

OPINION

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Facing a Failed Policy

A war that we never had to fight

BY U.S. REP. WILLIAM LACY CLAY

Last month's election was a stunning rejection of President George W. Bush's Administration by both Democrats and the vast majority of Independents.

Most Americans finally came to the conclusion that things had gone terribly off course in Washington and they voted for the new Demo-



cratic majority from this election, but two essential things stand out: Every vote counts; and do not start unnecessary wars.

Among the 30 House seats gained by the Democrats, Republicans lost 22 of those races by less than two percentage points. And, of those, 18 were won by fewer than 5,000 votes. So, if you ever wonder why we fight so hard to defend your voting rights, the election results prove how just a handful of voters can make a huge difference.

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cratic majority to get things back on track.

Of course, the President is still the President, and we'd like to find some common ground with him in order to advance the Congressional Black Caucus' key priorities. Issues like disparities in healthcare, home ownership, academic achievement, household incomes and inequities in the justice system.

Thankfully, the unprecedented number of black committee and subcommittee chairman will put CBC members in a historic position to advance our positive agenda. There are many lessons to be learned

casualties, we're still waiting for the President to face the reality of his failed policy and finally adopt a new direction in Iraq. A direction that will let the Iraqi people decide their own future and get our troops out of harms way.

The Congressional Black Caucus will demand that the President learn that the lives of our brave sons and daughters should never be put at risk in a war that we never had to fight.

Congressman William Lacy Clay, D-Mo., is a member of Congressional Black Caucus.

The war in Iraq is a tragedy that should have never happened. In 2003, I opposed the Forced Authorization Resolution because I didn't believe the nonsense about weapons of mass destruction and the spin about Saddam's alleged links to Al Qaeda.

And, now, after almost four bloody years, and over 22,000 American casualties, we're still waiting for the President to face the reality of his failed policy and finally adopt a new direction in Iraq. A direction that will let the Iraqi people decide their own future and get our troops out of harms way.



Invest in Education, not Incarceration

Misguided priorities making matters worse



BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Last year, more than 7 million American people—that's about one in every 32 adults—were behind bars or on probation or parole.

The U.S. has, for years, imprisoned more people than any other country in the world. Yet, we don't have the highest literacy rate. And our economy continues to take a hit as jobs are outsourced to foreign countries with a cheaper and better educated workforce.

Inner-city schools fail half of their students and jobs are removed from communities, replaced with guns and drugs, resulting in incarceration, if you're lucky, death if you're not.

Nonetheless, many U.S. states have cut their education budgets to compensate for rapid growth in prison populations and prison construction. The misguided priorities that inform such decisions have only served to further marginalize already oppressed populations. It's time that this country shifts its focus away from imprisonment and commits its resources to education and empowerment.

In the past 20 years, more than a thousand new prisons and jails have been built in the U.S. Yet, our prisons are more overcrowded now than ever. According to the Justice Department, the total number of inmates increased 35-percent from 1995 to 2005. The nation's 'war on drugs' and the stiff sentencing laws that grew out of that war are largely to blame.

The numbers of individuals sentenced for drug crimes increased nearly 65-percent between 1996 and 2003, accounting for the largest increase in inmates in

the federal system.

If federal and local governments were to adequately fund the nation's public schools, ensuring all students had access to high-quality teachers, tutoring and after-school programs, we could stem the growth of the nation's prison population. With support, many could be steered away from drugs and the street life and pushed towards college or vocational school.

Instead, the country has poured its money into a criminal justice system that, instead of creating special programs designed to rehabilitate the low-level offender, corals these lost souls into the nation's prisons. Upon release, having no education and no skills, many return to the lifestyles that landed them in prison. It's a dangerous cycle and only prison architects and big business benefit.

In 1977, I was incarcerated for 7 months. I was told that it cost taxpayers \$30,000 to incarcerate me. A year later, I enrolled at Eastern Michigan University under an affirmative action program. Because I was poor, I had to use loans and taxpayer supported government grants to pay for my education. The cost of my four year education was \$24,000, less than the cost of my short jail sentence.

No longer a burden to taxpayers, I am a significant taxpayer, helping, through my tax contributions, to pave the way for others who've yet to get an opportunity to make a way for themselves. The tax dollars used to support my education were a worthy investment, one that benefits all of society. America should take note and act accordingly.

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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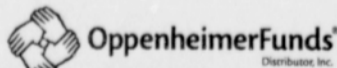
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