

OPINION

Justice Blocked with 'Kill at Will' Laws

Secretive partnership exposed

by Marc H. Morial

There has never been any doubt that George Zimmerman pulled the trigger that killed a 17-year-old, unarmed Florida youth named Trayvon Martin. But not much is known about Zimmerman's accomplice. His name is ALEC, which stands for the American Legislative Exchange Council.

ALEC is a corporate-financed membership organization for conservative state legislators that, in conjunction with the National Rifle Association (NRA), wrote and promoted the "Stand Your Ground" law, which so far has shielded



Zimmerman from arrest and prosecution.

Stand Your Ground is essentially a "Kill at Will" law, which allows a gunman to use deadly force if that person believes he or she is in imminent danger of death or great bodily harm.

Since the law was passed in Florida in 2005, the "justifiable homicide" rate in that state has jumped 300 percent. ALEC has used its close relationship with conservative lawmakers in state legislatures throughout the country to pass similar legislation in 25 states – and the tragic body count is growing.

It is bad enough that since its founding in 1981, ALEC has been

the shadow author of numerous pieces of legislation aimed at boosting corporate power and profits, reducing worker rights, weakening environmental protections, and restricting voter rights.

Now, the organization is actively supporting a law which is moving this country back to the lawless days of the Wild West when it was common practice to "shoot first and ask questions later." That is not the kind of America we or our children deserve in the 21st century.

That is why last month, I stood with a coalition of civil rights groups and hundreds of outraged citizens at a rally in front of ALEC headquarters in Washington, D.C. We came to pull back the curtain so that the world could meet the team of ghost-writers who have written these kill-

at-will laws and spread this poison around the nation.

We came to spread the disinfecting sunlight of truth on the real force behind these deadly laws and to demand that the organization end its promotion of Stand Your Ground and other similar firearms legislation.

The same team of ghost-writers is poisoning the constitutional right to vote by promoting these despicable voter ID laws throughout the nation. ALEC's model voter ID legislation, which is being promoted in dozens of states, has the potential to disenfranchise more than five million voters during this all important presidential election year.

Fortunately, the secretive partnership between big business and conservative politicians is coming under increasing scrutiny across

the country. In fact, the Center for Media and Democracy has created a website: ALECExposed.org, revealing the bills the organization supports, as well as its corporate and political backers.

This should give everyone pause when an inside-the-beltway group can write and promote laws that corrupt the democratic process, give a free pass to criminal behavior and trample on our civil rights. Last month, we marched for justice for Trayvon Martin. But until we get to the bottom of the NRA/ALEC relationship and their motivation for promoting laws that go beyond commercial interests, who knows who ALEC's next victim will be.

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

Money Runs the Show in Prison System

Time to stand for the public good

BY REV. SALA W.J. NOLAN GONZALES

Corrections Corporation of America has just made \$250 million

available to buy state prisons, and launched a marketing effort in 48 states to encourage governors to contract for their management. The



prison company is asking for 20 year contracts with assured occupancy rates of 90 percent.

State governments seek cash from selling prisons to private corporations because they can no longer afford to run them. The environment of vengeance and "get tough" posturing on crime that pervaded the political environment in the 1980s removed judicial discretion with three-strike laws and mandatory minimum sentences, and converted misdemeanors into felonies. The result has been mass incarceration.

The U.S. imprisons 2.3 million adults and holds millions more on probation or parole. Our judicial system controls one in every 32 adults in our country. Our incarceration rates exceed those of every other nation.

Money runs the show. Once people are charged with crimes, the economic burden is such that 90 percent take plea bargains and never go before a jury. It gives me pause that the people we put in prison are our poorest, and that most of them leave behind children who are only

further buried in poverty and dysfunction.

Even more disturbing is the solitary confinement, which has become an integral practice in U.S. prisons. Today, 44 states and the U.S. government operate prisons entirely dedicated to isolation. An estimated 80,000 inmates are housed in single rooms, some without windows, for 23 hours a day and an hour alone in an outdoor cage, with only limited interactions with guards.

Intended for the worst of the worst, solitary confinement is now ordered for minor infractions, and is routine for the mentally ill, who are vastly overrepresented in prisons and whose conditions are only made worse by it. Solitary confinement can last weeks, years, or decades, despite its permanent and devastating damage, and its international recognition as torture.

The American Civil Liberties Union and the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture appeared before the UN Human Rights Council to call for a review of rampant solitary confinement in U.S. prisons. Isolation offers no pretense of rehabilitation, and results in increased violence and despair. And now prisoners who were sentenced to long terms

in the 1980s are coming out.

Ironically, in the face of economic hardships, prison administrators are reviewing the cost effectiveness of solitary confinement and harsh sentencing. They are finding that socialization, education, alternative sentences and rehabilitative programs are far more effective and tremendously cheaper. They are also safer for communities of return.

Our prisons are broken. We need to fix them. It is time for their effectiveness to be examined in the light of day. We need to see the actual costs of harsh punishment and mass incarceration. We need to understand that rehabilitation is not only humane, but effective and cost-efficient.

We are called to a system of justice that offers a possibility of redemption, and that treats inmates with decency and respect. Our prisons are broken. Do we sell them to the highest bidder for fast cash, and guarantee 90 percent occupancy? Or do we stand up for restitution, rehabilitation, and the restoration of the public good?

Rev. Sala W.J. Nolan Gonzales is Minister for Criminal Justice and Human Rights in the United Church of Christ.

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CALL 503-288-0033 FAX 503-288-0015

news@portlandobserver.com

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