

Reparations and Rationale

Among certain sectors of American intelligentsia there is talk of reparations to the ancestors of slaves who served in the American south prior to the Civil War. Perhaps just as unctuous as slavery was the virtual re-enslavement of the Black population after the disintegration of reconstruction.

Never mind that most, if not all, Africans reached American shores as the result of wars by African tribes against other African tribes. The Muslim suppliers of guns and weapons often acted as the intermediaries and brokers, selling and transferring their human property to those who enslaved Black men and women in North Africa, Europe, Asia, around the world and eventually in the American Colonies. The origin of the slave trade history exculpates no one in particular. Also, put aside that many of the African Americans in the United States today are unrelated to the slave population or those mistreated in the post-reconstruction era.

What is important, of course, is to build a fair and free society where skin color and other accidents of our birth are irrelevant. It has been a long hard fight and it is ongoing.

While thinking about reparations, I was recently rereading the history of a man very few people know about: Chaim Solomon. He was more than an American Jewish patriot. He was an early member of the Sons of Liberty, a radical group which advocated for American independence. The British thought he was a spy and imprisoned him in New York, where he contracted tuberculosis which ultimately killed him at age 44. Solomon left his family and fled to Philadelphia since New York was occupied by the Red Coats, while Philadelphia at the time was not. Finally reunited with his family, Solomon became "financier of the American Revolution." There is some dispute as to precisely what Solomon did during the Revolution, but one thing is clear. He died penniless as a result of his financial support of the American Revolution, and neither he nor his descendants were ever paid in spite of perhaps as many as five American Presidents recognized his contribution to independence.

In short, Chaim Solomon was a broker. The Colonies had no money that was worth anything. Financing the Revolution was as important as the Revolution itself. The troops at Valley Forge were virtually in revolt in 1776 because they were not being paid. Governor Morris, Washington's man in charge of fundraising, was a blatant anti-Semite and was very reluctant to go to the Jews until, history tell us, Washington ordered him to do so. Chaim Solomon was delighted to use his talents in aid of the Revolution, since he was too sick to serve as a soldier. He was a broker of notes and bills, creating a market in currency that made it possible for the continental congress to finance the Revolution. It is also clear that Solomon did this without profit to himself, at zero markup. We also know for a fact that Solomon gave money to at least five of the founders of this country, all of whom expressed great appreciation, whether Madison, Mifflin or the others.

After the war, Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of Treasury of the new United States, came up with a plan that saved the Union. The states were refusing to pay for the Revolution, and the federal government had no way to raise the kind of money needed. The assumption agreement, a plan hatched by Hamilton, created a system that unified

the early nation. The United States of America assumed the debt of the states, borrowed the money and paid for it by a workable tariff system. Hamilton thus saved the nation from early disintegration.

Chaim Solomon died a pauper at age 44 from tuberculosis contracted while in a British prison in New York. His heirs attempted to collect the money he was owed, but with no success. One of Solomon's ancestors even instituted suit. The United States responded by striking a coin in honor of Solomon and later on a stamp. There is a statue in Chicago of Washington and Solomon and another statute of Solomon in Philadelphia. That is about it in terms of recognition of Chaim Solomon. His name is certainly not taught in any of our schools.

The thought occurred to me that perhaps the Jewish community ought to be paid back with interest. Just think of all the Jewish programs and schools that such an absolutely justifiable payback would finance. Perhaps this would help this Jewish community in America realize its own important heritage and ties to traditional values. There is no doubt that one of the great concerns of those of us who see a value in Jewish continuity is the lack of education and knowledge on the part of young Jews, not to mention a lack of observance.

As someone once said to me, without Judaism there are no Jews. Without Jewish values, the moral structure of the Judeo-Christian west is in great jeopardy.

No doubt this idea of mine will go nowhere. It is unlikely that the United States will ever fully come to appreciate the contribution of Chaim Solomon, nor will it ever be repaid. After the death of Chaim Solomon, there were still states that did not permit Jews to hold office and for well over 200 years, until modern times, country clubs, housing and jobs were off limits to Jews. As recently as my generation, Jewish students such as myself, were told it would be more difficult for us to get into Ivy League schools in order to make way for others. Is this not discrimination?

Discrimination is whenever we treat people differently, better or worse, because we perceive them as different. Some discrimination is legal. Only the best athletes get into the final rounds of sports competitions. That is a form of discrimination. We permit private religious institutions to hire people of their own faith.

The problem we all face is the arbitrariness and inconsistency in advocating that some groups based upon color, religion, or some other attribute, are more "entitled" than others.

It is becoming increasingly evident that main stream media is now very reluctant to publish points of views such as those expressed here. Fear of political reprisal and social damning is a consequence of the Facebook, Twitter, social media generation.

There is no doubt that pendulum will swing in the other direction, but hopefully it will not move to another extreme. All extremes have proven themselves bad for America and Americans.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.