



Opinion

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We Need to Strengthen and Unify America

BY CONGRESSMAN
ELIJAH E. CUMMINGS

Since the horrifying events of Sept. 11, President Bush has reminded us that all Americans are engaged in a common struggle against the forces of terror. We know that our continued freedom and security depend upon shared sacrifice.

We are now engaged in a national debate about the economy that will determine how the need for sacrifice will affect our daily lives.

Even before Sept. 11, unemployment was far too high. Many Americans who were working had to hold down two jobs just to make ends meet.

For millions of these working Americans, the economic consequences of the attacks have been devastating. Consider, for example, the impact on a hotel worker whom I will call "Joe."

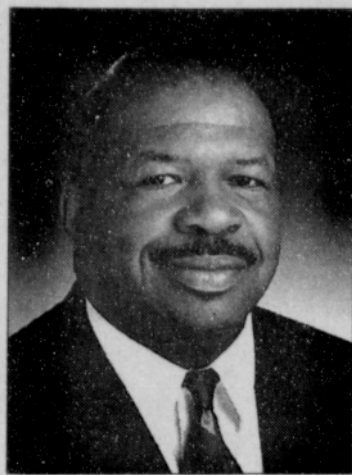
Joe's income depends largely on tips. In late September, he confided to me that his weekly tips had drastically declined from more than \$200 to less than \$50.

"How am I going to support my family?" Joe asked me. "How will I buy food and clothing for our children?"

Now, it is November, and Joe is wondering whether he even will have a job next month.

He is far from being alone in that fear. Last week, the Department of Labor announced that the nation's official unemployment rate has climbed to 5.4 percent - the highest jobless level in nearly five years.

Nationally, unemployment among white Americans rose to 4.8 percent, but Americans of color have been hit even harder. Among African Americans, the jobless rate increased by a full



Elijah E. Cummings

The political dividing lines in the Washington debate about how best to respond remain both deep and wide.

Republicans are demanding legislation oriented toward expanded and accelerated tax cuts. Although the principal beneficiaries would be wealthy corporations and individuals, the Republicans contend that the economic benefits of those tax cuts would trickle down to working families.

In response, we Democrats cite evidence that any meaningful economic stimulus to be derived from

measures that would help small businesses affected by the attacks, create new jobs and strengthen national security.

Democrats and Republicans alike, however, understand that we must promptly respond to the economic downturn. Therefore, it is likely that the current "stimulus" debate will be resolved by a compromise.

In the longer term, our leadership challenge is to reach a bipartisan consensus on a national economic policy that is both practical and fair.

For example, programs like food stamps, public housing assistance, unemployment insurance and Medicaid are typically viewed as expressions of our national compassion. As William Spriggs of the Urban League has observed, however, these "social safety net" commitments also help to maintain consumer demand during recessions, thereby bringing the nation as a whole back to economic health.

It also would be pragmatic, as well as fair, to increase Pell Grants and other financial aid for higher education. We must train more Americans to perform the technical and professional jobs that benefit us all and are more likely to be retained during difficult economic times.

Working men and women like Joe, who are losing their jobs through no fault of their own, deserve to share in America's success - as well as in our national duty to sacrifice.

The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings represents Maryland's Seventh Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. He currently serves as First Vice Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus.

A policy that would make a small number of affluent Americans more wealthy while many more risk losing their homes would not be the kind of "shared sacrifice" that strengthens and unifies this nation.

—U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings.

percentage point last month to 9.7 percent. More than 7 percent of all Hispanic Americans were also out of work.

For them - and for all the people like Joe who may soon be joining them in the unemployment lines - the intense "economic stimulus" debate now underway in Washington is more than an abstraction.

Numbering in the millions, they desperately want to work, but they have yet to find a job that pays a living wage. Unless the President and Congress take swift and effective action, they may well lose their homes, their health insurance and the sense of dignity that comes from being employed.

the Republican tax cut proposals would be both too little and too late - especially for Americans like Joe who face the loss of their jobs.

A policy that would make a small number of affluent Americans more wealthy while many more risk losing their homes would not be the kind of "shared sacrifice" that strengthens and unifies this nation.

The Democratic stimulus plan would immediately commit at least \$70 billion to aiding unemployed workers in very practical ways (such as assisting with the cost of their health care until they find work). We also favor direct stimulation of the economy through increased federal spending on

Noble Prize Nominee Advocates Abolishing the Death Penalty

Nobel Peace Prize nominee Sister Helen Prejean is coming to Oregon Friday, Nov. 16 and Saturday, Nov. 17 to rally support for the Life For A Life 2002 Initiative, which would replace Oregon's death penalty with life in prison without parole plus restitution.

The initiative, which would appear on the November 2002 ballot, is sponsored by former

U.S. Sen. Mark O. Hatfield, former Oregon Secretary of State Norma Paulus and Dr. William E. Connor.

Prejean, an internationally known anti-death penalty advocate who wrote the award-winning book "Dead Man Walking," will give public presentations in Portland, Salem and Eugene as part of her effort to highlight the

need for a more humane and effective alternative to the death penalty.

On Friday, Prejean will give a public presentation at Portland State University at 11:30 a.m., and again at the First Unitarian Church at 8 p.m. On Saturday, Prejean will speak at Willamette University in Salem at 11 a.m., then travel to Eugene for a 7:30 p.m. speech at

the McDonald Theatre.

In addition, Prejean will deliver the keynote address to a conference of religious and community lay leaders in Portland. And she will present the President's Award, on behalf of the Oregon Criminal Defense Lawyers Association, to seven area lawyers and law firms who work for free on death penalty cases.



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