

Twice as good vs. thrice as fast

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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If you haven't read Ta-Nehisi Coates's cover story in the current *Atlantic*, [do](#). Coates surveys the history of white supremacy in America, with a particular focus on housing policy in one Chicago neighborhood, and calls us to do what we've never really done: seriously consider what it might take to make it right.

The headline is "The Case for Reparations," but Coates doesn't name a dollar amount or even argue that payment is the main goal. What he's after is a genuine reckoning with the deep racism that's helped build white America—with collective, structural sins against black people, sins that reap fruit long after we've stopped actively committing ([some of](#)) them. Anticipating the objection, "Won't reparations divide us?" Coates responds:

Not any more than we are already divided. The wealth gap merely puts a number on something we feel but cannot say—that American prosperity was ill-gotten and selective in its distribution. What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt.

What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling "patriotism" while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.

But isn't the real issue poverty and inequality, not racism? No, and liberals who make this pivot

ignore the long tradition of this country actively punishing black success—and the elevation of that punishment, in the mid-20th century, to federal

policy.... Today, progressives are loath to invoke white supremacy as an explanation for anything. On a practical level, the hesitation comes from the dim view the Supreme Court has taken of the reforms of the 1960s. The Voting Rights Act has been gutted. The Fair Housing Act might well be next. Affirmative action is on its last legs. In substituting a broad class struggle for an anti-racist struggle, progressives hope to assemble a coalition by changing the subject.... The politics of racial evasion are seductive. But the record is mixed.

Coates goes on to elaborate that progressive policy that isn't aimed specifically at black Americans still gets fought and sometimes weakened via racialized arguments—and with racially correlated effects (e.g., the 1990s overhaul of welfare and the more recent defanging of Obamacare's Medicaid expansion).

Perhaps most devastating is Coates's rebuttal of those who would blame the challenges facing the black community on individual shortcomings in general and deadbeat dads in particular (a major theme in his body of work). Here he cites several of his interview subjects in Chicago:

From the White House on down, the myth holds that fatherhood is the great antidote to all that ails black people. But Billy Brooks Jr. had a father. Trayvon Martin had a father. Jordan Davis had a father. Adhering to middle-class norms has never shielded black people from plunder. Adhering to middle-class norms is what made Ethel Weatherspoon a lucrative target for rapacious speculators. Contract sellers did not target the very poor. They targeted black people who had worked hard enough to save a down payment and dreamed of the emblem of American citizenship—homeownership. It was not a tangle of pathology that put a target on Clyde Ross's back. It was not a culture of poverty that singled out Mattie Lewis for “the thrill of the chase and the kill.” Some black people always will be twice as good. But they generally find white predation to be thrice as fast.

Coates endorses Congressman John Conyers's longstanding efforts to move a bill through the House—not authorizing any reparations expenditures, merely calling for a commission to look at the relevant issues. The [current version of Conyers's bill has 31 cosponsors](#), only a couple of whom are white. It's not that we've considered the legacy of white supremacy in this country and determined that reparations are not in order. It's that we're not even willing to engage in such a national reckoning in the first place—despite the high social value placed on not-being-racist, despite the widespread reverence for Martin Luther King, despite the fact that liberals have in

recent years worn out the keys in the word "privilege." Such a reckoning is long overdue.

For an introduction to the (rather lengthy) article and clips from some of Coates's interviews, watch this video from the *Atlantic*: