

Local Forum Dissects The Pros And Cons Of Reparations

By Domnick Hadley

Anyone with a conscious can see that slavery was a crime against humanity, says Rep. John Conyers.

The proof, he says, lies within the graves of the millions and millions of slaves who died and suffered because of slavery.

Conyers was the special guest at a forum on reparations that was held Friday, Feb. 21, at the Penn Valley Community college.

And even more so, anyone with eyes and a brain can see that slaves built the thriving structure of this nation -- without no just compensation.

So, the right and moral thing to do would be to at least embrace the idea of studying slavery and the effects resulting from the institution, said Rep. Conyers.

Yet Congress refuses to embrace a bill -- H.R. 40 -- that would simply begin with a study.

"Congress studies everything else on earth, yet they say that we don't even want to study this," said Rep. Conyers. "When we were giving reparations to the Japanese, there were no forums.

"Now when you suggest reparations for the group of people who built America with no compensation, then there's a problem," he continued.

Rep. Conyers sentiments were among many presented at the forum.

Members of the community joined Rep. Conyers in a panel discussion -- presenting the pros and cons of H.R. 40 and reparations itself.

H.R. 40, named after the government's promise of 40 acres and a mule to freed slaves, was introduced by Rep. Conyers in 1989.

The bill seeks to accomplish four things:

- Acknowledge the fundamental injustice and inhumanity of slavery.
- Establish a commission to study slavery, its subsequent racial and economic discrimination against freed slaves.
- Study the impact of those forces on today's living African Americans.
- After the study, make recommendations to Congress on appropriate remedies to redress the harm inflicted on living African Americans.

Philip Caradella, a local attorney who presented the cons of reparations, said that from a legal standpoint reparations is not lawful.

Although he admitted that slavery was an unfair and immoral institution, by law reparations is not feasible.

According to Caradella, until December of 1865 slavery was lawful.

So, no matter how immoral slavery might have been, at the time slavery was legal.

"No sane person can deny that slavery was an immoral crime," said Caradella. "However, the law is not the same as morality.

"The law is not required to be fair," he continued. "And until December 1865, slavery was lawful."

Caradella also said that the sovereign immunity prohibits the government from being sued.

No body of government is going to agree to be sued, and forced to pay for something which was then lawful, he said.

"There are no surviving slaves, and there have not been any statutes passed yet to allow their descendants to sue," he said.

But Rev. Sam Mann, who presented the pro side of reparations, is not concerned with the legal aspects.

For Rev. Mann slavery was wrong -- whether sanctioned by law or not -- and some action needs to be taken to remedy the ills it created.

"We live in a prosperity today that was built on slavery," Rev. Mann said.

The first and biggest step, he says, would be to apologize -- first by mouth and second through monetary compensation.

President Clinton issued a formal apology on behalf of himself. The bill should have been introduced then, says Rev. Mann.

"If white people were really sorry, the bill should have been introduced by President Clinton," said Mann.

"We are talking about the separation of families, unpaid labor that built this nation, and the blood that was spilled," said Sen. Mary Groves Bland. "There is not enough money in America."



AT REPARATIONS FORUM . . . Dr. John Conyers was the featured speaker for a panel discussion on reparations on Friday, Feb. 28, at the Penn Valley Community College. Shown with Conyers (middle), from left to right, are Alvin Brooks, Karen Curls, Troy Nash, William Threat and Rev. John Modest Miles. -- CALL photo by Rex Purefoy