

**Testimony: UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent
“Repairing the World for the Future of Children of African Descent”
Thursday, May 26, 2022
3:00PM – 6:00PM EST (12:00PM – 3:00PM PST)**

SPEAKING TIME: 15 – 20 minutes

Good afternoon. It is an honor to speak to you, and I thank you for the invitation.

I am Dr. Shirley N. Weber, California Secretary of State. Born a sharecropper’s daughter in Hope Arkansas, I learned early the consequences of American racism and classism. My journey to Los Angeles as a toddler was a result of threats to my father’s life. Educated in Los Angeles public schools and the state university, UCLA, I saw first hand the disparities that exist in this nation that

consistently result in limited opportunities and social and political gaps that have deep roots.

Over the past fifty years, I have been a scholar, university administrator, community activist and elected official. For forty years I was the founder and professor of Africana Studies at San Diego State University, served two terms as a trustee of the San Diego Unified School District's Board of Education, and a State Legislator in the California Assembly for four terms. January 2021, I was appointed California's 30th Secretary of State, the first African American in California's 170 year history and the second black female constitutional officer.

The topic of today's working group and panel makes two assumptions. One, we are assuming that there has

been some damage done to those of African descent and that there is some need for repair. Two, we are assuming that someone is responsible, and that those who are responsible must do something to repair what has been done. These assumptions bring us here today and afford us an opportunity to provide some insight into the depth of the problem and potential solutions.

In 2020, as a state legislator I authored Assembly Bill 3121, which established a state Task Force to study the issue of reparations, educate the public, and develop reparations proposals. I authored the bill because California is the fifth largest economy in the world. It would not be the state that it is if not for the hundreds of slaves brought to California to work the gold mines

that became the foundation of our state's wealth. California had been a free state in name only. It was a de facto slave state, with fugitive slave laws that rivaled the country's fugitive slave laws in terms of its cruelty.

Many are familiar with the story of Tulsa, Oklahoma, a thriving community of independent Black businesses and entrepreneurs whose lives and livelihoods were burnt down by an enraged white mob. While the neglect and assault on Allensworth, a black economic city in California founded in 1908, was not as dramatic as Tulsa, the end results were the same. Crushing dreams of an African American community striving to build a to strive, raise their families, and interact with the larger society on an equal footing.

As Secretary of State I am the guardian of California's history, in the form of our State Archives. Our archives contains thousands of documents and records that tell the story of California that we tend to forget. There are numerous documents detailing the taking of land by "legal" means. The Burgess family is a vivid example of a stolen legacy in California that is reflective of many legal acts of eminent domain, devaluation of property for quick sale (steal), and a host of other reasons.

In the story of Jon Burgess, whose grandfather's home, land, and livelihood was taken by the state of California, an entire lineage was stripped of its wealth due to the actions of government officials, who significantly undervalued the Burgess land to steal it away. There are

dozens, and quite possibly hundreds, of examples uncovered by the Reparations Task Force detailing the injustice, terror, and genocide of Black Americans in the United States.

As we discuss the repairing of this world in relation to African children, AB3121, the California Reparations's Taskforce Act has agreed on some basic facts that make the call for reparations necessary:

“More than 4 million Africans and their descendants were enslaved in the United States and their colonies that became the United States, from 1619-1865

-The institution of slavery was constitutionally and statutorily sanctioned by the United States from 1789 - 1865, inclusive.

- The slavery that flourished in the United States constituted an immoral and inhumane deprivations of Africans life, liberty, African citizenship rights and cultural heritage and denied them the fruits of their own labor.

-Following the institution of slavery, the United States government at the federal, state and local levels continued to perpetuate, condone and often profit from practices that continue to brutalize and disadvantage African Americans, including sharecropping, convict leasing, Jim Crow laws, redlining, unequal educations, and disproportionate treatment at the hands of law enforcement.”ⁱ

As a result of the 403 years of brutalized treatment, Africans have the highest proportional incarceration rates- over 1,000,000; have an employment rate persistently in the double digits; and have less than 1/16 of the wealth of white Americans. The U. S. policies have had a devastating impact on the social, political and economic life of African Americans.

One can only imagine what the conditions of African - former slaves - would be today if the original plan to repair the damages of slavery had been implemented. - 40 Acres and a mule. Instead of paying slaveholders for the “loss of their property”, the former slave would have had the foundation to build a better life for him and profit from their own labor. The story of white families who benefited from the US Homestead Acts that gave free land to those willing to work it speak of the “head start” they received merely by coming to the US and being willing to work the land for five years. Blacks were excluded from the Homestead Acts. Imported immigrants were granted land despite their lack of citizenship. The United States' intervention through reparations, special

treatments, etc is not uncommon. Reparations for Japanese Citizens interned during World War II to make an effort to atone for the injustice and loss of wealth that resulted from a wrongful act inflicted by the United States. The payment to Jews who were victims of the Holocaust has seldom been challenged despite that fact that the US did not imprison Jews in concentration camps. The unwillingness to provide reparations, apologies, special considerations, etc. by the US demonstrates how deep and difficult is the battle for reparations for Africans Americans.

Over the past year, we have seen a resurgence of violence against African Americans in the United States.

The past week's attack on innocent persons in Buffalo reminds us of the fact, that despite arriving in this country before the Mayflower, 403 years ago, Africans are still seen as intruders and trying to displace others as if they have no place in America.

To repair the world for African children demands an infusion of resources over many years. It has taken 403 years of negative action, attacks, failed systems of education and justice, to bring the African American in the United States to their current social and economic condition and it will take much to repair the damage and work to bring them to their rightful position of parity with those who have benefited from the current system that has privileged euro- American heritage. The longer the history,

the deeper the pain and problem. This has become even more difficult because instead of running to the truth, the United States seems to run away from it. California, in its uniqueness, is running to it and hopes to change the hearts of its citizens through education and statewide diversity efforts.

As California's Secretary of State, it is my responsibility to ensure access to our representative government for all of California's citizens. In a representative democracy like the United States, having the ability to vote connects to every other issue. However in California and the rest of our country, we are seeing efforts to stifle the voting rights of our fellow Americans.

In Georgia, Florida, Texas, and other states in the nation, we have seen a massive attack on access to the franchise by consolidating polling locations ahead of the 2016 and 2020 elections. Physical voting locations were reduced to stifle the great enthusiasm and discourage participation.

Horrifying videos of winding, endless lines pushed voters with busy lives, kids, and jobs to wait for hours to exercise their fundamental right. Consequently, Black Americans were forced to travel further distances & faced greater disruptions to exercise their right to vote.

Some strides have been taken to alleviate some of the obstacles faced when voting. Amid the pandemic, California

and other states opened up the opportunity for voting by mail, seeking to retain access to the franchise without compromising voters' health.

Therefore, leaders passed several laws that gave all eligible voters the ability to vote “absentee,” as it was formerly called, creating a more convenient yet secure way of voting. This style of voting alleviated many obstacles used to prevent African Americans from using this fundamental right, but its use can be described as a rising tide that lifts all boats.

How can we ensure there are resources to support Black maternal health, which is the worst among all ethnicities? How do we make our voices heard when we need greater resources to educate our children when our

populations are packed and cracked into districts so that our votes mean practically nothing?

How do we ensure equity in our universities, our boardrooms, our classrooms, and our government without the means of self-determination, the ability to control our own destiny? Without ensured access to the franchise of voting, we cannot guarantee the safety and security of the generation that follows us.

California cannot alone repair the damage to those of African descent. Despite our wealth, we are but one state in one country trying to address a global phenomenon of persecution and subjugation. It is good to know that many of the nations of the UN agree that something must be

done to account for this phenomenon in some form of reparations.

However, I become quite embarrassed and frankly upset to know that the United States itself did not support a resolution of the UN calling for atonement and reparations for people of African descent just last year. That fact makes clear to me that there is work to be done, and pressure to be put on the leaders of this nation and those of the world on this issue.

I close with my appreciation of the members of the working group for coming together and engaging in this work.

ⁱ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB3121