

OPINION

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Convenient Memory Loss Immigrants are not the problem with America

BY M. LINDA JARAMILLO

I hear story after story about communities across the country being torn apart by fierce debates over immigration. I read speech after speech delivered by political leaders adding inflammatory remarks to an already hostile social environment. In all the fear-producing outcries, immigrants are named as the problem with America. One such place is the State of Oklahoma.

What mystifies me about all this is our apparent memory loss. I am confused by our patriotic cries that raise the American flag and the Statue of Liberty as the icons of our culture. Yet, we seem to have forgotten that the 13 stripes on the flag represent the original colonies made up of rebellious and courageous immigrants coming to this land to make a better life. We have

forgotten that the Statue of Liberty is called a symbol of freedom and opportunity, inscribed with these words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." We have forgotten that most of the American West was Mexico not very long ago. Most alarming is that we ignore that this land first belonged to Indigenous peoples who have been set aside.

This memory loss reminds me of my history lessons in public schools over a half-century ago. As an eighth grader, I was required to take Colorado History. The problem with the Colorado History class was that the textbooks left out significant

information about the real history. Never did I see people in those books who looked like me, even though my ancestors had been on the land for centuries before the United States expanded and created states like Colorado, Arizona,

ries about those who traveled west on wagon trains – courageous and rebellious immigrants in search of a better life. It seems that the authors of the history textbooks had lost their memory too.

Now, our memory loss is show-

ing up in hateful state legislation that strips people's dignity and their basic human rights. Oklahoma enacted a law this month that is based on assumptions that have no proven foundation. Legislators and the Governor endorsed a bill that blames "illegal" immigrants for the economic woes and lawlessness in the state. Where is the data that proves that "illegal" immigrants are committing crime at a higher rate? Where is the data that verifies that "illegal" immigrants are draining public resources? This bill is not about data, it is about a loss of memory that has rendered people invisible in the history books and in today's stories.

What is even more ridiculous is that the State of Oklahoma claims that this law will be enforced without discrimination. It reads, "The provisions of this section shall be en-

forced without regard to race, religion, gender, ethnicity, or national origin." Let's not kid ourselves: this law is all about discrimination. Oklahoma is but an example of bigoted public policies being considered in many statehouses in this nation.

Hispanic Oklahomans are leaving the state in droves out of fear. Many of them are not recent immigrants; they have been there for generations. Native Americans in Oklahoma are being mistaken for Hispanics and targeted for deportation.

On the heels of the Thanksgiving celebration, we seemed to have forgotten the truth about our history. We've had a convenient loss of memory.

M. Linda Jaramillo is the executive minister of Justice Ministries for the United Church of Christ.



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Texas, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, California, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

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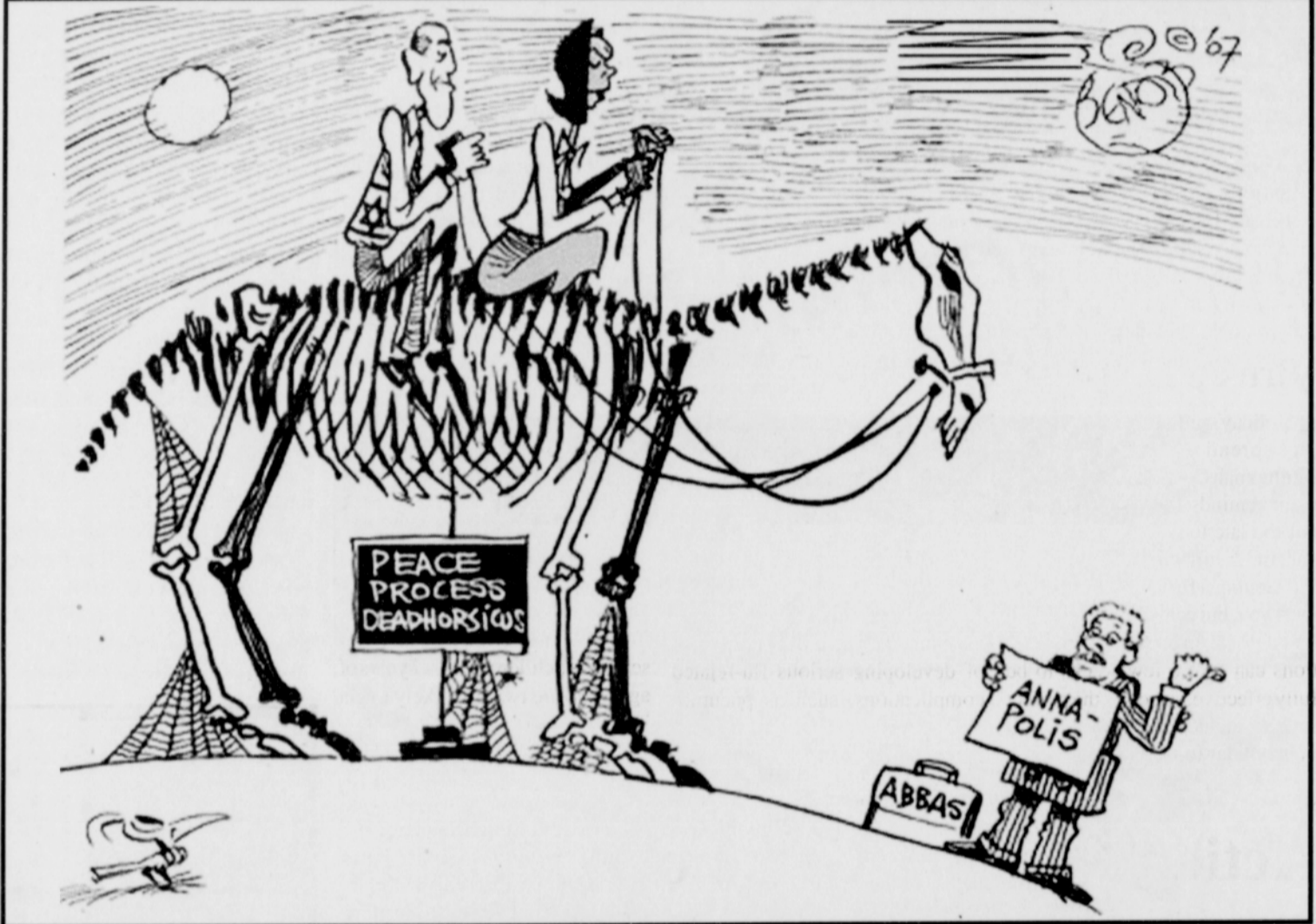
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Politicians Ignore New Orleans Again Loses out on debates, national spotlight

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Four cities have been chosen to host the 2008 presidential and vice presidential debates. New Orleans, one of 16 finalists, didn't make the final cut. City officials were told it was because the city, devastated by Hurricane Katrina two years ago, wasn't ready to host such a large-scale event.

Interesting, considering New Orleans held Mardi Gras celebrations just six months after the storm and has attracted numerous conventions and conferences, many of which bring hundreds of thousands of people into the city. Critics of the commission say New Orleans was omitted from the final list because

politicians don't want to remind the world that the government failed the people of New Orleans.

In the days, months and weeks following Hurricane Katrina, the world watched

the intersection between race and poverty and to unveil plans designed to adequately address the issue.

Instead, the commission used unfounded complaints to say 'no' to New Orleans.

New Orleans would have given the candidates an opportunity to examine the intersection between race and poverty.

as the American government failed to address the needs of the people of New Orleans. The storm-ravaged city became a perfect case study of the country's inability to address issues of race and poverty. Promises were made to help rebuild the city. But, as the media and the government moved on to the next hot topic, those promises were forgotten.

The current presidential candidates are not doing much to bring attention to New Orleans either. Sure Democrat John Edwards launched his campaign there. But the issues that New Orleans shed light on – economic oppression, governmental neglect of poor people of color and more – aren't as prevalent in the discussions as, say, health care or ending the war in Iraq.

And we can't just blame the Republicans: One of the co-chairs of the committee responsible for selecting the debate sites, Paul G. Kirk Jr., is a Democrat. The other, Frank J. Fahrenkopf Jr., is a Republican.

Hosting the debates in New Orleans would have given the candidates an opportunity to examine

America needs to remember how the government failed New Orleans. If the story isn't told often, the lesson won't be learned.

The presidential debates would have once again shined a much needed light on the city and would have exposed the bureaucracy and red tape residents wanting to rebuild must struggle with. Instead, New Orleans is once again tossed to the side. And so too are the many poor people of color all around the country who saw their stories reflected in those of the hurricane's victims.

An opportunity for growth and change has been missed.

All we can hope for now is that the candidates do what the debate commission was too cowardly to do: Go to New Orleans, talk to the residents, learn what's really going on and begin to formulate plans to make sure what happened in New Orleans in 2005 never happens again.

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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