

HOW MUCH DO I OWE OPRAH?

Bill Donohue

The first congressional hearing on reparations for slavery in more than a decade is now being taken up by the House. Before we go any further, I want to know how much I owe Oprah.

The idea of reparations for African Americans is seriously flawed. Some argue that if the Japanese received reparations, why shouldn't blacks? It is true that in 1988 Japanese Americans received reparations, but that was entirely different: The 82,000 people who were given \$20,000 each were interned during World War II; no money was given to their relatives.

There is no denying the history of wrongdoing that African Americans have endured. But the slavemasters are dead, as are their slaves. Unlike the Japanese, those in the black community who would benefit from reparations have not themselves endured what their ancestors did. Moreover, if patterns of unjust discrimination against African Americans continued after slavery, and this qualifies for reparations, what do we say to other racial, ethnic, and religious groups who suffered as well?

Let's begin with blacks. Blacks were sold to Europeans by their African slavemasters—they were not kidnapped as portrayed by Alex Haley in *Roots*. Think of it. Imagine boatloads of white boys showing up in Africa announcing their interest in slavery. Weren't they slightly outnumbered? Why didn't the Africans say yes, there is going to be slavery, but you white boys have the identity of the masters and the slaves backwards: we will be the masters and you will be our slaves. Why didn't that happen?

If blacks who are descendants of slaves are to be given reparations, should not those blacks whose ancestors were

slavemasters have to pony up as well? After all, many free blacks in this country owned slaves, though that is never taught in the schools.

The Irish not only were enslaved by the British, more of them died proportionately on board the slave ships than did Africans. That is because there was no provision for slavery in the New World for white people. So when it came time to do the dangerous work on the ships, the English ordered the Irish to do it, saving blacks for the slave auction. Subsequent generations of the Irish in America also faced discrimination in the schools and at work. Should we give today's Irish a check as well?

The Germans who came here in the 18th century were indentured servants, and many faced discrimination during both world wars. Should they get a check? Southern and Eastern Europeans, particular those of Polish extraction, were discriminated against in the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924? Where do they go to get their check? Jews worked the sweatshops in the 19th century and were victimized during World War I. Can they collect as well?

Italians from northern Italy discriminated against Italians from southern Italy, so much so that southern Italians were the first migration of Europeans to return to their native land in large numbers. Should they tap their fellow Italians from the north for reparations? The Chinese were excluded from coming to America between 1882 and 1943. Where do they go to collect?

What about the Indians? The Sioux, the Comanches and the Apaches were so warlike that other Indian tribes fought alongside whites to defeat them. Before we give any more money to the Indians, should those tribes who were brutalized by these three tribes be given a check?

Not only is the idea of reparations unworkable, it is unjust.

It is an axiom of Anglo-Saxon law that the guilty should pay, not the innocent. Asking white people today to pay for the sins of whites whom they never knew, and for things they never did—just because they are white—is morally offensive.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that reparations are a good idea and the money should be distributed without delay. Let's even say, for the sake of argument, that the criteria don't matter (let's give Tiger Woods a half share because his father was black and his mother is Thai). Some of the recipients are bound to do what many people would do—they would have a field day. Which raises the question: After a fast weekend in Vegas, and the money is gone, will they go quietly?

Juan Williams is an African American Fox News contributor who opposes reparations. Why? He thinks it is too easy. He argues that it is too easy for Americans to turn away from their obligations to blacks by offering money, and then declaring they are done with it. He believes there are more constructive things that can be done, and that they should be on-going.

He has a point. Check writing resolves nothing. If I had it my way, we would provide school vouchers to low-income Americans, many of whom are black. That would do more to bring about upward social mobility than any reparations scheme. Unfortunately, those who want reparations oppose school choice.

But if we are to go down this road, I need to know if Oprah, who is worth over \$3 billion, will allow me to pay in installments, preferably without interest.