

OPINION

Obama's American Agenda

Benefits black America, too

BY CYNTHIA TUCKER

President Obama's historic status as the nation's first black president hasn't spared him criticism from some black commentators and members of Congress, who claim that the president ought to have a bona fide "black agenda."



Several members of the Congressional Black Caucus have chastised Obama for, they claim, doing little to address the unemployment rate among black workers, some six to seven points higher than the overall rate of just under ten percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Last month, talk show host Tavis Smiley's annual "Black Agenda" conference included a panel which heavily criticized Obama for failing to directly address a range of difficult social problems which still plague black America. Indeed, Smiley has become a consistent critic.

Smiley has every right to score the president's accomplishments and failures as he sees fit. But it is naive for him to expect that the nation's first black president will champion an exclusively black "agenda," any more than John F. Kennedy, the nation's first Catholic president, issued a "Catholic agenda." Obama was not elected the president of black America. He's the president of the entire country.

Still, Obama hasn't ignored those detractors. Perhaps that's why he met April 6 with a group of black preachers, including Atlanta's T.

DeWitt Smith, head of the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Here's hoping he took the opportunity to point out that his policies benefit black Americans, too.

According to Families USA, a health care advocacy group, 40 percent of blacks reported being uninsured during some portion of 2007-2008, compared to about 26 percent of whites. Black or white, they will be able to afford health insurance as a result of the new law, which Obama made a priority.

The president also battled entrenched interests to change the student-loan program, which freed up money to give a slight funding increase to Pell grants. Many black students will benefit from the boost in tuition assistance, just as many white and brown students will.

But the most significant assistance that Obama is providing to black students — to all students, actually — lies in his promising reform plan for elementary and secondary education. The new emphasis on charter schools and merit pay has the potential for bringing the best and brightest teachers into public school classrooms, while weeding out the incompetent and uninspired.

There are few things that the federal government can do that have a more significant effect on children

than helping them to get a good education. For black kids, that's crucial. The difference between those black Americans who have achieved mainstream success and those mired in poverty lies, for the most part, in the difference in academic achievement.

It's true that college-educated black workers have a higher unemployment rate than college-educated white workers — a commentary on a "post-racial" America. But it's also true that college-educated black men and women will fare much better than their less-educated counterparts.

So far, few black opinion-makers have zeroed in on Obama's education reform plans. That reticence may stem from an ambivalence — or hostility — toward the reforms from a mainstay of the black middle-class: teachers. Teachers' groups have not exactly rallied in support of Obama's plans. Some teachers remain especially critical of merit pay.

Still, his emphasis on teacher accountability has the potential for doing more to shake up public education than any reforms of the last two decades. Obama may not have a plan for reducing the black-on-black homicide rate (who does?) or shoring up black marriage (other than serving as a good role model), but, if he can boost educational achievement for all children — including those who are poor and black — that would certainly qualify as progress. Let's call that an American agenda.

Cynthia Tucker is columnist for the Atlanta Journal Constitution.

Regulate Health Premiums

Oversight will make health bill stronger

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The President and Congress successfully overhauled the healthcare system in a major way, making it possible for nearly four million Americans to get needed healthcare insurance.

Despite this great — and historical — news, more work remains. One of the remaining obstacles we have to overcome is making sure health insurers can't raise their premiums by an exorbitant amount. Without oversight on this front, the benefits of the healthcare bill will be lost to many.

Insurer Anthem Blue Cross in California plans to raise its insurance premiums by 39-percent, a move that has many customers on edge. The company has put the rate hike on hold for now, but the very thought of such an increase from any insurer has legislators moving quickly to act.

U.S. Sen. Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., are pushing legislation that would prevent insurance companies from raising premiums



without prior approval from a regulatory body. Some states already have this step in place, most do not.

Of course, leaders in the insurance industry say that more regulation is not the answer. They want federal officials to instead work to reduce rising medical costs, which play a part in driving up premiums. Indeed, skyrocketing medical costs is something the country needs to work on but the insurance industry premium increases do require oversight, plain and simple.

Policymakers attempted to include such legislation in the healthcare bill but that provision was ultimately cut. Ironically, it was the threat of the rate hike from Anthem that resurrected the healthcare bill. Unfortunately, lawmakers make a grave mistake when they let the bill pass without this mandate.

If they move quickly, they have a chance to get it right. Requiring insurance companies to get prior approval before significantly raising their rates is the best approach to making sure all that health care reform promises does not ultimately fall flat.

Greg Mathis is a retired Michigan District Court Judge and syndicated television judge.

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