

# Point of View

## PEOPLE, PLACES and POLITICS

By Joe Neal



Almost every year now, I am addressing in this column the issue of Capital Punishment. Those who have followed my work in the Nevada Legislature know of my vociferous opposition to this kind of punishment.

I am pleased to learn of others with the necessary expertise to keep this matter of society's random killing on the national agenda. Yes, the issue of capital punishment is headed back to the U.S. Supreme Court. It is being challenged on the basis of its random selection of who shall live and who shall die.

There are approximately 33,000 convicted murderers in the country. Out of this number we have approximately twelve hundred murderers under the death sentence within the United States jurisdiction. The question is, why are the twelve hundred sentenced to die? It has a lot to do with how society perceives itself in relationship to capital crimes and how much society can become aroused by the press to seek convictions of death. The economic status of the murderer plays an important part as to whether or not he gets the death sentence. Race has always been a dominant factor in whether or not blacks get the death sentence, usually in all cases where the capital offense is committed against a white person. There are some jurisdictions which will not render a sentence of death.

All of the above allows for capital punishment to be administered at best in a random selection of its victims.

The right of life under our U.S. Constitution is one of our most precious rights, and it is impermissible under the Constitution to allow society to take a life in ways other than that which is equally just for all. You cannot have one murderer sentenced to die because he is poor or black and have another escape the punishment because he is wealthy and white. For society to act in this fashion is for it to become as random in its selection of the death sentence as a gunman who walks into a crowded theater and starts shooting.

Capital punishment by society cannot and should not be as random as the crime. Society cannot just look upon capital punishment for the purpose it might serve, but rather for how it is being administered. It is the administration of capital punishment which concerns us most and not the unfounded arguments of deterrence, which we often hear as its justification.

Society should not allow any punishment to continue to exist which tends to select its victims because they are poor, black or lacking in wealth, political power and prestige.

It is my judgement that the sentence of death cannot be administered in a fair and impartial way under the present system to meet the mandate of the Sixth Amendment of the Constitution, which is that it not be cruel and unusual, and/or the mandate of the Fourteenth Amendment, which is that it be administered equally.

We cannot continue to allow each state individual jurisdiction to administer the death sentence as a part of its criminal laws. The mismanagement of this sentence is tantamount to saying that the U.S. Constitution does not exist.

## To Be Equal

# HOW MANY ARE POOR?

By John E. Jacob

There's nothing like good news, even if it's not true. The good news now coming out of Washington is that poverty is not as serious a problem as most people seem to think it is.

The bearer of good news is David Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget. Thirty-five million poor people? Not according to Stockman. He says the real figure is only 20 million, as if such a huge number of deprived people can be described with the word "only."

It seems OMB has made 15 million people — the difference between Census Bureau estimates of the poor and OMB's rosier estimates — disappear from the ranks of the poor.

OMB does it by statistical juggling. It says that if you add in-kind government benefits to the incomes of the poor, many are no longer poor. That sounds fairly reasonable until you examine it. Here's how



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OMB's fiddling with the numbers goes.

First, there is federally subsidized housing. If you take the market rental value of a subsidized housing unit, subtract the actual rent a poor

person pays and attribute the difference to his or her income, many of the poor would now have incomes above the poverty line.

Here's another example — Medicaid. If you add the value of federally-paid medical care, the same thing happens. The imputed income plus actual dollar in-

with really dealing with the problems of growing poverty.

Second, it reveals a mind-set that is quick to point out the subsidies given the poor while never mentioning those given the better-off. After all, if we should impute public housing subsidies to poor people receiving them why

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come of the poor person lifts him or her out of poverty.

But wait a minute. Let's assume a poor person has no earnings for the year. Let's also assume that person has major surgery and a long nursing home stay, all paid for by the government, and costing \$50,000.

Mr. Stockman and his statistics crunchers at OMB would say that person has an income of \$50,000 for the year and is no longer poor — in fact, that person should now be counted among the more affluent of our citizens.

That may make sense in Washington, but common sense tells us that person is still poor. He still doesn't have a dime to call his own, still has no cash income, and still is poor by any reasonable way of looking at his situation.

So OMB's little exercise has no validity in the real world, where 35 million are still deprived despite the efforts of officials to define them out of poverty. So there goes the good news — gone with the first fresh breeze of realism.

But the Stockman report is troubling for several reasons. First, it indicates our national policy makers are more interested in playing a numbers game than they are

not also impute federal mortgage interest subsidies to homeowners. Such subsidies are many times the housing subsidies to the poor.

Finally we ought to face up to the fact that the so-called "poverty line" does not define poverty — it defines the poorest of the poor; it is a line that separates abject poverty from simple poverty.

That poverty line is based on a two-decade-old calculation of the minimum food budget.

Defining poverty is better achieved by using the Labor Department's budget for a "lower living standard." That's a no-frills estimate of what it takes to keep a family going at absolutely minimal living standards.

And that budget turns out to be about 40 percent higher than the so-called poverty line. That standard also implies there are many more poor people than the 35 million officially defined as poor. So poverty is not only a national problem, it is a national disaster affecting far more people than we realize — perhaps a fourth of the population.

And it is a problem that can't be defined out of existence, for the OMB is dealing with statistics, not with people who are poor and who are hurting.

## Editorial

Greyhound Lines' employees have voted to continue their month old strike and to reject a company offer for wage settlement by a vote of 9,181 to 325.

The company had proposed a 7.8 percent wage cut and several other concessions from its employees, claiming that the company had been paying the highest wages and providing the most benefits of any inter-state carrier.

The company has been around for a long time and has developed a good name for its service to customers.

However, it seems slightly ironic that any company would propose a reduction in wages and benefits at a time when the economy is in its present condition. Even with a softening of the inflation rate, the cost of living is still higher than it was just four years ago. Possibly it is expected that employees will give up many of the things they have been able to purchase on time in order to make ends meet.

A question that comes to mind when Greyhound or any company asks for its employees to take a cut in pay may be: Will the Greyhound Bus Company or any such company be willing to reduce its charges by the percentage points it is asking its employees to be willing to forego? If not, why not? Are the employees always asked to accept reductions in pay while the companies for which they have been working use these reductions either for expansions or for fattening the companies' purses?

Whatever the hidden reasons for the proposal advanced by Greyhound, it is hoped that reduction in wages will not become a common proposal of companies who offer contracts to their employees.

The U.S. Constitution does exist and it is for everyone, including the murderer.

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