in the society with the most opportunities for advancement. The American dream is not a myth but a reality — so attractive that tens of thousands of people from across the world try to make it to our shores every year. The benefits of living in the United States weaken, if not destroy, the foundation of the argument in favor of paying blacks group compensation for what happened to their ancestors.

In a system where politicians steal from Peter to pay Paul, the politicians, as George Bernard Shaw once pointed out, can always count on the support of Paul. But does this redistribution of wealth leave anyone better off? Yes. The people who receive the hard-earned money confiscated from the taxpayers will undoubtedly be materially better off. However, to judge whether such a policy is sound, one must look beyond the immediate effect and try to discern the impact on other groups....

Perhaps the most important error made by those who argue for reparations is not economic at all but philosophical. The idea of achieving justice by taking money from one group to pay another for an act that was neither committed nor suffered by the parties is a collectivist affront to the American ideal of individualism. People are not interchangeable pawns but individuals responsible for their own actions. Slaves and slave owners are dead, and we cannot bring them back.

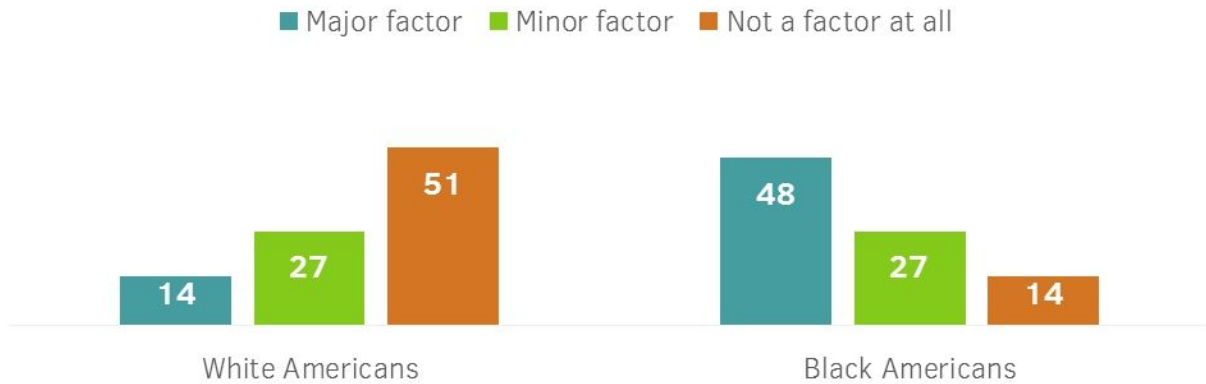
*Stefan Spath is a writer for the Foundation for Economic Education.*

## Source F. The Price of Slavery

[Moore, Peter. "Overwhelming Opposition to Reparations for Slavery and Jim Crow." YOurGov. 02 Jun 2014]

### The legacy of slavery

*Do you think the impact of slavery is a major factor, a minor factor, or not a factor in lower average wealth levels for blacks in the United States today? %*

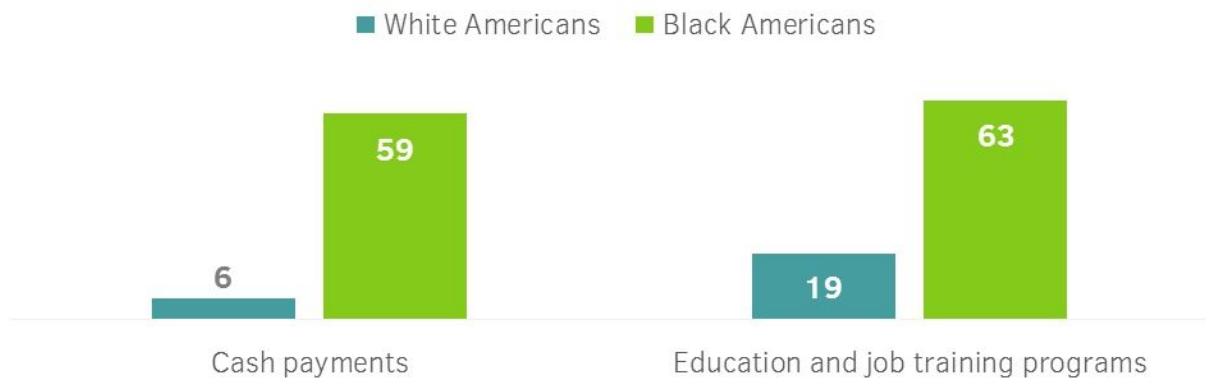


YouGov | yougov.com

May 23-27, 2014

### Reparations

*Do you think the government should or should not offer the following things to black Americans who are the descendants of slaves? % answering 'should'*



YouGov | yougov.com

May 23-27, 2014

## **Source G. This is What Reparations Could Look Like in America**

[Collins, Chuck. Commentary. "This Is What Reparations Could Actually Look like in America." Quartz, Quartz, 23 June 2017.]

In 1988, US president Ronald Reagan formally apologized for the US government's internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and, under the provisions of the Civil Liberties Act, paid \$20,000 in reparations to over 800,000 victims of internment. Over \$1.1 billion was initially allocated and an additional \$400,000 was appropriated later to cover claims.

There are also examples of such payout globally. In accordance with a 1952 agreement, Germany has paid over \$89 billion in reparations to victims of the Holocaust during World War II. German officials continue to meet with groups of survivors and their advocates to revisit guidelines and ensure that survivors receive the benefits. As recently as 2015, both Greek and Russian parliaments voted to demand that Germany pay them for the damage inflicted by Nazi occupation.

Many whites with little in the bank to show for their racial advantage will understandably be frustrated by the concept of reparations. If they never owned slaves—and neither did their ancestors—why should they have to pay? By the same token, many first- or second-generation Americans, whose European ancestors fled their own hardships to come to the US, feel miles and centuries apart from slavery.

The key point, however, is the unpaid labor of millions—and the compounding legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, discrimination in mortgage lending, and a race-based system of mass incarceration—created uncompensated wealth for individuals and white society as a whole. Immigrants with European heritage directly and indirectly benefited from this system of white supremacy....

For this reason, I propose two concrete mechanisms to fund a national Reparations Trust Fund. The first is a graduated tax on wealth and inherited wealth. Households with wealth in excess of \$5 million would pay a 1% tax, but rates would climb for billionaire households.

Secondly, I propose that the fund be capitalized in part by hefty penalties on wealthy individuals and corporations that attempt to move their funds "off-shore" or into complicated trusts to avoid taxation and accountability. There would also be stiff penalties assessed on wealth managers who aid and abet these wealth escapes by creating trusts and off-shore subsidies for the sole purposes of tax dodging.

*Chuck Collins is a senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies.*