

The American Project

Season 1: Reparations for slavery & its legacy

Episode 1: Introduction

Transcript

Released: Mon, 1/20/2020 • Length – 7:58



Guests and speakers (Clockwise from top left) William "Sandy" Darity, Steve Cohen, Tiffany Patterson, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Mitch McConnell, Brian Smedley, Thomas Paine, Martin Luther King, Jr., Marianne Williamson.

Representative Steve Cohen (D-TN)

The Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties will come to order. It is only fitting that we should hold a hearing today on HR 40. The commission to study and develop reparation proposals for African Americans Act.

Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY)

Yeah, 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.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

The case I make for reparations is virtually every institution with some degree of history in America has a history of extracting wealth and resources out of the African American community.

Osha Davidson

This is Osha Davidson, producer and host of the American project, independent reporting on a democracy in the works. I should probably introduce myself. This is my first podcast, but I've been a journalist and author for over three decades. I've written five books, and my bylines have appeared in the Huffington Post, the New York Times, Rolling Stone, the Nation, National Geographic, and The Crisis, the magazine of the NAACP. Okay, enough about me. Back to the subject of this podcast. Our first season is a deep dive into an issue that seemed to explode into the nation's consciousness in 2019.

Marianne Williamson

The Democratic Party should be on the side of reparations for slavery.

Osha Davidson

Reparations for slavery. That's former presidential primary candidate Marianne Williamson, raising the issue during the first primary.

Marianne Williamson

I do not believe that the average American is a racist, but the average American is woefully under educated about the history of race in the United States.

Osha Davidson

Now, whatever you might think of a Williamson, it's hard to argue with her premise about white America's ignorance on race, that includes the history of reparations itself.

The basic idea is not new, not by a long shot. In fact, some of our founding fathers supported the concept before America was, well, America.

Thomas Paine

But great question may be what should be done with those who are enslaved already? Perhaps some could give them lands upon reasonable rent. So as all may have some property and fruits of their labors. Thomas Paine, March 8 1775.

Osha Davidson

Okay, to get real for a second: There's no silver bullet for solving America's racial problems. But how could there be? Slavery marks the beginning of government sanctioned injuries to black people, not the end. That's because slavery was followed by a widespread campaign of white supremacist terror. There were thousands of lynchings, and thriving black communities were violently destroyed, killing hundreds of men, women, and children throughout both the South and the North.

For a century Jim Crow laws prevented black access to everything from a decent education, to public transportation to that cornerstone of democracy, the right to vote. Then there were New Deal and post-World War II programs specifically designed to grow the white, but not the Black, middle class. For the first time, millions of working class whites had access to low interest loans for homes. Blacks were shut out from this historic initiative. The same applies to that other great American project, the GI Bill. White vets like my dad became the first in their families to get a college degree thanks to Uncle Sam. But Black veterans who had also fought for their country? They were essentially locked out of a program that lifted millions of families like mine into the middle class.

This long history of institutional racism has created what's known as the racial wealth gap. Actually, calling it a gap is a bit like calling the Grand Canyon a ditch. If you think that's an exaggeration, consider this: A 2018 study found that for every dollar held by white households in America, Black households have just seven cents. And that chasm grows even wider in some places. In Boston, for example, the net worth of a median white household is a quarter of a million dollars. The same figure for a similar black

household: \$8. The gap is so large and the disparity so entrenched that some experts contend that nothing short of a reparations program could come close to leveling America's long-tilted playing field. Now, many white liberals and progressives agree that the government owes a debt to black Americans. After all, it was their enslaved ancestors who provided the free labor that turned this country into the richest nation on the planet. But they have questions. They want to know how much reparations would cost and who would pay? Who would get the money and how would it be distributed? These are legitimate concerns and over the course of this season we'll talk to experts who have come up with detailed solutions to them. There's a lot riding on this debate, and not just for black families.

Sandy Darity

I think that ultimately the decision this nation makes about reparations will dictate whether or not there's any prospect for the American creed being valid.

Osha Davidson

That's prize-winning Duke University economist William "Sandy" Darity, a founder of the discipline known as stratification economics. Over this season, you'll hear a lot more from Sandy, who has agreed to be a consultant for this podcast. You'll also hear from experts in other disciplines from history...

Tiffany Patterson

The organization was called National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief Bounty and Pension Association. By 1900 it had grown to over 300,000. Now think about that for a moment.

Osha Davidson

...to health care...

Brian Smedley

We see higher rates of infant mortality; we see a higher incidence of childhood illnesses such as asthma. And this continues with a higher burden of chronic disease in adulthood and at the end of the life cycle, shortened lifespan.

Osha Davidson

...and from education to environmental justice, to religion and ethics. Coming soon on the first season of The American Project, reparations for slavery, and its continuing legacy, independent reporting on a democracy in the works. Check it out wherever you get your podcasts, and please remember to subscribe. For now, let's give the last words on this subject to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr

At the very same time that America refused to give the Negro any land, through an act of Congress, our government was giving away millions of acres of land and the West and the Midwest, which meant that it was willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. But not only did they give the land, they built land grant colleges with government money to teach them how to farm. Not only that, they provided county agents to further their expertise in farming. Not only that, they provided low interest rates in order that they could mechanize their farms. Not only that, today, many of these people are receiving millions of dollars in federal subsidies not the farm, and they're the very people telling the Black man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps. And this is the reality. Now when we come to Washington, in this campaign we're coming to get our check.