

OPINION

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President Obama's First 100 Days

High marks all around

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Restore confidence – check. Pass a stimulus bill – check. Reset American leadership abroad – check. Take action to shore up the faltering banking and auto industries – check. Get a new puppy – check.

Ever since Franklin Roosevelt passed a dizzying number of bills during the first 100 days of his presidency in 1933, commentators and others have used that time frame to grade a new president's early performance.

Now it's Barack Obama's turn and by most accounts, he has made a re-



markable first impression. On a scale of 1-10, I would give him a solid 9. There's always room for improvement.

But, looking ahead to the next 100 days and the massive challenges facing our nation, I don't see the President's job getting any easier.

Presidential leadership cannot be fully measured against a check list of promises made and promises kept. We need to also look at the decisions our Commander-in-Chief makes during a sudden crisis, as well as the steps he takes to ensure that his policies benefit every citizen.

The President's swift action to protect Americans on the high seas against Somali pirates and his mobilization of government resources to

prevent the spread of swine flu qualify as effective actions against unforeseen enemies. But, much more must be done to ensure that the President's economic and social policies are as inclusive as possible. Let me briefly touch on three areas of concern.

First, while I applaud the President's aggressive tackling of the economic crisis, including passage of the \$787 billion stimulus package, I believe he needs to lead an interagency effort that also involves unions and the construction industry to ensure that the green jobs seen as key to the recovery do not by-pass black America.

Second, this Administration must do more to reinvigorate the nation's commitment to civil rights which has been eroded over the last eight years. Just this month we learned that Su-

preme Court Justice David Souter is retiring in June, giving the President his first opportunity to place his stamp on the High Court.

We trust he will pick a successor who shares his own progressive views on civil rights, equal opportunity and color-blind justice.

In addition to a new Supreme Court justice, President Obama faces a tough battle over his nomination of Maryland Labor Secretary Thomas Perez to head the civil rights division of the Justice Department. Opposition is already lining up to challenge the President's choice of Perez and the Administration's plans to more aggressively tackle employment discrimination, hate crimes, voter suppression efforts, racial profiling and

a host of other civil rights issues.

Finally, while we applaud the President's attention to racial and gender diversity in filling White House and cabinet positions, we believe that more must be done at the sub-cabinet and agency levels to ensure that his administration "looks like America" from top to bottom.

With high marks all around and a public approval rating of 68 percent, we congratulate the President on an impressive first 100 days. In the next 100 and beyond, we urge him to stay focused on serving all the people in pursuit of his progressive agenda for change.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Farwell to New Orleans' Mayor Ray Nagin fell short of the challenge

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Three and a half years ago, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin was forced to deal with something very few elected officials have to face – a natural disaster that killed thousands and caused billions of dollars worth of damage.

The nation watched in horror as Hurricane Katrina hit the city, causing massive flooding, and we wondered why the government was so slow to respond.

Nagin, like all of those in

power, struggled to manage the devastation Katrina left behind. Nevertheless, much of New Orleans stood behind him, electing him to a second term in 2006. That term will be over in a year and very few New Orleans residents will be sad to see him go.

Nagin isn't being voted out: city rules prohibit a mayor from serving more than two terms. But, if Nagin was up for re-election, it is pretty unlikely that he'd win. A recent poll showed his popularity among black resi-

dent, while his popularity among whites was a mere 5 percent.

Why do residents dislike him so? The city's stalled rebuilding efforts have a lot to do with it. New Orleans has had a hard time bringing



in funds earmarked for the city by the federal government.

Nagin ran his re-election campaign promising to develop a comprehensive, workable plan for a rebuilt New Orleans.

The plan was drafted but fell far short of implementation.

The city's crime rate, which skyrocketed after Katrina, has residents in an uproar as well. A major poll named New Orleans the nation's most crime-

To be fair, the problems in New Orleans are not all Nagin's fault. Most existed long before he entered office. However, his management style and inability to work with the City Council and

Governor's office leave residents holding the short end of the stick.

As Nagin's final year in office wraps up, it remains to be seen what his legacy will be. Hurricane Katrina and the challenges that followed showcased both his passion for New Orleans as well as his shortcomings as an administrator.

The new mayor – whoever that may be – has a long road ahead. The next mayor will immediately have to establish a strong working relationship with both the City Council and the state government, create and implement a plan to rebuild New Orleans and manage the never-ending red tape that is FEMA and the federal government to bring much needed – and promised – funds to the city.

There is much work to be done in New Orleans. The city needs a leader who is truly up to that challenge.

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

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See the Monster in the Mirror

America's double standard on defense

BY ERIC STONER

Washington needs to relearn the basic moral principle of universality: What is wrong for others to do must also be wrong for us.

In February, the Obama administration requested a mind-

boggling \$664 billion for the U.S. military over the next fiscal year – more than 10 times

China's official military budget.

In fact, the United States spends roughly the same amount on "defense" each year as every other country in the world combined, according to the authoritative data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

And much like China, Washington's accounting for

such things is notoriously lacking in transparency.

Many expenses that the average person would consider defense-related – such as funding for the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Energy's maintenance of the nuclear stockpile, military aid to allies, and the share of interest payments on the national debt that can be attributed to past military spending – are hidden in other parts of the federal budget.

When all of these costly extras are added up, the United States' unofficial military budget tops out at more than \$1 trillion.

on F-35 Joint Strike Fighters – at a staggering \$100 million apiece – or use that money for food and shelter for the millions who have been driven into poverty due to the world economic collapse?

Do we want to spend another \$2 billion each month for the next five or 10 years to fight the war in Afghanistan, or should that money be used to further research into alternative energy and build a high-speed rail system across our country? We simply cannot have it all.

There are a few hopeful signs that things may be changing on Capitol Hill. Congressman Barney Frank has been avidly pushing for a 25 percent cut to

The truth is that the vast sums allocated by both the United States and China for future wars are a tragic waste of finite resources.

To make it simple, Robert Higgs, a senior fellow at the Independent Institute, wrote, "A well-founded rule of thumb is to take the Pentagon's (always well publicized) basic budget total and double it."

And who outside of our borders would say that the "purposes" of the U.S. military machine are benign or that the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with "natural resources?" It'd be hard for anyone to take that argument seriously while our troops occupy two countries and bomb a third with unmanned drones on a weekly basis.

The truth is that the vast sums allocated by both the United States and China for future wars is a tragic waste of finite resources, especially given the spiraling financial and ecological crises that we face.

The trade-offs must be laid bare. Do we want to spend more

the military budget for months. While his proposal is seen as radical by most in Congress, the Pentagon would still receive more taxpayer dollars after his cuts take effect than it did in 2001 – thanks to President George W. Bush's eight year military spending binge.

Until the United States acknowledges the monster in the mirror and begins to dramatically cut its bloated military budget, President Barack Obama's soaring rhetoric about the need for a different, more respectful relationship with the rest of the world will unfortunately remain hollow words.

And if China is ever to slow or reduce its military spending, the United States as the sole military power in the world, must lead by example.

Eric Stoner is a freelance journalist based in New York. His articles have appeared in "The Guardian," "Mother Jones" and "The Nation".

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