

**Faced with a Twenty Dollar Bill**  
**By Jarvis Jay Masters**

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was stunned. I wanted someone to say, *"No! No! This makes no sense!"*

I had been watching television and a news announcement came on stating that Harriet Tubman was going to be the face of the new twenty-dollar bill. I stayed in front of the television, listening for someone to rebut this notion. I was waiting to hear someone say, *"No way! Come on, you guys! What are you really trying to say here?"* But not a word. No one said a single word.

Why would Harriet Tubman ever want her face printed on the very currency that sold her Mama and Daddy and all of the people of color she had ever known into slavery? The very institution of slavery that made wholesale out of human bondage, making its wealth on the backs of the tortured, setting up an economy of exploitation? I believe if they were hearing this news, it would make them cry their hearts out. I believe if Harriet Tubman were hearing this news, she would be appalled. "This doesn't honor me," she would say. "This dishonors me and everything I stood for."

Whether historically correct or not was not for me to answer. Instead, I wondered "How in God's name" (as my Mamie used to say) "are we supposed to be really cool with this? Go get—what's that lady's name?—Betsy Ross instead. What about her? Didn't she stitch the Nation's first flag, the stars and stripes, while sitting on her front porch? That's a great story, guys! How about this great patriot?"

For a while, I thought that if Obama and none of the other "great thinking folks" weren't raising objections, then who was I to object? After all, I didn't have the

smarts to think and wrestle with the first African American president or his wife, the First Lady, with all those PhDs, while I am still keeping close to my Webster's Dictionary.

And other people I respect think it's a good idea. A friend of mine got an e-mail from the office of Congressman John Lewis, who is an activist for African Americans and his heart is definitely in the right place. The e-mail said, "Harriet Tubman is a true American hero who deserves to be honored but this Administration is refusing to put her on the twenty-dollar bill this year. Harriet Tubman's legacy should be *celebrated*, not erased."

But are we really "celebrating" her history by putting her on a twenty-dollar bill? What a bizarre, backward way of celebrating her. If anything, putting her on the bill is *erasing* her legacy!

I thought—and more than once—that if Harriet Tubman was my Mama, I guarantee she'd roll over in her grave for knowing that she took all those chances to free hundreds of slaves, whole families of slaves, taking all these white folks' fortunes and trying her damndest to steal away abused human beings and break the backside of slavery.

Here's what I believe Harriet would say if she knew.

*Child, I was takin' chance afta' chance of bein' torn apart an' lynched in da process—an' now, ye wanta put my face on 'dis note 'dat made our kind deir 'property'—da very evil dat bought an' sold my Daddy an' Mama several times ova? An' so many otha's who suffered by da whips, oh so bad, an' now ye makin' my face go*

*'der? I can't eitha' put my face an' name on da notes 'dey paid fo' people like Daddy an' my Mama.*

The transactions of slavery took place through money. All those people she tried to free had been bought with a financial transaction, like a new dishwasher or lawn mower—which is exactly how slaves were treated. Like you would treat your dishwasher. You “own” your dishwasher or lawn mower. You use it as you want it and when it breaks, you throw it away in the junkyard. The slaves were treated like appliances. Worse than appliances. I’m sure Ms. Tubman, if she ever found out about this currency, wouldn’t know or understand why we would ask this of her.

And I feel the same way. Why are we doing this? How is it that so many people of color, namely African Americans, can be so thrilled and excited by this new prospect? If we had a chance moment to see and touch her scars and her heart in those life-lasting photographs, could we really think that she would ever again want to be owned by cash?

Harriet Tubman belongs to history. Why not build a monument equal to the size of others at the Capital building, or a life-size portrait on a wall in the White House? How about constructing a Tubman Room, not far from the Lincoln Room? This courageous Black woman, who made such an indelible mark in the annals of American history, should have long ago replaced all those tributes to Robert E Lee.

Ms. Harriet Tubman is comparable to the likes of Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and other great African American figures, but few institutions have honored her. And yet all of these luminaries said again and again, “Had it not been for Harriet Tubman, slavery would never have found its way to

freedom.” So where are the H. Tubman hospitals? She was a veteran of the Civil War, wasn’t she? Where are the hundreds of H. Tubman schools, parks, and libraries? Where are the street signs and highways? And other than a few scattered monuments in the south, where are the “Harriet Tubman” Black business signs?

The most common currency used in drug sales in the inner city is the twenty-dollar bill. By far, it’s the bill of choice that does the most harm. It’s pocket cash that gives you that easy morning walk past the brown apartments and across the street to the liquor store on the corner and you’re that much close to alcoholism. You stroll on out for a carton of cigarettes and edge close to lung cancer. The twenty-dollar rock of crack, hit of speed, or blowjob somewhere behind the apartment building because Mama does not know what else to do to feed her three babies. Will the face of Ms. Tubman look from each twenty-dollar bill at all of the addictions the currency is enabling in broken streets and broken hearts?

It’s the cash bill that breeds violence in the streets, cupped inside the hands of so many youth, whose pointless killings flash across our television screens, as viewers mutter and shake their heads. “Tsk, tsk, how terrible.” And the commercial comes on for toothpaste or a new air conditioner, then the next news clip, and then people get off the couch and go on with their lives, the shooting long forgotten. This is the dollar amount that makes victims, mostly people of color, left for dead outside their schools, football games, or cheerleading practice, outside on the porch, or walking home from church. This is the bill of choice that pays for dope and drives the ever-downward spiral to death.

Harriet Tubman doesn't belong on this twenty-dollar bill in his pocket when the kid gets away with his life this time, but the next day his luck is gone and he lays out against the curb in the streets just twenty-four hours later. Is this what it's all about—is this where Harriet Tubman belongs, in the streets with her face down, the blood pooling underneath it? I believe she'd ask, *What did I do, babies, to deserve this?*

What she deserves, what would truly honor her memory, is something that helps to quell inner city violence instead of promoting it. What would honor her memory is a Harriet Tubman foundation to reach out its hands to people of color who struggle with the legacy of slavery, the generations of broken families and broken backs that led to that violence or drug use.

My mind always turns to see what young people might think about the face of a Black woman—any Black woman, let alone Harriet Tubman—on a twenty-dollar bill.

“Who's that?” the curious nine-year-old asks her teacher as she stares down at the bill.

“She's one of our ancestors, dear. Her name is Harriet Tubman. Some people like calling her 'Moses' because of what she did for Black people by leading them out of bondage. Ms. Tubman was born into slavery. Her Daddy and Mama were bought, like when you buy a donkey. But when she told older, she stopped letting people treat her like a donkey. She ran off that plantation place and kept running until she was free and discovered that people treated her better in other parts of America. Ms. Tubman got so good at running back and forth and then one day, she went and got

her whole family off that plantation—and not just her family. She started the Underground Railroad and got a lot of other people out as well and she never was caught. She was brave. She risked her life again and again to save other slaves, although she could have sat round in comfort on her porch. So now you know!”

“Then why is she on the same bad money that sold her own Daddy and Mama?”

Teacher looks confused. “What do you mean?”

“Her face—Harriet—why would she want to put it on the same bad thing that did to slaves, the same bad things that make my Mama and my Daddy fight with each other, the same bad things that killed my brother and put my uncle in jail?”

“No, baby, it’s not that way at all,” the teacher tries to explain. “The idea is that it will make Black people prouder. Make them stand up straighter.”

“Why do we need money to make us feel proud? My Mama always says that being proud has nothing to do with money.”

Teacher sighs. She’s getting frustrated. “Look, dear, there’s nothing we can do. Harriet Tubman isn’t here, so she doesn’t have a choice.”

The little girl folds her arms. “Well, then, let’s choose for her. Let’s get her off the bill!”

Not so easy, child. Not so easy.

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I asked a couple of white friends what they thought of Harriet Tubman being put on a twenty-dollar bill. Instantly, they understood my reasoning.

'Whoa! Whoa!' said Mark, not having to fake it or pretend. "This is a terrible thing that they're doing. Yeah, that is sooo fucked!"

"Hey, man, I didn't know about it until now. We studied Harriet Tubman in high school," said Trout. "But, no, they gonna put her on cash? Can they do that, just like that?"

"I knew something was wrong about it. I get real uncomfortable when I know something's wrong," said big Mike. "There's no way it goes together. It's like she's becoming a slave again right in front of our eyes. Fuck! And now in our pockets? You know I'm no racist and I'm not, no way, cool with that shit."

Thanks to them, I realized I hadn't lost my mind. It was gratifying all the way through. What Big Mike said came at me with a big, *Wow! Wow!* There was no better way of saying it. It was the feeling that Harriet Tubman was being asked to be a slave all over again. It pained them and for me, it was never going to go away.