

OPINION

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Our Criminal Justice System is Broken

Reform prisons and prisoners

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

At the beginning of this year, more than 1.5 million Americans were in prison or jail. For years now, the United States has been the world's leading incarcerator.



Considering the rate at which this country imprisons its citizens, it is unlikely the trend will change any time soon.

The U.S. spends billions to lock away offenders, many of whom are low-level, nonviolent drug offenders. Often times, states don't have the needed funds to run their jails or prisons. Money

ing a "new" economy that runs the nation's prisons.

Generations of failed public and social policies created a system that makes it hard for some of our people to find decent jobs, affordable housing and access to a quality education. This lack of opportunity creates hopelessness.

Drugs and alcohol are used to, falsely, ease the feelings of despair. Addiction fuels criminal activity. Let's be clear: this is not the reality for all of the black folk who are incarcerated. For most, though, it is not too far from the truth.

In communities across America, black churches and community based organizations

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sometimes has to be taken from programs that may help keep individuals out of the system to keep the prisons running.

It's clear our nation's criminal justice system is broken, and has been for years. It is beyond time for reform.

As in most areas, African-Americans are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system. Nearly one in every 30 American men between 20 and 34 are incarcerated. For black men, the number is very different, and disturbing: one in 9 black men in that same age group is in jail or prison. Our sistas don't fare much better. One in 355 white women, ages 35 to 39, is imprisoned. For black women, it's every one in 100.

Black Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. This disparity sheds light on a system that feeds off of urban youth, taking advantage of their lack of resources and creat-

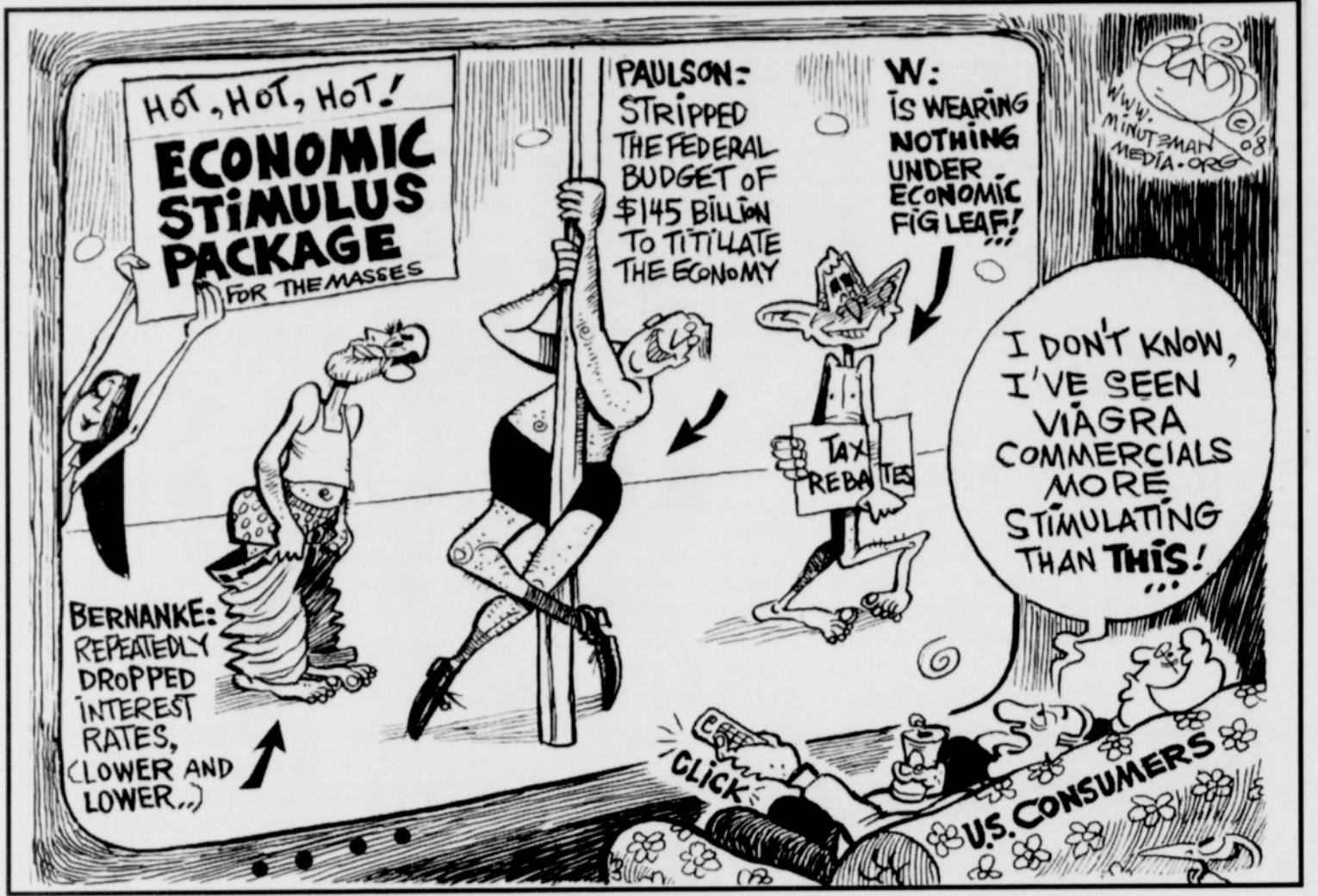
are working to uplift our people and reverse this disturbing trend. More needs to be done.

The U.S. must create policies and identify funding for programs that will keep young people off the street and create jobs. Courts need to be allowed to exercise discretion when sentencing low level offenders; there are alternatives to jail that have been proven to rehabilitate.

Real reform must first begin with an acknowledgement and analysis of the racial disparities in arrest, sentencing and incarceration. And it must begin sooner, rather than later.

It has taken decades to build our current prison system. It cannot be reformed overnight. But the nation can begin to take big steps in that direction.

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



Stopping Violence against Women

We can do more than we're doing today

BY ESTA SOLER

One in three. That's the chance women worldwide have of experiencing violence some time in their lives, according to the United Nations. In some countries, it's much worse—seven in 10 women will suffer.

Violence against women and girls takes many forms—from trafficking in Eastern Europe and Asia, to honor killings in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, to rape being used as a weapon of war in Darfur and the



Democratic Republic of Congo, to rape, stalking and domestic violence in industrialized countries like the United States.

No country is immune, but some are better positioned than others to help stop it. Here in the United States, we can do much more to keep women and girls safe than we're doing today.

Last fall, Sens. Joseph Biden, D-Del., and Richard Lugar, R-Ind., introduced groundbreaking legislation to combat the global crisis of violence against women and girls.

The International Violence against Women Act would apply the force of U.S. diplomacy and

foreign aid totaling \$1 billion over five years to preventing abuse and exploitation against women worldwide. It would integrate efforts to end gender-based violence into all existing, appropriate U.S. foreign assistance programs, with a special emphasis on supporting the overseas women's groups that are working in the trenches to keep women and girls safe.

The measure would authorize substantial resources for international programs that prevent violence, provide services to survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, change public attitudes, and better address violence against women in humanitarian situations.

It would aim to prevent violence in all of its forms, including honor

killings, bride burnings, acid burnings, dowry deaths, genital mutilation, mass rapes in war, or domestic violence.

The bill is languishing right now—there have been no hearings, and little movement.

In honor of International Women's Day, let's resolve to change that by calling or writing our senators and representatives and asking them to support the International Violence against Women Act.

If we pass this legislation, we will help stop a global crisis. We will help keep the next generation safe. We will give women and girls—and their families—a worldwide vastly better chance to lead safer, healthier lives.

Esta Soler is president of the Family Violence Prevention Fund

A Safe Place for Infants Averts Tragedy

BY BRYAN M. JOHNSTON

I received the first word of a serious situation facing our St. Helens office on Valentine's Day.

A perfect 7-pound newborn girl had been found unconscious in the toilet of a St. Helens adult care facility. A facility employee heroically—and successfully—worked to revive the girl. Medics responded

and transported the infant to a local hospital for further treatment and observation.

Just six days after her birth, Baby Valentine—as Department of Human Services staff members began calling her—was calm and content as our St. Helens caseworkers took turns cuddling her.

Now Baby Valentine is safely in

foster care while the court determines custody issues. Her mother, an employee of the care facility, faces criminal charges. The consequences of this unwanted birth were traumatic but not tragic. Not all unwanted babies are as lucky.

However, Oregon's Safe Place for Newborns Law offers a way to save these children without passing judgment or placing blame. This law permits a distressed parent to give up a baby safely, legally and confidentially within the first 30 days of the baby's life.

The law permits either parent to leave a newborn child at a hospital, doctor's office, birthing clinic, police station, sheriff's office or fire department.

There are no legal consequences for making this choice as long as the baby is 30 days old or younger, is handed to a person at one of the above places, and shows no signs of abuse.

The baby will be cared for and will receive medical attention if needed. DHS will place the baby in foster care

and start the legal process for making the child available for adoption. Many families are waiting to adopt an infant.

I am told there wasn't a dry eye in our St. Helens office the day Baby Valentine visited. I understand why. Holding that little child, our DHS staff shared a flood of emotions: how perilously she clung to life, how we hope she will grow up in a loving family, and how we want to spare any infant such a trauma.

The Safe Place law offers a way to give unwanted babies the kind of future Baby Valentine was almost denied. Please join me in spreading the word that in Oregon there is a Safe Place for infants whose parents are not able or willing to parent.

It's not only the law, it's the duty of all of us to make Oregon a safer place for all citizens.

For information, 1-800-SAFENET. Bryan M. Johnston is interim assistant director of the Children, Adults and Families Division in the Oregon Department of Human Services.

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