

## Juvenile prisons won't solve state's problems

■ **OUR OPINION:** Blame for teen crime belongs to Oregon voters, parents and neighbors

Kids are out of control in Oregon, and the state has decided to spend \$24 million to rectify the problem ... by building prisons.

As laudable as the idea of locking up teen offenders is, it will not solve the problem. No matter how many prisons we build in this country, they keep filling up. More prisons are a quick fix to a complex problem that cannot be solved by "tough" laws.

What is most infuriating, however, is that while politicians will agree that the rise in juvenile crime points to a larger social problem, no one in Salem or D.C. seems willing to take on the issue. That's because the rise in juvenile crime is not the fault of politicians. It's ours.

It may be mere coincidence, but the rise in Oregon's juvenile crime rate occurred at the same time the now-infamous Measure 5 cut property-tax funding for public schools. The voters, not the bureaucrats, made that decision.

Rather than streamlining state government, it eliminated school arts programs, extra-curricular sports or erected financial barriers for participation. Many students now find themselves after school, in an empty house, with no productive channel for their energies. They have video games, MTV, and "hanging out."

At the very least, it means that no one — not the parents, not the neighbors, not the school, not the government — is looking out for

Oregon's teens nor spending any money on them until they break the law. And virtually all of that responsibility must be laid at the feet of ordinary people.

We talk about rebuilding communities and spending "quality time" with America's youth. We wring our hands about the desperate state of the American family and the break down in family values. Meanwhile, every one stands around waiting for someone to do something. Someone does. The criminal justice system has become the nation's babysitter, and it's almost as expensive as a college education.

Every day on the talk-show circuit, somebody stands up and says, "What about the children?" Great question.

It's so easy to be self-righteous about that sort of thing. But how many of us know the children in our neighborhoods or their parents. How many parents go to parent-teacher conferences or PTA meetings? How many people care about who the boy-next-door is before his photo is on the front page of the morning paper for robbing the 7-Eleven? We shake our heads and say, "What went wrong?"

And we blame the economy, and we blame racism, and we blame television violence, and we blame drugs, and we blame Republicans and Democrats — and all of that is true. But in the end, we have to decide how long we will continue to ignore our own shortcomings.

Do we want to make excuses, or do we want to make a difference?



## Farrakhan focus misdirects debate

It was quite a sight. Boys being held by their fathers, uncles and grandfathers. Listening, embracing, hoping for answers. All the while gathering under a country's flag that had let them down many times. The flag, perhaps a bit faded and tattered from enduring generations of shattered dreams, seemed to promise that this would finally be the day of change.

They were told to put down their guns and pick up their babies. They listened. They were asked to be witnesses to the sea of tranquility that they were creating. They obliged. They said that their march would be misunderstood by many. They were right.

The focus on Louis Farrakhan as the icon of last week's Million Man March, a gathering that we now know was the largest demonstration in our capital's history, is as predictable as it is saddening. If you haven't read the coverage of the event yet, don't worry. You can still get plenty of the repetitive, Louis-Farrakhan-is-evil commentaries that are being mass-produced by our nation's most original thinkers. They all go something like this:



*That Louis Farrakhan is something terrible, isn't he? Hates whites. Hates Jews. Hates Catholics. Hates gays. Hates everybody but those weird, militant-looking guys with the bow ties that always stand behind him. They're even scarier.*

*Then he says all those strange things. Like when he was on Larry King's show last week, talking about Colin Powell being president, he said, "It calms the nervous, white ego." There he goes again talking in that absurd, coded language that nobody gets.*

*He could learn a lot from Colin. That's the guy African-Americans should be supporting. A person who served his country and didn't ask too many unnecessary questions. An honorable African-American who learned to stop whining and start achieving.*

*Racism, racism, racism. I don't know if Colin has ever used that word. I know President Clinton and Senator Dole don't. They both spent the day far away from those "marching" throngs (shouldn't they be at work?) boldly taking a stand and denouncing Farrakhan for all of his evil. And with all this grumbling that has come from the O.J. and Million Man stuff about blacks don't have this and blacks don't have that, it's nice to know we're all staying focused on what's important: Farrakhan.*

The pundits constantly tell me that Louis Farrakhan is a hate-monger. All right, now that we've cleared up that complicated debate, where are we? We are left here standing, empty as before, without having engaged in the racial dialogue for which this country is so desperate-

ly thirsty.

America's choice to see the march through the Farrakhan lens indicates just how much nervous, white egos need calming. The march gave all people the opportunity to address the pathology of racism that is the infection of our national being. By choosing to focus our anger on Farrakhan, rather than our energy on the issues being raised, we wrapped one another in a conformed blanket of opposition against the Nation of Islam's leader, while we blinded ourselves to the cancer.

The message preached by Farrakhan, as well as the marchers, was that black communities must coalesce if better lives are to be achieved for all. Is it so difficult to recognize that this message is larger than one man? Why must we remain fixated on a demagogue, when there is so much work to be done?

We're told that the black unemployment rate is twice the rate of whites and poverty rates are three times as high for blacks as for whites. Young African-American men are more likely to be in prison than in college, and one of every three is either behind bars or on parole.

This stark reality is certainly cause for white egos to become nervous. But what should be the response to this nervousness? Do we address the problems of racial discord and our responsibility in eradicating them, or do we bury our head in the sand with misdirected debate?

Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison, in her book *Playing in the Dark*, refers to "the impact of racism on those who perpetuated it. It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist infection on the subject." It is time for white Americans to honestly look at their views on race and try to understand why blame and denial so often motivate racial dialogue in this country.

On Monday, Oct. 16, 1995, a multitude of African-American souls heard the call to take the initiative in rebuilding their families and communities. The time for counting on white support was over. Today, black America struggles alone for well-being, survival and existence.

Meanwhile, the rest of us pat ourselves on the back for opposing Farrakhan.

I never knew white drums could be so deafening.

*Keith Cunningham, a senior majoring in English, is a columnist for the Emerald.*

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The Oregon Daily Emerald welcomes your opinions on this and other issues. You may submit a letter no longer than 250 words to the Emerald offices at Suite 300 in the EMU or send us your thoughts via e-mail at [ode@oregon.uoregon.edu](mailto:ode@oregon.uoregon.edu)

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