

OPINION

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Racism, It Never Went Away

Coming to grips with a nationwide problem

BY JUDITH A. BROWNE

The lurid images of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina have taught us many lessons. While many of us wrung our hands in despair as we watched, feeling helpless and distraught by the suffering of the people of New Orleans, nearby parishes, Mississippi and Alabama. We had to stop and think about where this moment stood in the history of this great so-called super power.

As a country, we needed to be introspective. Now during the rebuilding of lives that have been uprooted and in some cases destroyed, we must come to terms with the elephant in the flood. We cannot ignore that race still matters.

Press coverage showed clearly that the majority of people stranded in New Orleans were African American. But not only were they left behind, they were ignored, treated like animals and left to live in unspeakable, unsafe, squalid conditions. They were left to die with no water, no food and no medication. Many were left to die in attics and on roofs. Photos showed black bodies floating in the floodwaters and lying on the pavement, black babies limp and lifeless and elderly African Americans gasping for air. These are forever ingrained into our psyche and our history.

As the stories pour out in the aftermath of Katrina, the covers are being pulled back on our dirty little secret of racism. One story revealed how deep these problems truly are. With total disregard for the lives and safety of Americans trying to escape to higher, drier ground, officers of the Gretna Sheriff's office used gunfire and intimidation to prevent African Americans to cross the bridge out of New Orleans.

Reportedly, an officer told a group of mostly black evacuees that they could not cross the bridge because Gretna was not going to become another New Orleans and there would be no Superdomes in their city. The traumatic experience did not end there. At gunpoint, a Gretna officer forced the group from a camp they set up on a highway and took their food and water.

The Sheriff admitted that Gretna, "a bedroom community," had security concerns. These concerns trumped the value of the lives of the African Americans who sought refuge.

This devaluation was further demonstrated by law enforcement efforts within New Orleans. Instead of making provisions for the bare necessities of survival available to desperate families stuck in New Orleans, a "shoot to kill" order was issued to stop persons appropriating such necessities.

Again, there was total disregard for the lives of people merely seeking to survive. Evacuees also complained that outside law enforcement officers were disrespectful and unresponsive to pleas for help. Many African Americans staying in large shelters were humiliated by being hosed

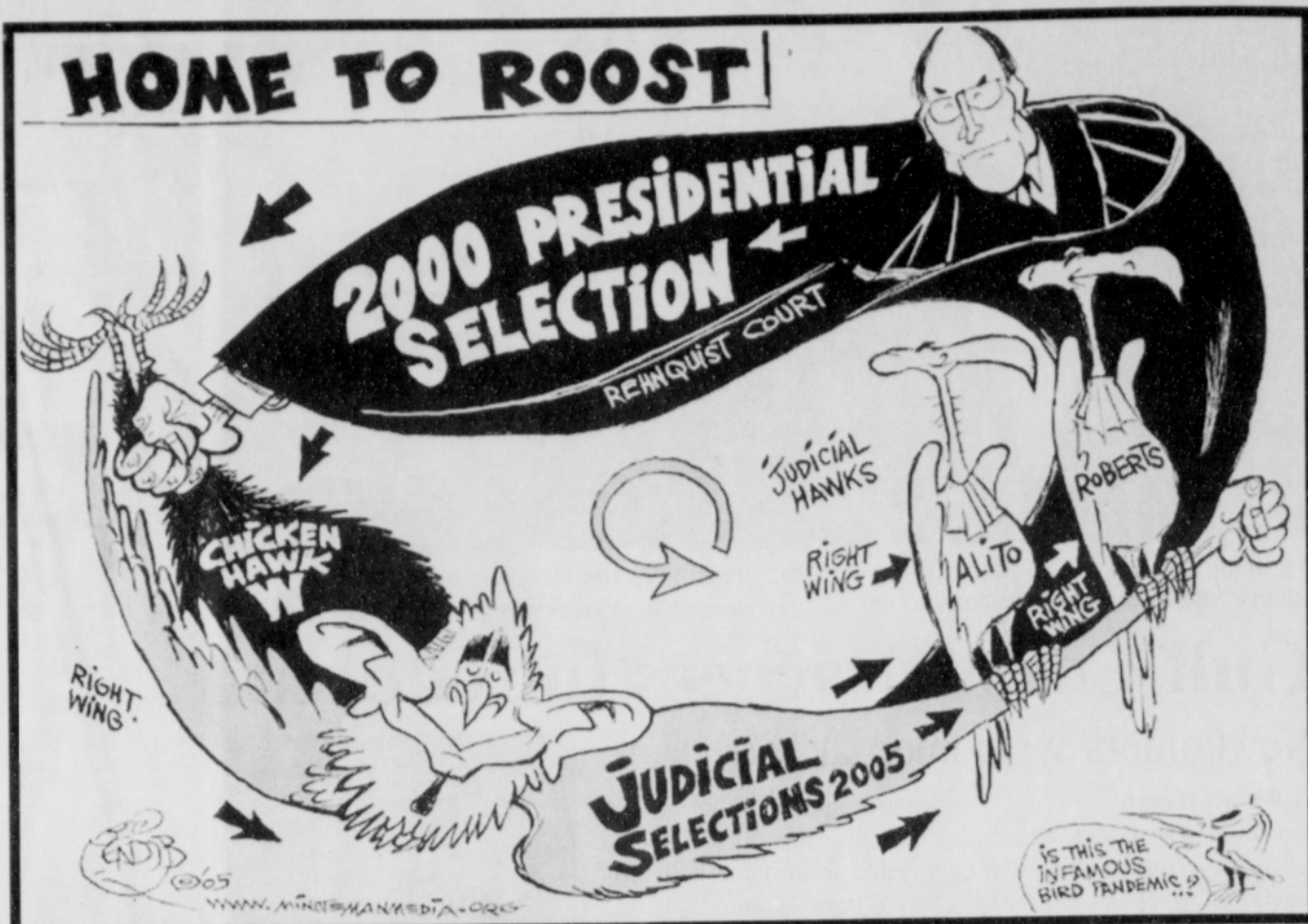


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down in a "detoxification" effort, sniffing dogs, metal detectors and curfews.

Surely we also must acknowledge that individuals of all races have taken extraordinary steps to help black evacuees. This has been a true testament to a country pulling together in a time of need. And there may yet be a silver lining. Although it is hard to stomach, the racism suffered by African Americans in the Gulf region is making us come to grips with the problem nationwide. This is not the first time that the suffering of blacks has been a catalyst for change, and it probably will not be the last. However, one can only hope that African American lives do not have to continue to be lost in the struggle to capture the conscience of America.

Judith A. Browne is senior attorney with the Advancement Project, an organization that creates strategies for achieving universal opportunity and a racially just democracy.



Education in Prison System Pays

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS



Research shows that educating incarcerated men and women cuts down the likelihood that they will return to prison once released. Despite this, fewer than 5-percent of inmates in the U.S. are enrolled in college classes. This number is too low.

Higher education or vocational training should be mandatory for any inmate in a U.S. jail or prison. When education is made part of a comprehensive prisoner re-entry program that includes substance abuse counseling and psychiatric evaluation, society at large reaps the benefits of reduced crime rates, stronger communities and lowered tax burdens.

Some see prison as a form of punishment and believe that offering a free education to inmates is a slap in the face to hard working citizens that struggle to pay for higher education or vocational training.

The reality is that the majority of these prisoners will be released back into society and will need some way to support themselves and, in many cases, their families.

Lacking any real skills, many ex-offenders find only temporary, low-paying jobs. Frustrated with the shortage of opportunities available to them, many ex-offenders return to a life of crime. By arming ex-offenders with the skills necessary to succeed, this cycle could be stopped before it has a chance to begin.

Over 2 million people call a U.S. jail or prison home, making the U.S. prison population the largest in any industrialized nation. More than half of formerly incarcerated people return to prison within three years of their release. According to U.S. Department of Justice statistics, state prison systems cost taxpayers almost \$30 billion a year - most of this money is spent building new prisons and keeping old ones running; staff salaries and construction

make up a bulk of the costs.

By reducing recidivism (the return to prison by ex-offenders), the prison population would be reduced and prison spending could be drastically cut. It makes better economic sense to invest the \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year it would take to educate an inmate than it does to spend the \$70,000 a year it takes to incarcerate them. The tax money that is saved could then be earmarked for other social programs.

In a society where a college degree or some trade is necessary to earn a living wage, we are setting ex-offenders up to fail by releasing them back into society without any marketable skills. Making sure society - all of society - has access to higher education and skills training should be a top priority for our government.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.



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