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# What's lost in the reparations debate | STAFF COMMENTARY



Pastor Robert Turner walks past the National Museum of African American History and Culture as part of his monthly walk from Baltimore to Washington to raise awareness of reparations on Wednesday, April 16, 2025, in Washington. (AP Photo/Nathan Howard)



By **TORREY SNOW**

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“Slavery was standard practice throughout human history until it was ended by White people.” This incendiary remark posted by Elon Musk on X captures precisely why our society remains ill-equipped for an honest reckoning with the United States’ brutal institution of chattel slavery — one that nearly tore the nation apart, entrenched profound social and economic disadvantages for generations of Black Americans and continues to fuel divisive ideological battles today. Against this charged backdrop, Maryland stands on the cusp of reigniting a fiercely emotional debate over reparations for slavery and subsequent forms of institutionalized racism.

The vast wickedness of the U.S. slave systems sucks so much oxygen from the room that it becomes difficult to grasp its full historical context. In 1860, only about 7% of U.S. households owned slaves nationwide — a figure that reflects slave ownership concentrated among an economically privileged minority, even as rates rose to around 30% in slaveholding states.

The abolitionist movement, while drawing crucial moral fire from Black voices of resistance, was powerfully advanced by conscientious white citizens who allied with figures like Maryland’s own Frederick Douglass, amplifying escaped slaves’ testimonies and pushing the cause into the halls of power. An estimated 320,000 white Union soldiers gave their lives in the Civil War, part of a bloody struggle that ultimately eradicated legal slavery in the United States. These documented realities often land uncomfortably amid a dominant cultural narrative that reduces the story of U.S. slavery to a stark binary: white people as collective oppressors, Black people as collective victims.

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There is no evading the truth: the U.S. Constitution proclaimed liberty and justice while tolerating for far too long the trafficking, breeding and torture of Black Africans across centuries. This evil complacency fertilized the ground for hateful ideologies that flowered into Jim Crow laws, enforced by judicial, legislative and executive might. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Charles Darwin's theory of racial hierarchy outlined in "The Descent of Man" fueled the rapid growth of "scientific racism," tragically enabling exhibitions like that of Ota Benga, the Mbuti man caged in the Bronx Zoo's monkey house as a supposed evolutionary curiosity. Such worldviews lingered into the 20th century, finding expression in Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger's eugenics advocacy. This includes her outreach to influential circles that overlapped with racist groups as part of efforts that disproportionately affected Black communities, echoes of which exist in today's stark disparities in abortion rates. The legacy of slavery and government-enforced racism runs deeper and wider than most modern minds can fully comprehend.



The profound scope and depravity of American slavery and racism is exactly why a rational, good-faith debate about “reparations” is nigh impossible today. True justice would demand scrutinizing nearly every cornerstone of American society for complicity, not just convenient political targets like “wealthy” whites. Some institutions have begun this process voluntarily. The Baltimore Archdiocese, for instance, launched a commission to “study the sin of racism in the local Church, document economic benefits derived from enslaved labor and promote healing.” Anne Arundel County recently issued a formal apology for its historical role in slavery. Yet P.R.-driven apologies and partisan policy proposals masquerading as reparations fall desperately short on the scales of justice.

In reality, much of the modern push for reparations and sweeping apologies serves as a powerful emotional hook to consolidate political influence and expand tolerance for Marxist ideology. Because these efforts are so overtly political, advocates often miseducate the public — cherry-picking facts that pin collective guilt on white Americans while sidelining the sacrifices made to end the institution, including the hundreds of thousands of patriotic lives lost across racial lines in the fight for emancipation. This selective storytelling is the true injustice: transforming a complex national sin into a blunt political weapon.

The path forward must prioritize historical education over partisan exploitation. Frankly, the entire saga should stand as a cautionary tale about the perils of civic illiteracy and the dangers of ceding unchecked power to centralized government — the very entity that enabled and prolonged these atrocities. Positioning that same government as the primary arbiter of reparative “solutions” risks drawing all the wrong lessons from history. Let’s hope future

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