

OPINION

Getting on the Right Side of the Issue

Lock 'em up attitude gives way to prison reform

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

For years, America's political leaders—many of whom were conservative Republicans—thought that the best way to lower crime and keep the public safe was to pass harsh sentencing laws that locked away even the lowest level non-violent drug offenders for years.

his "lock 'em up and throw away

the key" attitude did little to stop crime but did firmly cement the U.S. as the industrialized nation that incarcerates the most people.

Now, with state and federal budgets stretched to their limits and lawmakers deciding whether or not to raise taxes or risk of running out of money, conservative political groups are seemingly reversing direction on how they approach the criminal justice system.

Historically, liberals have long advocated the use of alternative sentencing methods but now Republicans have joined the bandwagon.

They're not changing course because they've seen the light and realize offender rehabilitation is critical. Rather, they're exploring 'softer' approaches to justice because they're worried about the increasingly high costs of running prisons.

Some of the programs spearheaded in Republican states look promising and could possibly serve as national models. A recent New York Times article discussed a Texas law that now sends non-violent offenders into drug treatment instead of prison. The state has also strengthened its programs that help keep ex-offenders from returning to prison.

Because of this new approach, the Texas prison is spending far less

than it did in the past, state taxpayers have saved hundreds of millions of dollars and violent crime in the state is at the lowest it has been in 30 years.

Texas isn't the only conservative state in the nation trying this new approach; South Carolina, Ohio and Arkansas are also reforming their justice systems, all in the name of saving money. Notable Republican leaders, including former House Speaker Newt Gingrich; Edwin Meese, attorney general during the Reagan administration, and Asa Hutchinson, former director of the Drug Enforcement Administration, are all leading the 'conservative prison reform movement'.

Sometimes people or groups get

on the right side of an issue much later than one would like. But conservatives finally understand that investing in rehabilitation is a much smarter way to spend taxpayer money.

Focusing on drug treatment, psychological counseling education and job training and not just imprisonment doesn't just save money—it keeps communities safer.

It's unfortunate that it took an economic crisis for Republicans to get to this point. But they're here now...here's hoping the reform keeps moving in the right direction.

Greg Mathis is a former Michigan District Court judge and currently is a judge on syndicated television.

Fraternity Brothers Made King Memorial a Reality

Effort was 27 years in the making

BY MARC H. MORIAL

"We build this memorial because...when our nation was about to split in two—black versus white, rich versus poor—Dr.

King said we should live together as brothers or perish as fools." -- Harry E. Johnson, president and chief executive officer, the Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial is the first on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. to honor a person of color, a non-president and a man of peace.

More than a quarter century in the making and at a cost of \$120 million, the Memorial promises to rekindle global interest in the life and legacy of one of the greatest champions of civil and human rights the world has ever known.

In these times of rampant domestic and international turmoil and division, Dr. King's message of justice, democracy, hope and love is needed more than ever.

The MLK Memorial project was the brainchild of Alpha Phi Alpha, the world's oldest intercollegiate fraternity founded by African American men. Fraternity leaders conceived the idea in 1984, 16 years after Dr. King's death and only months after President Reagan signed the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday into law.

Dr. King himself was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha as were National



Urban League legends Lester Granger and Whitney M. Young, Jr., who were also colleagues and friends of Dr. King. I too am a proud Alpha Phi Alpha Brother.

Since 2002, the massive fundraising effort needed to bring the MLK Memorial project to fruition, has been led by former Alpha Phi Alpha President and Houston lawyer, Harry E. Johnson, Sr. Under Johnson's leadership, the Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation has raised more than \$114 million from scores of corporate donors and thousands of citizens who want to ensure that Dr. King's legacy endures.

Harry Johnson was just eight years old when Dr. King led the 1963 March on Washington where he delivered one of the most well-known speeches in American his-

tory. He says that he owes much of his success as a lawyer and activist to the inspiration of Dr. King and the changes he brought about through non-violent action.

Johnson is a graduate of Xavier University in New Orleans and received his law degree from Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School of Law. He served as President of Alpha Phi Alpha from 2001-2004, and for his leadership of the King Memorial project, was awarded the prestigious "President's Award" at January's Trumpet Awards Gala in Atlanta.

Carved out of a granite boulder and situated on the Tidal Basin in a direct line between the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, the MLK Memorial will be a fitting tribute to Dr. King.

According to Harry Johnson, "Drawing from Dr. King's speeches

and using his own rich language, the King Memorial will be a public sanctuary where future generations of Americans, regardless of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation can come to honor Dr. King."

We applaud Alpha Phi Alpha

and Johnson for their leadership of this important project and urge all Americans to visit this historic new addition to the National Mall.

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

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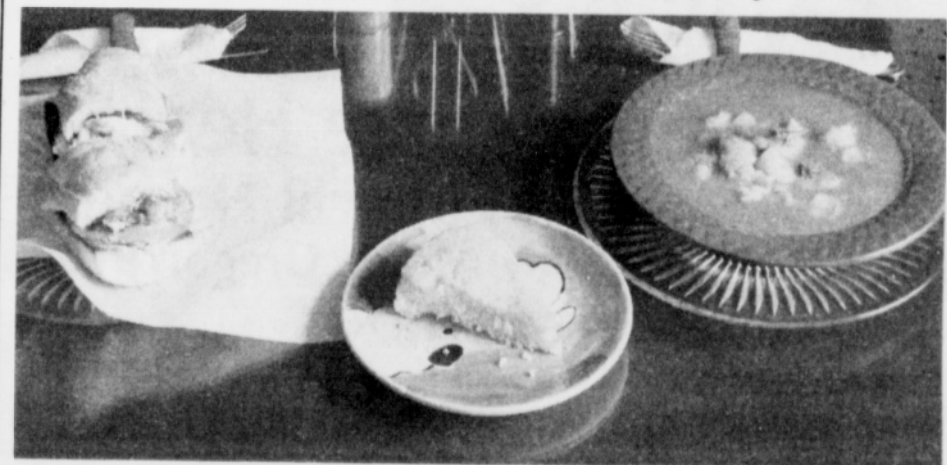
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