

Shouldn't Concentration Camps Be Liberated?

"Yes, we do have concentration camps." This headline was written by the editorial board of the Salt Lake Tribune, in the reliably conservative state of Utah. Andrea Pitzer, author of the definitive book on the global history of concentration camps, agrees. So do people like the Japanese survivors who were once forced to live in another era's concentration camps.

Over the past year, seven children have died in U.S. immigration custody or shortly after being released. These deaths occurred after 10 years during which not a single child died. Elora Mukherjee, director of the Immigrants' Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School, told The Atlantic that the stench in some detention facilities is so horrible that it was hard for her to even have a focused conversation with the children. Babies didn't have diapers. Young kids were forced to care for infants who they didn't even know. Clothes were covered in snot and excrement. Baby bottles were used without being properly cleaned and sterilized. All of these conditions have created environments where sicknesses and diseases spread like wildfire. In one facility, lice spread from child to child, and when the children were forced to share "lice combs," and one of the combs somehow got lost, dozens of kids were punished by having their bedding removed. They had to sleep on the cold concrete floor.

This is why we say that cruelty is the point. It's not an accident. **These systems are cruel by design.** The idea is to make it miserable to deter people from coming to the U.S. These detention centers are reckless and dangerous. Dr. Dolly Lucio Sevier was granted access to a Border Patrol facility in McAllen, Texas, and wrote in her report about it that "the conditions within which they are held could be compared to torture facilities." They "felt worse than jail." The kids she examined were forced to endure "extreme cold temperatures, lights on 24 hours a day, no adequate access to medical care, basic sanitation, water, or adequate food."

As many have pointed out, we need to remember exactly how and why the teenage diarist Anne Frank actually died. She was not gassed to death in a Nazi death camp. It's believed that she and her sister Margot contracted and died from typhus. In December 1944, a minor miracle occurred when Nanette Blitz, a lifelong childhood friend and classmate of Anne's, was transferred to the Bergen-Belsen camp where the Frank sisters were being held. "She was no more than a skeleton by then," Blitz recalled. "She was wrapped in a blanket; she couldn't bear to wear her clothes anymore because they were crawling with lice."

Guess what? Lice are the primary carriers of typhus. That's how the disease spread. And right now, today, we have prison camps across the United States where the same thing is happening. Multiple reports state that emergency conditions are repeatedly ignored until they result in death. The adults and children in these camp aren't accused of being a danger to society. They haven't been charged with violent crimes. Yet they are clearly being punished in the most severe ways. These are asylum-seekers.

Here's where I am. If we have doctors, historians, and leading congresspeople calling these facilities "torture facilities" and "concentration camps," and we all see the deaths piling up, and the conditions growing perilous, the question becomes: What exactly are we going to do about it?

For all the years that we've read and heard about concentration camps in other countries under other regimes, I don't think many of us fully considered what we would do if such camps were built and operated in our nation, by our government, on our watch, on our dime. But that's exactly where we are right now. **My soul is uncomfortable with where we are.**

I swear, I am not trying to be inflammatory. I don't mean this as a threat of violence or physical force, but I thought that concentration camps were **supposed to be liberated.** I thought that kids being held against their will in such atrocious conditions were supposed to be rescued. I don't know what that kind of rescue would look like in present-day terms, but I know this much: **My soul is uncomfortable with where we are.**

It seems like **our game plan** is to focus on defeating Trump, and in the meantime, sue the administration until it incrementally agrees to start allowing kids to brush their teeth or wash their hands with soap. It just doesn't seem to be **enough.** What if Trump wins again? Is **our game plan** then to **wait four more years** to hope we end these monstrous camps? Even if a Democrat wins, pledging to improve conditions, how can we hold them to account and **demand** that migrants be freed?

I always wondered how concentration camps lasted for so many years during the Holocaust, but now that we have our own, I see how. It's a mix of fear, indifference, and lack of political will. We see the consequences of doing nothing, but it seems as though we've put all of our eggs into the basket of a far-off election. And I am uncomfortable with where we are.

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REPARATIONS REBUTTAL RAZED



"Reading the Emancipation Proclamation 1864"

Herrick, H. W., delineator; J. W. Watts, engraver.

A subcommittee of the House Judiciary held a historic hearing on reparations for slavery —the first of its kind in over a decade. The hearing coincided with Juneteenth, a day that commemorates June 19th, 1865, when slaves in Galveston, Texas, finally learned that the Emancipation Proclamation had abolished slavery. Lawmakers are considering a bill titled the:

"Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act."

Award-winning author Ta-Nehisi Coates testified at the historic congressional hearing on reparations:

"Yesterday, when asked about reparations, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell offered a familiar reply: America should not be held liable for something that happened 150 years ago, since none of us currently alive are responsible.

This rebuttal proffers a strange theory of governance, that American accounts are somehow bound by the lifetime of its generations. But well into this century, the United States was still paying out pensions to the heirs of Civil War soldiers. We honor treaties that date back some 200 years, despite no one being alive who signed those treaties. Many of us would love to be taxed for the things we are solely and individually responsible for. But we are American citizens, and thus bound to a collective enterprise that extends beyond our individual and personal reach. It would seem ridiculous to dispute invocations of the Founders, or the Greatest Generation, on the basis of a lack of membership in either group. We recognize our lineage as a generational trust, as inheritance. And the real dilemma posed by reparations is just that: a dilemma of inheritance.

It is impossible to imagine America without the inheritance of slavery. As historian Ed Baptist has written, enslavement, quote, "shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics" of America, so that by 1836 more than \$600 million, or almost half of the economic activity in the United States, derived directly or indirectly from the cotton produced by the million-odd slaves. By the time the enslaved were emancipated, they comprised the largest single asset in America—\$3 billion in 1860 dollars, more than all the other assets in the country combined.

The method of cultivating this asset was neither gentle cajoling nor persuasion, but torture, rape and child trafficking. Enslavement reigned for 250 years on these shores. When it ended, this country could have extended its hallowed principles—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—to all, regardless of color. But America had other principles in mind. And so, for a century after the Civil War, black people were subjected to a relentless campaign of terror, a campaign that extended well into the lifetime of Majority Leader McConnell.

It is tempting to divorce this modern campaign of terror, of plunder, from enslavement. But the logic of enslavement, of white supremacy, respects no such borders, and the god of bondage was lustful and begat many heirs—coup d'états and convict leasing, vagrancy laws and debt peonage, redlining and racist GI bills, poll taxes and state-sponsored terrorism.

We grant that Mr. McConnell was not alive for Appomattox. But he was alive for the electrocution of George Stinney. He was alive for the blinding of Isaac Woodard. He was alive to witness kleptocracy in his native Alabama and a regime premised on electoral theft. Majority Leader McConnell cited civil rights legislation yesterday, as well he should, because he was alive to witness the harassment, jailing and betrayal of those responsible for that legislation by a government sworn to protect them. He was alive for the redlining of Chicago and the looting of black homeowners of some \$4 billion. Victims of that plunder are very much alive today. I am sure they'd love a word with the majority leader.

What they know, what this committee must know, is that while emancipation dead-bolted the door against the bandits of America, Jim Crow wedged the windows wide open. And that is the thing about Senator McConnell's "something." It was 150 years ago. And it was right now.

The typical black family in this country has one-tenth the wealth of the typical white family. Black women die in childbirth at four times the rate of white women. And there is, of course, the shame of this land of the free boasting the largest prison population on the planet, of which the descendants of the enslaved make up the largest share.

The matter of reparations is one of making amends and direct redress, but it is also a question of citizenship. In H.R. 40, this body has a chance to both make good on its 2009 apology for enslavement and reject fair-weather patriotism, to say that a nation is both its credits and its debits, that if Thomas Jefferson matters, so does Sally Hemings, that if D-Day matters, so does Black Wall Street, that if Valley Forge matters, so does Fort Pillow, because the question really is not whether we will be tied to the somethings of our past, but whether we are courageous enough to be tied to the whole of them. Thank you."

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a writer in residence at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. His bestselling books include; **The Beautiful Struggle**, **We Were Eight Years in Power**, and **Between The World And Me**.

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