

OPINION

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Housing is a Human Right

Prioritize human needs

BY SAUL LANDAU

Our nation is running a \$1.4 trillion-dollar budget deficit this year. So why is Congress on track to approve more than \$1 trillion for "defense" spending, while cutting back services that most countries think of as human rights?



Even in the wake of Obama's landmark health-care legislation, our priorities are out of sync with what the public needs.

Consider this: About 3.5 million Americans—including 1.35 million children—are homeless for significant periods of time over the course of a year, according to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. Under U.S. law, American citizens don't have rights to shelter, food, medical care, or a decent old age. Yet these are human rights, and they're etched into the United Nations' Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Albania, Tunisia, Finland, and dozens of other countries have signed on to this document, which of course has gone unratified by the U.S. Senate.

What part of "in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his economic, social and cultural rights, as well as his civil and political rights and freedom" do our lawmakers reject?

Homelessness isn't the only indicator that underscores our mistaken priorities. Experts have estimated that at least 20,000 Americans die each year because they lack health insurance and can't get needed care. And a recent study found that 37 million people in this country sought emergency food assistance from food banks in the Feeding America network last year. That's roughly one in eight Americans.

Meanwhile, our country positions itself as the world's leading human rights advocate, ignoring many aspects of what the rest of the world considers to be human rights.

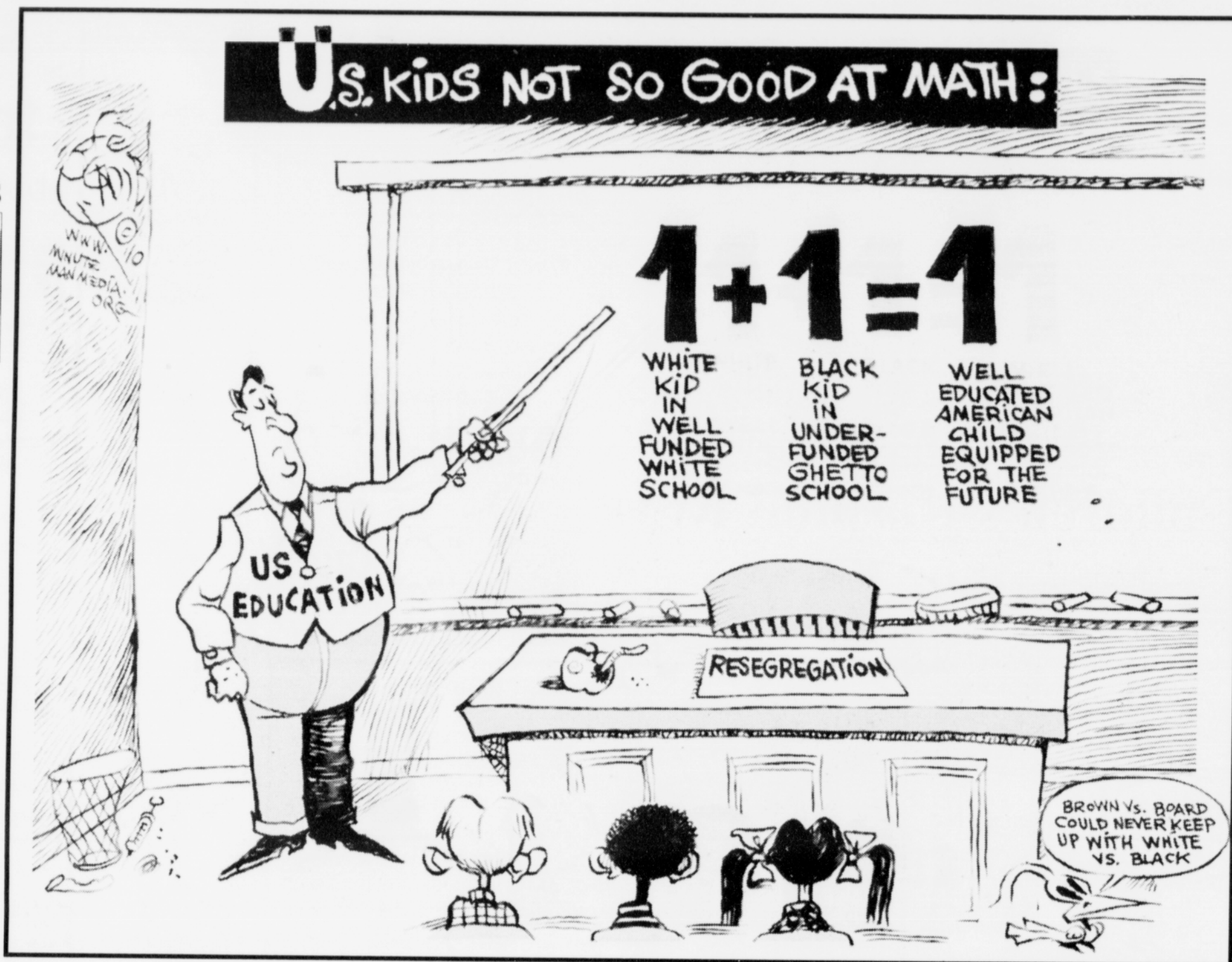
For example, the State Department recently published a report that found Cuba to be violating legal and political rights. The report made no reference to Cuba's success in housing and feeding its people, or providing them with health care.

The skewed policy of focusing on deficiencies in Cuba while ignoring our own glaring lack of substantive rights has characterized every administration for 30 years.

Arizona, like many states suffering from reduced revenues, recently slashed its Children's Health Insurance Program. About 47,000 kids—all poor, of course—now have no medical coverage.

Self-righteous human rights attacks on other countries don't help mask glaring needs at home, particularly food and shelter for millions.

Saul Landau is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies.



Seeking Environmental Justice

Race a factor in disparities

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

We recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of the first Earth Day, a day designed to increase appreciation for—and to inspire individuals to protect—the earth and its environment.



From school yard tree planting ceremonies to corporations sharing 'green tips' on national news shows, America got in the green spirit and vowed to take care of Mother Earth. The government was among the loudest when it came to promising to keep the earth clean. Unfortunately, it seems that promise doesn't extend to people of color.

Recent studies have shown that race is, by far, the most critical factor when determining how close and individual or family will live to a hazardous waste site.

A study authored by Clark Atlanta University professor Robert Bullard found that 56 percent of Americans who within two miles of a commercial hazardous waste facility are people of color. In 1987, that number was 33 percent.

A different study, conducted in 2008 University of Colorado sociologist Liam Downey, showed how little a role income played in deciding just who lives in these

unhealthy areas. According to the findings, a black household with an income ranging from \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year had higher levels of pollution near their home than a white household with an income of less than \$10,000.

When we, as African Americans, discuss justice, rarely do we discuss—or demand—environmental justice. It's time that we do. If our children are breathing in toxic air, what good will it do for them to have access to good schools?

government amended the Clean Air Act in the 1990s and moved to cut vehicle and equipment emissions in the 2000s.

It's 2010. What will the next 'big' environmental law be? How about one that works to eliminate environmental racism by removing waste sites and improving air quality in black neighborhoods?

There is a new head of the Environmental Protection Agency. Appointed by President Obama, Lisa Jackson understands and fights against environmental injustice. She is cur-

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If our communities sit atop wastelands the government refuses to clean up, how does it benefit us to have access to community centers? A truly just community includes good schools, programs for residents, sustainable jobs and, yes, clean, safe air. We must start asking for all of these things, in totality.

Every decade brings in new and groundbreaking environmental legislation. In the 1970s, it was the Clean Air Act. In the 1980s, the government mandated that abandoned waste sites be cleaned up. The gov-

rently on a multi-state tour of the Congressional Black Caucus and, with them, is working with local officials and activists to find solutions.

Hopefully, she can create a groundswell of support with legislators and the general public to push for laws that will ensure race is not factor when determining how much pollution a neighborhood and its residents are exposed to.

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