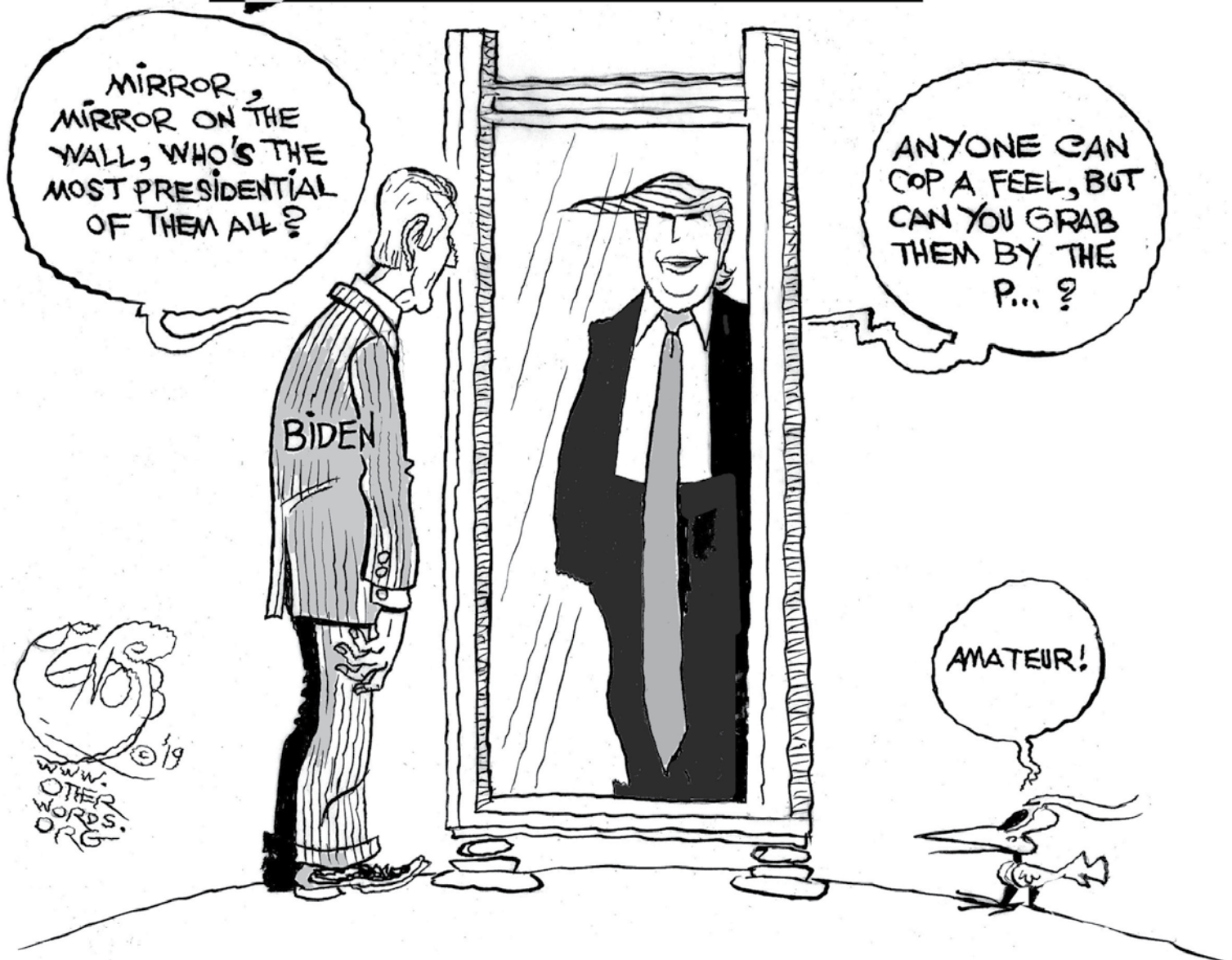


OPINION

DIRTY OLD MAN CONTEST:



Standing Up Against the Death Penalty

It should be abolished all across our land

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

California Gov. Gavin Newsom recently took the strong step of declaring a moratorium on the death penalty in California, saying: "Our death penalty system has been, by all measures, a failure. It has discriminated against defendants who are mentally ill, black and brown, or can't afford expensive legal representation. It has provided no public safety benefit or value as a deterrent. It has wasted billions of taxpayer dollars. Most of all, the death penalty is absolute. It's irreversible and irreparable in the event of human error."

California now joins three other states—Oregon, Colorado and Pennsylvania—with gover-

nor-imposed moratoria on the death penalty and the 20 states and the District of Columbia that have already abolished it. I am grateful to Gov. Newsom for being the latest courageous political leader to stand up and reject the death penalty's shameful legacy and continuing toll. It should be abolished all across our land.



The Equal Justice Initiative—led by the Children Defense Fund's extraordinarily gifted board member Bryan Stevenson—continues to be a leading voice against the death penalty and studies the death penalty's historical and ongoing bias.

The group notes how modern death sentences are disproportionately meted out to African Americans accused of crimes against white victims. African Americans make up less than 13 percent of the nation's population but 42 percent of the 2,905 people currently on death

row are black, and 35 percent of those executed since 1976 have been black. The victim was white in over 75 percent of the cases resulting in execution since 1976 although only 50 percent of murder victims nationwide are white." They add: "Prominent researchers have documented a pattern of discrimination in the application of the death penalty based on the race of the victim, race of the defendant, or both, in nearly every state that uses capital punishment."

The Equal Justice Initiative also notes that for every nine people executed in our country one innocent person on death row has been identified and exonerated. They call the death penalty "a failed, expensive policy defined by bias and error" and "a direct descendant of lynching."

They are not the only ones to make this clear connection. One of the Children Defense Fund's much valued colleagues Ndume

Olatushani is a gifted artist and passionate advocate for justice who spent nearly 28 years in prison, 20 of them on death row, before proving he'd been wrongly convicted.

Here is an excerpt from a letter Ndume asked me to send to Gov. Newsom:

"I have been given the privilege of being able to share a part of my story with you, mine is certainly one of hope. But I want to first say that I commend your courage for standing up and doing the right thing and not letting politics determine who lives or dies.

It is we who should thank people like Ndume who share their stories. His 21st century deliverance from condemnation to freedom is a stark reminder of exactly what is at stake today. We need more leaders with the courage to stand up against the death penalty right now.

Marian Wright Edelman is founder and president emerita of the Children's Defense Fund.



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