

New Orleans - New Reparations

By Robert Ben Mitchell (a white guy) - 09/21/05

Thank God I'm not black, for I don't think I have the courage, strength and fortitude to persevere what blacks in America have had to endure. Historically, I am speaking of African Americans, and in particular, the decedents of those who arrived involuntarily here prior to the Civil War. According to the 2003 United States Census, these blacks comprise about thirteen percent of this country's general population. Yet, as anyone aware of current affairs can tell you, this community disproportionately makes up a far larger percentage of the country's poor, disadvantaged, incarcerated, and, when disaster strikes, destitute and displaced. In overall economic terms, African Americans have not and never have obtained their just and respective portion of the American pie.

Other than American Indians, all inhabitants of this country are immigrants or decedents of immigrants. Why is it then, as a group, that only African Americans have succumbed to this most undesirable state. Because, unlike all other immigrant groups, African Americans were originally brought here against their wills as slaves. Even Chinese Americans, who immigrated and suffered horribly as indentured servants to build railroads during the mid 1800's, carried with them the prospect of freedom and prosperity once the terms of their contracts were fulfilled. No such hope was borne by those upon the Middle Passage. Such individuals came here solely as property, to be used as property, and then discarded as trash. Yet, with slavery over 140 years behind us, how could such events lead us to today's African American plight?

In political terms, there are two types of immigration: franchised and disenfranchised. Under franchised immigration, new arrivals are given the opportunity to obtain full citizenship, including suffrage: the right and responsibility to vote. This is the condition under which all groups, other than African Americans, originally came to the United States. Franchised communities arrived with the prospect of opportunity, prosperity and the capacity to develop strong and supportive sub-cultures within the broader population. Historically, such early immigrants benefitted not only from their political franchise, but also from strong nuclear families, and empowered local communities which allowed each generation to offer greater opportunities and wealth to their children. This, of course, was not to be for African Americans.

Under slavery, there was no franchise offered. In fact, long after the civil war, disfranchisement was the rule, until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's. While no longer property, for one hundred years after emancipation, African Americans wandered through a political wasteland of carpet baggers, Redeemers, Jim Crow Laws and segregation. These forces deprived the black community those factors which wove other immigrants into the prosperous side of the American tapestry. Hence, like light on the dark side of the moon, opportunity and prosperity were denied to and, therefore, absent from the African American experience. In their place was only abject poverty, with little if any hope for the betterment of future generations.

If economics were a race, then for the past four centuries, the African American entries have been barreling down the track backwards, due to forces largely out of their control. Even many of the recent programs of the 1900's, which were designed to uplift this community, have failed to substantively change these circumstances. For example, with less than fifty years to correct centuries

of injustice, Affirmative Action has been emasculated. In addition, Welfare, a supposed safety net, has become an entanglement as much as an assistance, often trapping those it was designed to uplift. In all cases, these programs and others, created by the wealthy and politically adroit, proved to be double edge swords that hinder with one hand those they claim to help with the other. Thus, in the astute words of Chris Rock, the United States is like a wealthy uncle who sends you to college, but molests you. The end result is that while the African American community may no longer be headed backwards on our economic highway, it long ago ran out of gas.

Not all poor and disadvantaged people are African Americans, yet African Americans have always, and continue to this day to make up a disproportionately large number of those left out of the American Dream. Why, in the most powerful and influential country on earth, would we allow this to happen? The answer is simple, and can be summed up in my axiom of economics: it takes a lot of poor people to make a rich person.

Throughout history, all dynasties have been built on slave labor. Whether the Egyptian, Chinese, Greek, Roman, Turkish, British or American empires, all these great systems of wealth have benefitted the few on the backs of the many. African Americans were our empire's original economic benefactors. Through their labor, sweat, suffering and lives, our forefathers laid the foundation for the super power we are today, a power now maintained by foreign child labor and illegal Mexican immigrants: the secret slaves of the twenty-first century. While no longer formally enslaved, neither is the African American community fully empowered to participate and profit within our society. Instead, it is trapped in a lowly economic strata where it continually serves as our country's ace in the hole - or, perhaps more historically accurate, spade in the hole. There, during the past century this community became disproportionate fodder for jobs too demeaning to the majority of those in other franchised groups (i.e., maids, janitors, garbage men, infantry, etc.). While individually, some African Americans have made great contributions to, and reaped significant rewards from our country, as a group, economic gain continues to pass them by.

With the advent of hurricane Katrina, and the devastation of New Orleans, the truth of the African American plight was laid bare for all to see. Will such tragedy finally bring social consciousness to bear upon this historical injustice foisted upon this community, or will we, like President Bush, dream of sitting on Trent Lott's rebuilt front porch? Will we as a nation open our hearts and minds to the great travesty our forefathers began and we which continue to perpetrate upon this people, or will we legislate permanent tax cuts for the wealthy, less than thirteen percent of whom are African Americans? I say, enough is enough. When 856 buildings burned in the 1788 fire that leveled the Parish of Orleans, the city of New Orleans rose from the ashes. Now, as we prepare to build the new New Orleans, we must also look to reparations for the centuries of inequities that have left the African American community in economic and social despair.

Given that the key to the American Dream is the American economy, financial reparations are a befitting means by which to repay the wrongs so long endured by African Americans. Yet, how can such wrongs be repaid? Should we adjust wages with compounded interest over four hundred years to come up with a reasonable sum? No, instant wealth is not the answer, as many a hapless lottery winner can attest to. The goal of financial reparations, in this case, should be for the African American community to obtain long term economic parity with all other American communities.

Thus, our giving should allow African Americans to represent not only thirteen percent of the poverty stricken, but also thirteen percent of the lower income class, and thirteen percent of the middle income class, and thirteen percent of the rich, and, as certain republicans like to say, thirteen percent of the super-duper rich. So how do we get from here to there along the reparation highway? The answer is simple: taxes, or better yet, no taxes.

African Americans are no better or worse than anyone else. Potentially, as individuals, they can be just as smart or dumb, nice or mean, and friendly or hostile as any other people. By the same token, they can also be just as reliable, inventive, hardworking and conscientious as anyone else, too. Thus, given the chance, African Americans will assume their rightful and proportionate place within our society. So, rather than provide handouts that only inspire dependency, lets do for African Americans what our government has always done for the wealthy: take away taxes. If we really want the African American community to reach equity with other communities, just stop taxing them until such time as that equity is achieved. Let's give African Americans the same tax breaks and tax loop-holes that have turned American industries into global powerhouses, because African Americans, like an industry, are strong and able. Stop taking away their money for a little while, and they will rise to prominence on par with those around them.

I propose that as we once again rebuild New Orleans, the United States of America embark on an ambitious program of financial reparations to the African American community. These reparations should be done by removing the burden of federal taxes from all African Americans until such time as this people obtains economic and social parity to all other communities within our country. As is befitting our current government that is bent on giving people choices - albeit to date, most of them not affordable choices - we have the opportunity to capitalize upon the awakening of social conscience wrought by hurricane Katrina, and to do the right thing - the empowering thing - which will allow African Americans to chose how they will ascend to equal partnership and participation in the American Dream. As any great industrialist will tell you, no taxes means more money, more money means more choices, more choices means more opportunity, and more opportunity leads to greater prosperity. This is the American way, and the way that we can make reparations that are long over due to our glorious African American community.