

REMARKS

May 18, 2023

Congresswoman Bush Remarks from Press Conference Announcing Reparations Now Resolution

Congresswoman Cori Bush (MO-01)

Thank you all so much for being here.

St. Louis and I rise today as one of 187 Black representatives to ever serve in an institution where over 1700 members of Congress who enslaved Black people have held office, in front of a building built by our ancestors who were enslaved, to offer the Reparations Now Resolution declaring that the United States has a moral and legal obligation to provide reparations for the enslavement of Africans and its lasting harm on the lives of millions of Black people.

St. Louis and I rise not alone, but with arms interlocked and hearts full of gratitude to the broad coalition of advocacy organizations, some of whom you will hear from today, whose partnership with my office for over two years has culminated in the introduction of a resolution that cuts deep like the pain of slavery and its manifestations in our lives. We rise with gratitude for those members of the 118th Congress, my colleagues, who are joining us as original cosponsors of this historic legislation, including Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Congressman Jamaal Bowman, Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, as well as with special thanks to Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, lead sponsor of H.R. 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, whose partnership I appreciate and who called me this morning to express her support and blessings for our Reparations Now Resolution. Thank you also to Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie for your leadership and for joining us today.

St. Louis and I rise because Black people in our country cannot wait any longer for our government to begin addressing the extraordinary harm it has caused since the Founding and that it continues to perpetuate to this day.

Let us speak this truth, uncomfortable as it may be: our country was not founded on the principle that all people are created equal. It was founded at the expense of the lives, freedom, and wellbeing of Black people whose enslavement, exploitation and dehumanization were written *into the Constitution!* The truth is uncomfortable, yes, but slavery and discrimination are not a minor or insignificant part of our country's development; they are integral to it.

Consider this: the U.S. economy was founded on the production of crops planted, harvested and produced by enslaved Black people. By 1831, the United States was delivering nearly half the world's raw cotton crop as a result of chattel slavery. In 1861 alone, the value placed on cotton produced by enslaved Black people was 250 million dollars, or more than 8 billion dollars today.

All of this happened not in spite of the federal government, but *because of it*. Ten of the first 12 Presidents enslaved Black people. President James K. Polk traded enslaved Black people at the White House. There have been 1,500 more enslavers of Black people than Black people who have served as Members of Congress. The Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision holding that Black people could not be U.S. citizens was decided by a majority that included 5 slaveholding justices.

This is not just a matter of our country's history, but it **is** a matter for which America must provide reparations if we desire a prosperous future for all.

We know that we continue to live under slavery's vestiges.

We know how slavery was perpetuated by Jim Crow.

We know how slavery's impacts live on today, from the Black-white wealth gap, to voter suppression, to segregation and redlining, to disparities in infant mortality rates and other health outcomes. Those are not the natural consequences of human society; they are directly caused by our federal government's role in the enslavement and exploitation of Black people throughout our history.

Our federal government never saw it fit on its own to rectify the immeasurable, cataclysmic harms of slavery. But we're here now, and we're lifting up this mirror of a resolution so that America can face it and see our future. A future of healing. A future of repair. A future of accountability.

We're here not to request that future, but to demand that future. We need that future right now.

That's why we are introducing this resolution today. We need reparations now. Of course, this initiative does not exist in a vacuum, but it exists to complement and enhance longstanding efforts like H.R. 40, led by the late Congressman John Conyers and today by the Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, whose leadership in Congress has been vital on this issue. We must enact H.R. 40. We must also enact other reparatory justice legislation like the Congresswoman Barbara Lee's resolution urging the establishment of a Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation.

We stand on the shoulders of giants and continue this work as reparations are a deeply personal matter to so many of us. It's deeply personal to me. When my ancestors lived their lives in West Africa unaware of the horrors that would befall them, their last names were not Bush. That name was forced upon my paternal ancestors by the white people who enslaved them. So this is about my own family's history, too.

But I also know that because I have the privilege, even after all that my ancestors experienced, of representing the people of Missouri's First Congressional District as the first Black woman to ever represent Missouri in federal office, I will do everything in my power to hold our government

accountable for the moral and material crimes it has committed and continues to perpetuate.

I am grateful to this movement. To the advocates and activists who engage in this struggle every day at the state and local levels and are making incredible progress, like in St. Louis. To the people who carried the torch before us. And to those who are willing to open their eyes and see that none of us are free until all of us are free.

Thank you again for being here and I will turn it over to Congresswoman Barbara Lee.