

# OPINION

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## Bury the N-Word

Racial slur has no place whatsoever

BY MARC H. MORIAL

A little over a year ago, a very disturbing case in New York City grabbed the national headlines and provoked much controversy. It was that of a white man named Nicholas Minucci accused of attacking a black man with a bat while uttering an ugly racial epithet. His defense was that the N-word had become so mainstream and so common in its usage that it was no longer a derogatory term. Now, he's behind bars for hate crimes.



decided to lose it in the 1980s after a visit to Africa.

The Brooklyn-based group known as Abolish the N Word presents a very compelling multimedia argument against the word's use on its web site.

Employing vivid and harrowing Jim-Crow-era photos with Billie Holiday crooning her classic protest song "Strange Fruit" in the background, it evokes a memory of a culture that originally condoned the use of the N-word - the same one that condoned inhumane acts of hatred against blacks - horrible crimes against humanity.

Allow the history books to refer to the N-word as an obsolete term - a distant memory of our nation's ignorant past.

Justice had been done. But the African-American community does shoulder a little of the responsibility for that grievous event. Had we not tolerated the casual use of the N-word within our own community and through our culture, the sting of Minucci's attack upon Glenn Moore might not have been so penetrating.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary tells us that while the N-word is found in the works of writers of the past - Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, James Baldwin, among others - it "now ranks as perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English. It is a word 'expressive of racial hatred and bigotry,' the dictionary states.

The term "niger" - meaning black - mutated into the N-word as a result of a mispronunciation by southern slave masters. As contempt for slaves grew, the word's use proliferated throughout the 1700s and 1800s. By the 1900s, it was replaced by the word "black" to reference African Americans. In 1906, Booker T. Washington endorsed the term "negro" instead.

Though some blacks in the early 1920s referred to themselves by a more euphemistic version of the N-word - "niggah" now "nigga," it was still considered a pejorative term. The Black Power Movement of the 1960s declared, "Black is beautiful." They didn't proclaim the N-word to be beautiful. The movement's followers referred to each other as "brother" and "sister" and not "nigga."

In the 1960s, black comics wouldn't touch the N-word with a 2,000 foot pole. Even comedian Richard Pryor who freely invoked the slur in his stand-up act in the 1970s

Abolish the N Word's members wax nostalgic about the early days of hip hop music when profanity wasn't used. "We remember referring to our friends as homeboy and homegirl. And we were still cool. We remember the airing of 'Roots' and the sting of hearing the N-word on national television for the first time," the group explains on its web site.

But now they're wondering how on earth its use has become so acceptable within the African-American community. "What happened in our community that the N-word is tossed around freely in everyday language? When the use of it makes you cool, down accepted?" they wonder. I must concur.

When did it become commonplace for us to resort to such a slur as a term of affection?

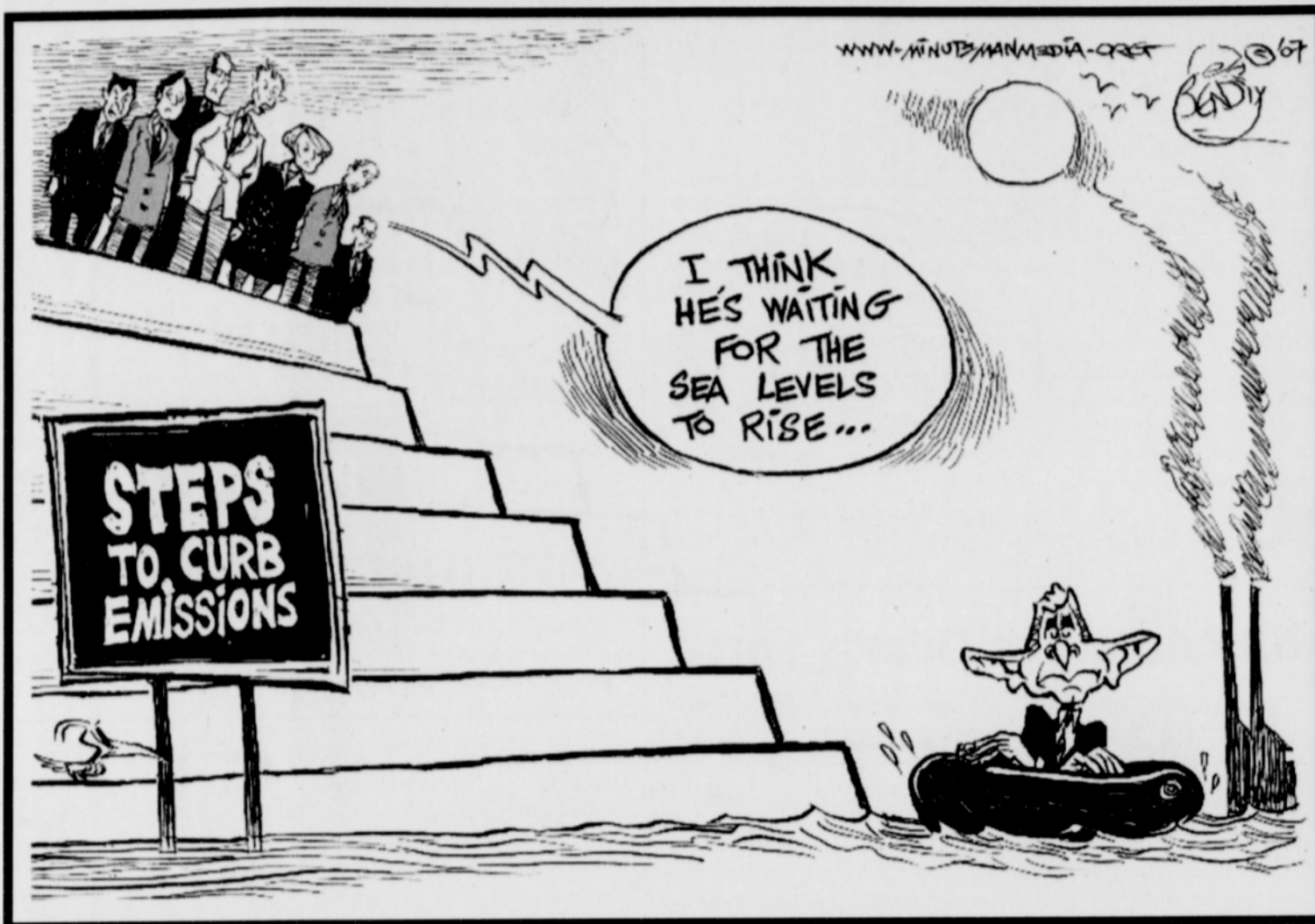
Earlier this year after the New York City Council approved a ban on the word's use, Tiara Smith, a black teenager from Dallas, Texas, made a telling observation when she expressed skepticism over its future impact.

"We grew up saying it and it's what I say all the time," she told the Associated Press. It's not going to stop anybody from saying it."

What is clear from her statement is that our younger generations are not fully aware of the N-word's painful role in American history. As comedian Bill Cosby observed in a 2004 speech before the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, we are letting our children down if we don't lead by example.

"When you put on a record, and that record is yelling 'n\*\*\*\*er this' and 'n\*\*\*\*er that' and cursing all

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## Trying Juveniles as Adults Doesn't Work

System creates new criminal breed

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

A majority of the states in this country try juvenile offenders in adult courts, sentencing them to adult prisons if they are convicted. Lawmakers originally instituted these practices because they believed it would deter crime, making the country a safer place for us all.

Based on data from a recent study by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, we now know this is not the case. In fact, the practice has had exactly the opposite effect. Young offenders, still very impressionable, interact with violent, hardened criminals while in adult prison.

Many are eventually returned home, lacking the education and skills they need to become productive citizens. They return to a life of crime, this time using the knowledge they gained while in prison.

Trying and sentencing juveniles as adults, in effect, creates a 'smarter,' more violent criminal. The practice needs to end.

Nearly two-thirds of all youth offenders tried as adults are dealing with some sort of trauma: They were raped or as-

saulted, are dealing with the death of a loved one or are at risk for suicide. Instead of assessing their psychological and emotional needs and getting them the help they need, our courts would rather transfer them into a system that has repeatedly failed to rehabilitate. More alarming is the fact that most of the juvenile cases moved to adult courts are for non-violent crimes.

Research shows that more than 80 percent of the decisions to try juveniles as adults are made by prosecutors (or legislators), not judges. Judges who can clearly and objectively review a

Some states are beginning to end automatic transfer of juveniles to adult court. In 2005, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich signed into law a bill that gave judges freedom to determine whether or not to try youth involved in drug cases as adults. The law created a clear set of factors that the courts must consider before transferring a minor from juvenile to adult court. Other states should follow suit.

Processing low-level non-violent youth offenders in adult court only develops a new breed of criminal, many of whom are destined to cycle in and out of the criminal justice system. If we continue this current practice, the number of people in our jails and prisons will continue to grow. Already, the United States imprisons more people than any other nation. This costs taxpayers billions each year and tears apart lives, families and communities. Private industry profits, the rest of us lose.

We cannot incarcerate our way out of society's ills.

Call your local legislator and urge them to support laws that end automatic transfer of juveniles to adult court. Ask them to sponsor bills that call for increased funding in education, after school and community youth programs, instead. Your voice will make a difference.

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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case's mitigating circumstances should be making these decisions.

Instead, the fate of our young men and women are being decided by individuals who merely want to show conviction rates come election time. And these are our young men and women. According to the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, three out of every four young people sentenced to adult prisons are of people of color.



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 EDITOR: Michael Leighton  
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CALL 503-288-0033  
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news@portlandobserver.com  
 ads@portlandobserver.com  
 subscription@portlandobserver.com