

OPINION

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Congress Impedes Our Right to Vote

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Government ID puts up obstacles

The House of Representatives passed a bill that would require voters to show a photo ID before they are allowed to cast their ballots.

The bill, known as the Federal Election Integrity Act is part of the

government's crack down on illegal immigrants. However, hundreds of thousands of American citizens – the elderly and ex-offenders among them – could potentially be denied their constitutional right to vote if this becomes law.

Though a Georgia judge recently declared a similar law unconstitutional, Congress has decided to move this bill forward. If this government is committed to ensuring all Americans have a voice in the political debate, then this issue has to be tabled...for good.

According to a report sponsored by the Justice Department, such a requirement would disproportionately affect Latinos and African-Americans, the elderly, the home-

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less, low-income people and married women. Studies show these groups are less likely to carry a photo ID.

Under the proposed law, voters must prove citizenship with a photo ID. Since most states don't require citizenship to obtain a state ID or driver's license, the only piece of

identification on the approved list that meets this requirement is a passport, which can cost up to \$100. Recent statistics indicate only 25-percent of voting age Americans have a passport.

A few months ago, Congress shocked many of skeptics and reauthorized the Voting Rights Act

of 1965, giving all American's free and clear access to vote for the next quarter century. Yet, here we are once again debating who in America should and should not vote.

The bill's supporters contend that this requirement would prevent those ineligible to vote from doing so. However, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving our constitutional rights, less than 100 people have been convicted of election fraud in the last four years.

Knowing this, we have to ask ourselves: If voter fraud is so uncommon, who are we trying to keep people away from the polls? With the stories of voter intimidation that came out of Florida and Ohio during the 2000 and 2004 elections, we

have to wonder if this bill is an attempt at legally keeping people of color – individuals most likely to vote progressive agendas – away from the polls. Is this bill really about voter integrity or is it a way to make sure the conservatives maintain power?

Election reform is a serious issue in this country. And it has to be dealt with. But denying American citizens the right to vote is not the way to do it. By voting down this bill, the Senate can stand by the commitment it made to historically disenfranchised people when it reauthorized the Voting Rights Act.

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



What the Pope Should Have Said

BY ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER



Pope Benedict XVI aroused the fury of the Islamic world with a speech in which he assailed the Muslim concept of holy war as a violation of God's will and nature. The Pope quoted a 14th century Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Paleologus, who derided Islam and its founder Muhammad for introducing "things only inhuman and evil," such as spreading the faith by the sword. The Pope held up Christianity, by contrast, as a model religion that promoted a "profound encounter of faith and reason."

From many parts of the Islamic world there were angry reactions to the Pope's words, reminding the Pope of the evil history of Christian crusades. Although Western Christians may think the crusades are ancient history, these medieval wars in which Christian crusaders slaughtered Muslims and established crusader states in Palestine are vivid memories for Muslims.

Current Western threats against Islam and invasions of Islamic countries, such as Iraq, are seen as a continuation of the crusades. The US and other Western nations who

and hatred between peoples. God desires peace and love, not war, he might have said.

The Pope would then turn to the history of the crusades and acknowledge with sorrow that Christianity has often been wrongly used to promote hatred and violence against others, perhaps quoting some pithy statements of popes who called for crusades against Islam. He would then declare that Christians must repent of such religiously inspired war-making. He would ask for forgiveness from "our Muslim brothers and sisters" for having wronged them in the past by calling for crusades against them.

He would end with a call for all peoples to unite to overcome war and violence, and to reject any use of religion to promote violence.

This speech, I suggest, would have won the hearts of Muslims around the world and would have made the Pope welcome in Turkey for his planned visit there on November 28 of this year rather than putting this trip into jeopardy.

It would also have put Christians in the US and elsewhere on notice that the language of promot-

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promote such wars are regularly referred to as "crusaders" in the Muslim press.

The Pope's words condemning Islam and its founder for holy war, while holding up Christianity as innocent of any such warlike tendencies, has infuriated Muslims and deeply damaged Catholic-Muslim relations. In using a Byzantine emperor to assail Islam, the Pope also failed to reckon with the fact that the Fourth Crusade (1201-4), called by Pope Innocent III, was diverted into an assault on the capital of the Byzantine empire, Constantinople. The Crusaders pillaged and occupied the city, leading to a weakening of the Byzantine world and its eventual fall to the Muslims.

I would like to suggest what the Pope should have said about holy war that would have won Muslim good will and opened up new dialogue between these embattled worlds. The Pope might have opened with some generalities deploring the current state of war and violence in the world. Then he would remark that such tendencies to war are deeply aggravated when religion and the name of God are wrongly used to foment violence

ing Western "anti-terrorist" wars against the Muslim world in the name of a "crusade" (the term George W. Bush actually proposed for his wars against Afghanistan and Iraq) are not acceptable.

Some more historically aware advisors of the Bush administration realized the volatile nature of this term and warned him against his use of it. But Christians need to do more than not use the term "crusade," while continually the reality of such war and warlike God-talk. We need to confront the questionable history of such wars against the Muslim world and the use of Christianity to promote such wars.

Is it too late? Although my influence in Vatican circles is limited, there is no reason why other Christian bodies, Catholic and Protestant, might not come together to publicly issue an apology to the Muslim world for the crusades and to call for a rejection of militarist responses to terrorism and the use of religious language to justify such militarism.

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