

Congressman Charles Rangel Calls for Reparations (June 14, 2005)

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APOLOGIES FOR LYNCHING ARE WELCOME, BUT REPARATIONS ARE IN ORDER

WASHINGTON - I welcome the formal apology to African Americans offered by the U.S. Senate for its culpability in blocking legislation to outlaw lynching for more than a century.

The gesture is very late in coming after at least 5,000 grisly murders, primarily in the South but not limited to that region of the country. But I wouldn't belittle the Senate's action. It means that the institution of government that once protected the perpetrators now recognizes and laments its earlier disregard for human lives.

The descendants of millions of Africans brought to these shores in slavery still bear the scars of the ordeal. Their emancipation during the Civil War did not reverse the destruction of their culture, the distortion of their historical contributions, and the violation of their bodies and spirits.

After slavery new means were applied to maintain discipline. Public lynchings were used both as entertainment for white citizens and as a method to intimidate freed Blacks. While saying "I'm sorry" doesn't absolve these crimes, it opens the door to a conversation about the damage and what can be done about it.

Reparations should be the next topic of discussion, as it applies to slavery and the various atrocities that followed that institution, including lynchings. A debate over the nature and amount of those reparations is already underway in academia, in Congress, in churches, homes and institutions of various kinds.

In my view, reparations in the area of education and health care would have the greatest positive impact on Black communities. In fact, I would take a page from the Congressional Black Caucus agenda for the 109th Congress which focuses on closing disparities in several critical areas including education, from elementary school to college; assuring quality health care for adults and children; employment, economic and business opportunities; equal justice, and retirement security.

The word reparations is just another way of saying that a group of individuals should receive a set of benefits to make up for their unusual sacrifice or suffering. Although the GI Bill was never called reparations, thousands of American soldiers, such as myself, after service in World War II and The Korean War, benefited from its generous education benefits. In my case the bill enabled a high school dropout to finish school, graduate from college and law school, and eventually enter politics.

That is one way to design reparations, without the necessary service in the military in order to qualify. That's the kind of apology that I would like to take to the bank.

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