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Opinion

Criminal Justice Reform Long Overdue for Black America

As a member of the infamous Wilmington Ten case in North Carolina from 1972 to 2012, I witnessed firsthand why the criminal justice system in the United States needed to be thoroughly reformed. We had been unjustly sentenced in 1972 to a combined total of 282 years in prison for standing up for equal quality education for Black students in the public school system in Wilmington, NC in 1971.

For 40 long years, until North Carolina Governor Beverly Perdue signed "Pardons of Innocence" documents for each member of the Wilmington Ten, the issues of unjust and disproportionate mass incarceration, bail reform, racism in the judiciary, prosecutorial misconduct, and reentry challenges were not matters of partisanship, but were matters of fundamental civil and human rights.

Thanks to the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the United Church of Christ (UCC), the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (NAARP), Amnesty International and millions of people across the U.S. and throughout the world, we finally received a modicum of justice with the Pardons of Innocence being



Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

NNPA
President
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issued on December 31, 2012.

In the wake of the recent 2018 Midterm Elections, there now appears to be a more bipartisan interest and commitment in the achievement of significant criminal justice reform in America. Earlier this year, the House of Repre-

“There now appears to be a more bipartisan interest and commitment in the achievement of significant criminal justice reform

sentatives finally passed the First Step Act with bipartisan support. The legislation establishes the initial steps for criminal justice reform at the federal level. Just last week, even President Trump announced his support of the First Step Act. However, what the U.S. Senate will do is still

an open question.

The U.S. Congress should expedite passing the First Step Act as well as other criminal justice reform legislation. For Black America in particular, this remains an urgent and crucial public policy objective.

Of the current 2.2 million people incarcerated in the nation's prisons and jails, a disproportionate number are African Americans and other people of color. According to a 2018 Pew Research Study, in 2016 African Americans represented 12 percent of the U.S. adult population but 33 percent of the sentenced prison population. The ACLU reports that African American men are six times more likely to be incarcerated as White men in the U.S.

According to the NAACP's Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, African American women are imprisoned at twice the rate of White women. The Federal Bureau of Prisons reported in 2018 that 38 percent of prison inmates are African American.

But we need to do more than merely stating the statistics of criminal justice that bear witness to the racial, social, and economic inequities and injustices. We need solutions. We need more research about the successful programs and projects that can prevent mass incarceration while we

emphasize the urgency for criminal justice reform legislation at both the federal and state levels. We also need more effective programs for the hundreds of thousands of incarcerated people preparing to reenter society without the counterproductivity of recidivism.

I have served on panel discussions amicably with Mark Holden, general counsel of Koch Industries, who also supports the First Step Act, a bill grounded in evidence-based and data-driven practices that we know keep communities safe and provide people with the second chances they need to lead productive lives. The bill specifically provides programs to help reduce the risk that prisoners will recidivate upon release from prison. Mark and I are on the same page on the issues of reentry and the need to reduce systemic reincarceration.

In fact, Koch Industries has been funding criminal justice reform efforts for more than a decade and was one of the first major corporations in the U.S. to “ban the box” by removing questions about criminal history on its employment applications. Other corporate leaders should also “ban the box.”

Read the rest of this commentary at
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Can a Woman's Coalition Survive Petulant White Women?

I have had about enough of some White women! First, 53 percent of them vote for an odious genital-grabber. Then, they organize a woman's march with momentum from the #MeToo movement, founded by Tarana Burke, but co-opted by White women like the wannabe activist Alyssa Milano who was a mediocre actress back in the day. Then, bunches of them support Roy Moore, an Alabama pedophile who would be Senator. Then the majority of them vote against progressive candidates like Georgia's Stacey Abrams and Florida's Andrew Gillum. Meanwhile, the four women who lead the Women's March – Bob Bland, Tamika Mallory, Linda Sarsour, and Carmen Perez – are organizing for a January 19 march, and the self-proclaimed “founder” is demanding their resignation. Really?

Theresa Shook is the Hawaii grandmother who put an idea on Facebook in the wake of the 2016 election. “We should march,” she said. She did little else, and activist Bob Bland picked up the baton and ran with it. She recruited other women, seasoned activists in their own right. Tamika Mallory had led a march from New York to DC to stop gun violence. Carmen Perez has worked on criminal justice



Julianne Malveaux

NNPA
Columnist

reform and has worked on Harry Belafonte's Gathering for Justice, now serving as its Executive Director. Linda Sarsour, a former executive director of the Arab American Association of New York,

“White people's hatred for Minister Farrakhan is irrational and, might I say, racist

has worked with Black Lives Matter and on police brutality issues. The four co-chairs of the Women's March are the very picture of intersectionality and multicultural cooperation – White, Black, Latina, and Palestinian, they are the rainbow!

So where does Theresa Shook get off asking these women to step down from a movement they built? She, along with wannabe activist and

has-been actress Alyssa Milano have demanded that the women's march leaders “denounce” National of Islam Minister Louis Farrakhan. Why? They object to his anti-Semitic rhetoric. They object to the fact that Tamika Mallory attended his annual Savior's Day this year. They say that anti-Semitism is hateful and dangerous, and they are right. But it wasn't the Nation of Islam that shot up the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh! White people's hatred for Minister Farrakhan is irrational and, might I say, racist. He is the only person, the only human being that Congress has censured. No David Duke, no Charlottesville murderers, none of the hatemongers that have caused the racist tension in our nation. Just Minister Farrakhan. But then our society is consistent with its double standards and its demands that Black people bend over backward to prove that we, too, sing America.

With the fraught history between Black and White women, with their complicity in our rapes, and in the lynching of Black men, White women have no right to demand anything of Black women, let alone that leaders like Tamika Mallory “denounce” Minister Farrakhan. For the record,

the Minister, a man who has the unique power to galvanize Black people, especially Black men, really doesn't care what people outside of the Nation of Islam, think of him. He understands this nation so well that he would accept any “denouncement” and keep it moving. But anyone demanding a denouncement of Farrakhan has no knowledge of American history, of African American history, of context, or of the unequal treatment that African American people experience that is a constant in our nation. And White women have consistently had little empathy for the way history has treated Black women.

Shook and Milano remind me of antebellum White women, hoop skirts and all, stomping their feet when they don't get their way. Milano says she won't speak if Tamika Mallory doesn't denounce Farrakhan. So, stay home, Alyssa. We won't miss you. Other White women say they won't march. Hundreds of thousands of others will. And Teresa Shook, the so-called founder, says she is demanding resignations. What is she going to do if she doesn't get them?

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