

OPINION

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Deeply Rooted Racial Injustice: Black suffering and white power

BY DR. MANNING MARABLE

The recent Hurricane Katrina crisis has generated a national debate over whether racism played a part in the human tragedy we have witnessed in devastated New Orleans.

Two weeks after the tragedy, 60 percent of African Americans surveyed in a national poll expressed their belief that the federal government's delay in helping the victims in New Orleans was "because the victims were black." By contrast, only 12 percent of white Americans agreed.

In response, the Bush administration unleashed its black apologists to deny any racial intent of its policies and actions. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice insisted, "Nobody, especially the President, would have left people unattended." Black conservative ideologue John McWhorter ridiculed the accu-

sations.

African Americans were stunned and perplexed by white America's general apathy and denial about the racial implications of the Katrina catastrophe. On a nationally televised

gresswoman Diane Watson protested

vigorously, " 'Refugee' calls up to mind people that come here from different lands and have to be taken care of... These are American citizens! "

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fundraiser for the hurricane's victims, rap artist Kanye West sparked a new controversy by denouncing "the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well off as slow as possible."

Black Americans were especially infuriated with the descriptions of poor black evacuees as "refugees" by officials and the media. Black Con-

But the racial stigmatization of the New Orleans outcasts forced many African Americans to ponder whether their government and white institutions had become incapable of expressing true compassion for the suffering of their people. Prominent Princeton Professor Cornel West pondered whether "black suffering" is required for the preservation of white

America."

West's provocative query ought to be explored seriously. The U.S. government and America's entire political economy were constructed on a racial foundation. Blacks were

criminally law and public policy. Psychologically, is the specter of black suffering and death in some manner reaffirming the traditional racial hierarchy, the practices of black exclusion and marginalization?

Even before Katrina's racial debate had receded from the media, the question of racial insensitivity was posed again by former Reagan Education Secretary William Bennett's remarks in a national radio broadcast. In early October 2005, Bennett announced to his radio audience: "I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could - if that were your sole purpose - you could abort every black baby in this county, and your crime rate would go down."

"New York Times" columnist Bob Herbert interpreted

Bennett's remarks as the central aspect of the Republican Party's bigotry, racially divisive tactics and outright anti-black policies.

"That someone who's been a stalwart of that outfit might muse publicly about the potential benefits of exterminating blacks is not surprising to me at all. Bill Bennett's twisted fantasies are a malignant outgrowth of our polarized past," Herbert said.

Bennett's repugnant statements, combined with most white Americans' blind refusal to recognize a racial tragedy in New Orleans, illustrate how deeply rooted racial injustice remains in America.

Manning Marable is professor of public affairs and history and director of the Center for Contemporary Black History at Columbia University.

Shocking New Gang Laws Proposed by Congress

Advances criminalization of our youth

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Most of us have watched our communities deteriorate under the weight of gang crimes and we've watched in horror as our young men and women continue to be sucked in by the supposed allure of the streets.

As laws aimed at curbing gang crimes were enacted, we were further shocked to see

that law enforcement officials were setting up a justice system that feeds off imprisoning our young people.

The Gang Deterrence and Community Protection Act (H.R. 1279) continue the government's trend of tough laws and long sentences. This proposed legislation will not only fail to deter gang activity, but young people prosecuted under it will be exposed to hardened criminals while in prison. They'll be returned to the streets angry and full of resentment.

The House of Representa-

tives passed H.R. 1279 this spring; the Senate is currently considering the bill. If passed, gang activity would be considered a federal crime and juveniles accused of gang activity could be transferred to adult courts; if convicted they could serve their sentences in adult prisons.

Gang crimes resulting in a death will be eligible for the death penalty. The bill provides no exception for mentally challenged young people and imposes strict mandatory sentencing laws.

Republican supporters of the bill say it will deter crime by removing gang members from the street. But study after study has shown that this type of legislation not only fails to reduce crime, but it also contributes to the criminalization of youth.

Research shows that youths transferred to the adult criminal justice system are more likely to re-offend, committing more serious crimes once released. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that, while being held in adult prisons, these young people are five times more likely to be raped and 50 percent more likely to be assaulted with a weapon, than if they were in a juvenile facility.

According to the Department of Justice, young people housed in adult jails are almost eight times more likely to commit suicide than those in juvenile facilities. Those who make it back to

the streets are mentally and emotionally wounded, resulting in a more violent criminal.

Of course, these tough sentencing laws disproportionately affect youth of color. More than 70 percent of juveniles admitted to state prisons in this country

increasingly violent crime.

Write your U.S. Senators, asking them to vote against this bill. Tell them that gang and crime intervention; counseling and job training centers are needed to keep urban streets safe. Let them know that our



We want to keep our streets safe, not create a never-ending cycle of increasingly violent crime.

were minorities.

Our communities will have to deal with the flood of young people, psychologically damaged, unskilled and unemployed, being released from prison. As such, we have to fight the passage of H.R. 1279. We want to keep our streets safe, not create a never-ending cycle of

community will no longer tolerate legislation that seeks to target and destroy our children and our people.

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

Support Tobacco Prevention

Goal is reducing smoking, deaths

BY DR. MEL KOHN

Many of us are proud to live in a state that is often on the cutting edge — whether it's open beaches, independent living for seniors or recycling programs. Yet when it comes to

education. From 1996 to 2003, the share of adults who smoke dropped from 24 percent to 21 percent.

And many of those who continued to smoke did so less, leading to a 40 percent drop in per capita tobacco consumption — almost twice that seen nationally.

In 2003, the Legislature cut

That means people working there are unprotected from secondhand smoke. The law also forbids citizens from working for stronger local laws.

Since then, the tobacco-prevention movement, both nationally and internationally, has moved ahead — but Oregon has not kept pace. For example, in November Washington became the 10th state to make all workplaces smokefree. In protecting all workers, it joins states such as California, New York, Delaware and Massachusetts and countries such as Uganda, New Zealand and Ireland.

Regaining our leadership in tobacco prevention and education is well within our reach.

Adequate funding for community and school programs and strong laws limiting smoking in all workplaces can jumpstart our efforts and lead to further dramatic declines in smoking.

The evidence is clear — we can reduce smoking and the death and disease that follow. We've already shown we know what to do and how to do it. The only question remaining is whether we have the will.

Dr. Mel Kohn is state epidemiologist in the public health programs of the Oregon Department of Human Services.



We are in danger of being left in the dust — or, perhaps more accurately, in a haze of secondhand smoke.

preventing tobacco use, we are in danger of being left in the dust — or, perhaps more accurately, in a haze of secondhand smoke.

According to newly released data from the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, Oregon ranks 35th nationally in funding to keep kids from smoking and helping people to quit tobacco.

Only a few years ago, Oregon's tobacco prevention and education program was a national model of effectiveness. In 1996, Oregon voters approved a 30-cent increase in cigarette taxes, designating 10 percent of that for tobacco prevention and

funding for Oregon's prevention program to less than half the 1996 voter-approved amount. Currently, the program is funded at less than one-sixth of the minimum level recommended by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

We've fallen behind in another way, as well. In 2001, the Legislature passed a law banning smoking in many indoor workplaces. This was a step forward, but the law has large loopholes: It exempts bars, bowling alleys, bingo parlors and restaurants with a bar included.

Are you or someone you know pregnant?

Healthy Birth Initiative can help. Healthy Birth Initiative (HBI) is a program for African American women and their families living in N/NE Portland.

HBI offers:

- Transportation to medical and social service appointments
- Home Visits
- Incentives
- Health education classes (free childcare and transportation when attending any HBI group or class)
- Information and referrals to community services

For more information contact:
Healthy Birth Initiative
5329 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Portland, Oregon 97211
503-988-3387 x22242

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