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Opinions

Georgetown students have voted in favor of reparations. Will America?

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By Christine Emba

Georgetown University students have voted in favor of reparations. Two-thirds of undergraduates who took part in a campuswide referendum April 11 voted "yes" on a student fee, of exactly $27.20 each semester, to create a reparations fund for the descendants of Georgetown's slaves. The number is in remembrance of the 272 slaves sold in 1838 by Georgetown's Jesuit leaders to resolve the school's debt at a critical point in its history, essentially saving the school.

It's a notable number and a remarkable event. While a number of institutions have begun to acknowledge their ties to slavery, Georgetown has offered a formal apology, renamed buildings and given descendants of the 272 preference in its admissions process. And although a discussion of reparations has begun among some candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, Georgetown's undergraduates now lead the national conversation.

The plan is by no means off the ground — the resolution is nonbinding, and a challenge to the referendum is already being considered — but the vote reflects a burst of moral clarity around a fundamental national question. And the fault lines at Georgetown reflect those in the country today — and reveal the real reason reparations may be an American impossibility.

Before the referendum, more than one opinion piece ran in the student newspaper the Hoya urging students to vote no. One criticized the idea of a "mandatory fee which, by nature, represents a moral judgement on the responsibility of Georgetown students for the institution's past . . . [contradicting the] very value of liberty." Another argued that the student body "was not obliged" to pay for Georgetown's "institutional failures." It went on: "Most certainly, no member of the current student body ever participated in the slave trade nor willingly operates an institution that does."

Americans love their liberty — its importance is a truth we hold to be self-evident. And threaded through our idea of freedom is a near-obsessive insistence on our individual merit.

Our country's founding myth says: "I am my own person, creator of my own new world. I built all of this myself — or maybe my father or grandfather did — and I deserve the credit." It's a story served to new arrivals as soon as possible, a fantasy made more plausible by an unspoken agreement not to discuss the darker elements of our country's past.

By extension, it allows all who swear by the self-made myth to escape obligation to others: "If you tried hard enough, you could be where I am, too. Therefore I am responsible for no one else, and your moral claims have no hold on me."

It's a tenacious illusion, and a hollow one. And any discussion of reparations for slavery threatens to strip it painfully away.

Because slavery interrupts the narrative entirely. Any truthful discussion of the United States' history leads to the inconvenient reminder that even the poorest American ancestor had to have gotten their building material somewhere, or, more likely, if they were white, from someone. Even if a white person didn't own slaves outright, a system of white supremacy lent a leg up. "I worked hard for what I got, and I'm still behind" becomes an obvious dodge — an unwillingness to recognize that others worked harder still but with no chance of benefit at all.

But admitting as much would suggest indebtedness and, as a result, obligation. And that, our founding myth cannot allow. Because then, do our successes no longer belong to us alone?

Even the Georgetown students who wrote op-eds opposing the proposed reparations fee were willing to admit to this conflict. "We agree that the Georgetown of today would not exist if not for the sale of 272 slaves in 1838," said one article published in February. That's more than most of the country seems able to concede.

A personal story is hard to revise; a national one, harder still. A school like Georgetown is usually ground zero for fostering the myth of individual merit — while the "GU272" students were organizing their reparations vote, it was discovered that the university was part of a college admissions scandal in which wealthy parents had allegedly bribed their children's way through a supposedly merit-based process.

But with their "yes" vote on a reparations fee, a majority of Georgetown's students have shown that they possess the moral imagination to suggest a modification to the American story, one that acknowledges a more complicated communal history. The question is whether the rest of the nation will ever catch up.

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