

***“I believe it’s time to start a national, full-blown conversation about reparations.”***

**SEN. ELIZABETH WARREN (D-MA)**

**THE ISSUE:** The debate over reparations for black Americans has ramped back up recently. Earlier this year, Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) reintroduced H.R. 40, a bill that would form a commission to study whether descendants of slaves should receive reparations (traditionally, financial compensation) to make amends for the former practice of slavery in the U.S.

“The call for reparations represents a commitment to entering a constructive dialogue on the role of slavery and racism in shaping present-day conditions in our community and American society,” Jackson Lee said.

On June 19—the day known as Juneteenth, a holiday held to recognize the liberation of black slaves—Congress held a hearing on the issue of reparations. By the end of June, Jackson Lee’s legislation had reached 90 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives. And House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) announced he intends to bring the bill to the floor for a vote.

However, the legislation is unlikely to move in the GOP-controlled Senate. “We’ve had waves of immigrants as well who have come to the country and experienced dramatic discrimination of one kind or another,” said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) at a news conference. “So no, I don’t think reparations are a good idea.”

**THE CONTROVERSY:** Reparations is a complex issue. Even supporters of reparations disagree on what they should look like and who exactly should benefit from them. And lawmakers in Congress are sharply divided on the issue.

**THOSE FOR** making reparations for slavery point out that the wealth of the United States was greatly enhanced by the exploitation of African American slave labor. If slaves had been allowed to retain the profits of their labor, their descendants would be better off economically today. Thus, reparations would be a way of correcting modern economic imbalances. African Americans have been affected by hardships after slavery ended, leaving the descendants of slavery at an unfair disadvantage compared to white Americans.

**THOSE AGAINST** the U.S. making reparations for slavery say affirmative-action programs and policies have already been implemented as part of a broader reparations program. Reparations would be too expensive, depriving the country of the opportunity to meet budget needs that benefit all Americans. Descendants of slaves are better off than they would have been in Africa. As Conservative commentator David Horowitz wrote, “American blacks on average enjoy per capita incomes in the range of twenty to fifty times that of blacks living in any of the African nations from which they were taken.”



**REPARATIONS FOR SLAVERY** is not a new idea in the United States. In 1865, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote Special Field Orders No. 15—better known as “forty acres and a mule”—which allotted formerly enslaved families in certain states a plot of land no larger than 40 acres. Around 40,000 freed slaves were settled on 400,000 acres in Georgia and South Carolina. However, President Andrew Johnson reversed the order, and the land was returned to its previous owners. Advocates of reparations argue that descendants of slavery should be similarly compensated.

## Issue 2 Reparations

### Should the U.S. pay reparations for slavery?



**YES: REP. SHEILA JACKSON LEE (D-TX)**



"The impact of slavery and its vestiges continues to affect African Americans and indeed all Americans in communities throughout

our nation. Which is why I am pleased to introduce H.R. 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act. [The bill's] proponents have made substantial progress in elevating the discussion of reparations and reparatory justice at the national level ... Though some have tried to deflect the importance of these conversations by focusing on individual monetary compensation, the real issue is whether and how this nation can come to grips with the legacy of slavery that still infects current society."



**NO: SEN. MITCH MCCONNELL (R-KY)**



"I don't think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none of us currently living are responsible is a good idea. We've tried to deal with

our original sin of slavery by fighting a civil war, by passing landmark civil rights legislation. We elected an African American president. I think we're always a work in progress in this country, but no one currently alive was responsible for that, and I don't think we should be trying to figure out how to compensate for it. First of all, it would be pretty hard to figure out who to compensate. ... No, I don't think reparations are a good idea."