

# OPINION

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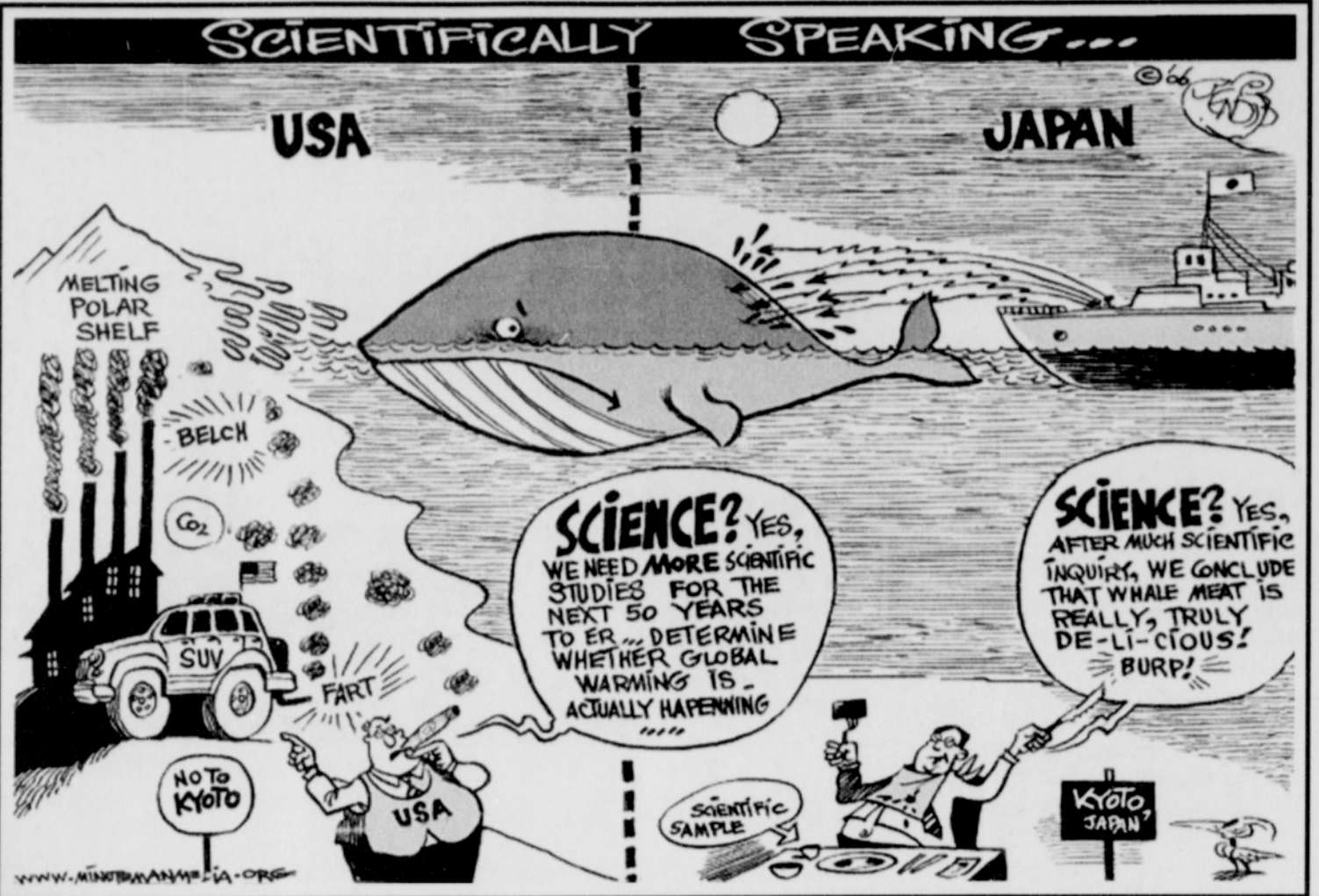
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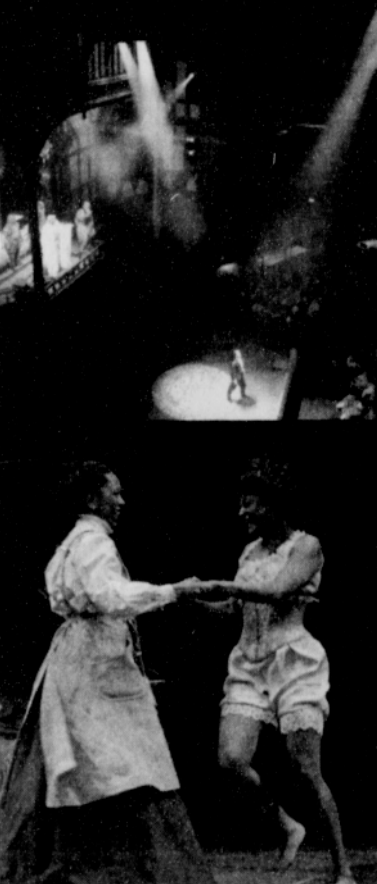
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## Failing Prison System Hardens Criminals

Violence, abuse should be the exception

BY MARC H. MORIAL

What happens behind bars in the jails and prisons of this nation doesn't stay there. It trickles out into the community. Every year, 13.5 million people — a disproportionate number of them African American — pass through our nation's prisons and jails, with a vast majority — 95 percent — eventually re-entering society.

Some leave their periods of incarceration as hardened criminals anxious to return to a life of crime. Others do not. In the 1990s, harsher punishments for drug crimes fueled the current prison population boom. And in light of the FBI's recent announcement that violent crime was up 2.5 percent in 2005, the problem isn't likely to go away anytime soon.

In our nation's efforts to "get tough on crime," we've lost some of our compassion for our fellow man. We've let cynicism under-



mine our hope that rehabilitation is possible for all people.

All human beings deserve a modicum of respect and dignity.

But in our nation's prisons, you really have to wonder if that standard is being upheld. Inhumane conditions — driven by overcrowding, financial woes and understaffing — have pushed some prisons to the boiling point. They're not places where prisoners have a decent chance at rehabilitation. They are places where criminals become more efficient and violent.

Mind you, corrections is a tough profession. Corrections officers often work long shifts in tense, overcrowded facilities without enough backup, support or training. Many wardens run aging and understaffed facilities in which experienced officers are likely to leave for better-paying, less-stressful jobs. These pressures cause stress, injury, and illness among the prison workforce and contribute to a dangerous culture inside. The tension is worsened further by racial and cultural differences.

In prisons where this culture has evolved, rules aren't enforced, prisoner-on-prisoner violence is tolerated and antagonistic relationships can erupt into overt hostility and

physical violence.

In the 1960s in my home state of Louisiana, the maximum-security state penitentiary in Angola had a reputation for being "America's bloodiest prison." I don't know what prison carries that distinction today, but it is no longer Angola. That prison's fundamental institutional culture has been profoundly transformed.

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Everyone who works at Angola treats prisoners with dignity and respect, and prisoners are expected to reciprocate that treatment. Prisoners have been given hope through education and morally based programming, and responsibility through meaningful employment. The fair and reliable enforcement of the rules by staff and prisoners means less violence.

The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons recently released a report, called "Confronting Confinement," that highlights a wide array of dangerous conditions surrounding incarceration — the violence, poor health care,

inappropriate segregation, lack of political support for labor and management, weak oversight of correctional facilities and lack of reliable data.

Of the 30 practical reforms recommended, institutional culture change is perhaps most important. Prisons need it if tools and training help change the culture of their institutions. The program teaches

them to resolve conflict through communication — particularly across cultural and racial differences — rather than violence.

In an era when everyone and their uncle seem to want to "get tough on crime,"

I realize that institutional "culture change" sounds soft. But prisons that add punishment on top of the sentence will be violent places. Prisons that treat inmates with basic human dignity and respect are more likely to be places where violence and abuse are the rare exception and not the rule.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

## Big Let Down on Minimum Wage

Congress ignores needs

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The federal minimum wage, currently \$5.15 an hour, hasn't changed since 1997; the latest proposal to increase it was recently shot down by U.S. Senate Republicans. Interesting, considering these same Republicans had no problem voting to increase their own pay each year for the last several years.

Falsely claiming that wage increases will cost jobs and hurt small business owners, those that oppose the boost appear to be more concerned with corporate needs than those of the larger society. By raising the federal minimum wage, the government will be able to lift millions of families out of poverty, improving the economic and social health of the entire country.

According to the Center for Policy Alternatives, if the minimum wage had kept pace with inflation since 1979, when the rate was \$2.90 an hour, it would now be just over \$7.80 an hour or about \$16,000 per year. That's enough to keep a family of three just above the federal poverty line. At its current level, that same worker only brings home

about \$10,700 a year.

Medicaid, subsidized housing and free school lunch programs help fill the void that low-paying jobs cause. With an increase in the minimum wage, employers would shoulder more of the responsibility for their employee's basic needs, thereby lowering costs for the states and, ultimately, you -



*It's interesting that while simultaneously denying their laborers a salary increase, corporate CEOs see no harm in raising their own salaries.*

the taxpayer.

Those that criticize a minimum wage hike say raising it will cost jobs. But a study by the Economic Policy Institute found that neither the 1996 nor the 1997 federal minimum wage increases caused job losses. It's interesting that, while simultaneously denying their laborers a salary increase, corporate chief executive officers see no harm in raising their own salaries. Last year, executive salaries grew 25 percent. According to the institute, the average American CEO earns more in a half day of work than a minimum wage worker will take

home all year.

The federal government has made it clear that the needs of the working poor are not high on its list of priorities. As such, many states have independently raised their state's wage minimums, including Oregon. Twenty states and the District of Columbia have set wages ranging from \$6.00 to \$7.35 per hour. Research shows that these states have, for the most part, performed just as well economically as states

with lower minimum wages.

If the federal government continues to ignore the need for a minimum wage increase, workers will fall further and further behind. State budgets will be overwhelmed as local governments attempt to provide safety nets for workers. Federal legislators don't deny themselves salary increases and it's time they stop denying America's low-wage workers.

Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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