



February 15, 2016

President Obama in Springfield, and A Bill to Study Reparations

Sitting at my desk in the Illinois House of Representatives, I attended President Barack Obama's speech in Springfield on February 10, 2016. The General Assembly of the state of Illinois has not had a visit from a president of the United States since President Carter delivered his address on May 26, 1978. It was an honor to be a member of the 99th General Assembly of the State of Illinois for the visit of Barack H. Obama, President of the United States. President Obama's speech was historic and helpful in the current political climate in Springfield. It is my hope that his words will be the inspiration that is needed for all elected officials to move our state forward.

On the same day as President Obama's historic speech before the Illinois General Assembly, I introduced House Resolution (HR) 1011 which requests President Obama to commission a study of reparations for African Americans. I truly hope that the United States will once and for all study the impact that slavery and its continuing effects have on our country and on the lives of African Americans. Just as U.S. Congressman John Conyers, Jr. from Detroit has called for a similar Commission with his HR 40, which he has introduced in the last 10 sessions of Congress, I am asking the Illinois General Assembly to ask President Obama to use his Executive Authority to commission a study to look at how slavery and its aftermath have impacted the progress of African Americans in the United States.

Just as wealth was extracted from African Americans through their labor during slavery, African Americans continue to be targeted for removal of wealth, with a recent example being the housing crisis 10 years ago when blacks were shunted into predatory loans regardless of their creditworthiness, causing devastation and abandoned buildings in our communities and the loss of homes and wealth by the thousands when the economy collapsed and many could not keep up with their payments. Just as specific torture victims of former Chicago police Commander Jon Burge have received reparations, we need to study and consider reparations for others and communities that have been injured by slavery and the continuing effects of systemic discrimination and wealth extraction causing disparities in opportunities in education, employment, health care, access to housing through red-lining and other maneuvers, and other issues of justice.

HR 1011 requests President Obama to commission a study to detail the economic impact of the slave trade and the use of slave labor; and how emancipation, while freeing them of their literal bonds, and ending an immoral practice, did not guarantee equality in education, employment, housing, and access to quality affordable health care; that this study also include an analysis for how reparations for past

harms have benefited the ethnic groups that have received them during the course of American history; and a proposal for reparations to the descendants of slaves in America, and how those reparations can help overcome obstacles that still exist today in education, employment, housing, health care, and justice.

2015 National Book Award Winner and 2015 MacArthur 'Genius' Award Winner Ta-Nehisi Coates states in his near-definitive June 2014 article in *The Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations": "Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole."

Coates continues in the same article, "Perhaps after a serious discussion and debate...we may find that the country can never fully repay African Americans. But we stand to discover much about ourselves in such a discussion—and that is perhaps what scares us. The idea of reparations is frightening not simply because we might lack the ability to pay. The idea of reparations threatens something much deeper—America's heritage, history, and standing in the world."

Coates states, "What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.... Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District