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The case for reparations

Impact of slavery lingers 150 years later

The issue of reparations has taken on a new life recently as it has become a discussion point among the Democratic presidential candidates.

Webster defines reparations as the making of amends for a wrong someone has done by paying money to help those who have been wronged.

I define it as making amends for the 250 years that America kept a large population of people as cattle, as property, or as less than human.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky dismissed this call for reparations. He was followed by Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, the only black Republican in the U.S. Senate, who said it's too complicated to figure out who to compensate.

You should not be surprised. Whites and even blacks and other people of color who are privileged or "advantaged" often have a problem with "leveling the playing field."

Many who side with this group also mistakenly believe that slavery completely ended in 1865, but forget about the policies and discriminatory practices that allowed the remnants of slavery to exist up until the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Families of former slaves were impacted by slavery until 55 years ago.

It's also a fact that though all slaves were considered freed in June 1865 and promised 40 acres and a mule, this promise was never realized for most. This promise was only fulfilled for a few hundred "soldier slaves" who fought alongside Union soldiers and happened to live along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. The land and animals were taken back upon the death of President Abraham Lincoln in that same year. Sadly, the property was returned to the former slave owners.

The 13th Amendment (1865) ended slavery, the 14th Amendment (1868) guaranteed African Americans the rights of American citizenship and the 15th Amendment (1870) guaranteed black men the right to vote.

But the 13th Amendment was replaced by today's prison system. Descendants of the enslaved make up the largest percentage of prisoners in the country. The 14th Amendment



Derrell Roberts, right, is co-founder of the Roberts Family Development Center in North Sacramento and co-host of Bookends on KDEE radio. He is pictured with Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund.

was compromised when Southern states enacted black codes to prevent African Americans from achieving political and economic autonomy. And the 15th Amendment was not made whole until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

After the Reconstruction era ended, lynching, disenfranchisement and segregationist laws proliferated across the South. There were also sharecropper farmers, separate-and-unequal equal schools, red-lining bank policies, white flight and much more. It was not until after World War II and the 1960s civil rights movement that Jim Crow segregation was outlawed.

If we gave each descendant of slaves \$1.5 million, one estimate is that reparations would cost \$60 trillion. Whether I agree with that or not is not the point. What I do understand is that 150 years after slavery, there are still remnants of the systems set up to make it difficult for blacks to be successful in this country.

Who is at fault? The Ku Klux Klan and its sympathizers, Lester Maddox types, George Wallace types, Strom Thurmond types, Steve King types, Mitch McConnell types and, unfortunately, Tim Scott types, to name a few.

As the Democratic presidential hopefuls talk about the issue of reparations, I hope this season of campaigning gives us a better understanding why this discussion continues 150 years after it started. □