

Point of View

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BY Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.
The Politics of the Death Penalty

In the wake of the very solemn and celebratory 1990 Easter services of worship, programs, parades and fashion shows, particularly here in the United States, one would think that the cry "Crucify Them!...Crucify Them!" would not be heard with its current frequency and national volume. The raging debate concerning the imposition of the death penalty as punishment for alleged criminal activity has taken on an unprecedented political tone.

The state does not have the power to create life and the state should not have the power to destroy life. The United States Supreme Court tentatively delayed the scheduled execution of Robert A. Harris in the state of California while legal arguments are made about Harris' mental competency.

Former San Francisco Mayor Diane Feinstein, is now leading in the polls in California as a Democratic candidate for Governor. Yet, Feinstein, who is known to be a liberal politician on most issues, was not the front-runner in the polls until she recently declared "I am the only Democrat who's for the death penalty." The television ads on Feinstein's new pro death penalty position have seemingly captured the blood thirsts of the electorate in the state of California.

Disturbingly the cry for capital punishment is being used more as a political strategy to lure votes than as a moral stance on a critical social issue. Of course, American politicians have been known to flip flop on the issues to attract voters. The cry for capital punishment has not only increased the rate of executions in the United States during the last several years, but also the normative value of a human life has now plunged back to the days when "hangings" were part and parcel of this

nation's sense of exacting justice.

Today, there are approximately 2,250 persons on Death Row in the United States. Across the nation, political campaign consultants are urging both Democrats and Republicans to take advantage of the politics of the death penalty. To our dismay, even some prominent African American politicians have now found it necessary to join the growing chorus of political voices demanding the death penalty. Governor L. Douglas Wilder of Virginia abandoned his long opposition to capital punishment when he announced his intentions to run for Governor. And now even Andrew Young, an outspoken civil rights leader, Christian minister and former mayor of Atlanta, has changed his previous opposition to capital punishment to campaign in favor of the death penalty as he runs to be Governor of Georgia.

Forty percent of this nation's Death Row prisoners are African American which is nearly three times the African American percentage of the population of the United States. In a state like Florida which has executed twenty one persons since 1976, the second highest number of executions following 33 persons executed in Texas, there is also a disproportionately high percentage of Hispanics on Death Row. Florida Governor Robert Martinez is reported to be increasing his standing in political polls after running television ads jubilantly affirming that he has signed 90 death warrants.

The very notion of capital punishment is an affront to human morality and dignity. Unfortunately, the advance of civilization on issues like the death penalty has not progressed very far. The Greek philosopher, Plato,

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POLITICAL POINTS

By

Assemblyman
Wendell P. Williams

We're All In This Together

There is a seductive illusion haunting African-Americans. The illusion that equality between the races has been achieved, and that the activism characteristic of the previous generation's freedom struggles is no longer relevant to contemporary realities. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Behind the rhetoric of equality exists a crisis, which presents fundamental challenges to African-Americans throughout the decade of the 1990s. There is an "internal crisis", that is, a crisis within the African-American family, neighborhood, community, cultural and social institutions. With the end of Jim Crow segregation, the African-American middle class was able to escape the confines of the ghetto. And as African-American middle class professionals retreated to the suburbs, they often withdrew their skills, financial resources and professional contacts from the bulk of the African-American community. There were of course many exceptions, men and women who understood the cultural obligation they owed to their community.

The internal crisis is directly related to an external institutional crisis, a one-sided race/class warfare which is being waged against the African-American community. The external crisis is represented as the conjuncture of a variety of factors, including the deterioration of skilled and higher paying jobs, and the decline in the economic infrastructure; the decline in support for public housing, health care, education and related social services for low-to-moderate income people.

The major characteristic of the internal crisis is the



Assemblyman Williams

steady acceleration of violence, in a variety of manifestations. The most disruptive and devastating type of violence is violent crime, which includes homicide, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault. In 1981 the total number of Americans arrested was nearly 9.5 million. African-Americans made up only 12.5 percent of the U.S. population, but represented 2.3 million arrests, or about one fourth of all arrests, which includes 48 percent of all arrests for murder, 57 percent of all robbery arrests, 27 percent of all auto theft crimes and 54 percent of all arrests for forcible rapes.

The epidemic of violence in the African-American community raises several related questions. What is the social impact within our neighborhoods? What is the effect of violence upon our children? And most importantly, how do we develop a strategy to reverse the rise of Black-on-Black crime and violence?

We need to recognize that, fundamentally, there would be no internal crisis among African-Americans if the political economy and social institutions were designed to create conditions for genuine democracy and human equality. The external crisis of the capitalist political economy is responsible for the internal crisis.

The struggle against violence requires a break from the strategic analysis of the desegregation period of the 1960s. Our challenge is not to become part of the system, but to transform it, not only for ourselves but for everyone. If we focus solely on the need to construct more prisons, the crisis will continue to exist in our cities - people who have a sense of mastery and control in their

To Be Equal

Youth Poverty On Rise

By John E. Jacob

It's time Americans stopped congratulating themselves about their affluence and about the great opportunities available here as opposed to other nations, because for all our affluence and for all our accomplishments compared with others, there is one aspect of American life that is nothing less than shameful.

Child poverty in America is outrageously high -- and it is on the rise.

Almost one out of four American children under the age of six are growing up poor.

Among African-Americans, half of our children are poor.

That should be an incredible scandal -- one that ought to be shaking THE Congress and the public.

Instead, it's just another statistic to be ignored.

The trouble is, childhood poverty cannot be ignored because it's going to come back to haunt this country and all of its citizens.

When you consider that poor children statistically tend to perform less well at school; to suffer health problems that

often lead to costly care; are less likely to become employed in later life and are more likely to become dependent as adults -- then you see this as a national crisis and a threat to America's future, not something to be dismissed.

But so far I haven't seen anyone in Washington crusading for policies to end child poverty.



John E. Jacob

There are plenty of talented, intelligent people fighting to cut capital gains taxes or crusading for other measures.

But no key figure in the Administration or the Congress is making an issue of the fact that almost one of every four American children is poor.

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lives do not violate their neighbors or steal their property.

Finally, an effective strategy for empowerment in the 1990s must begin with the recognition that the American electoral political system was never designed to uproot the fundamental causes of African-American oppression. Most of the greatest advances of African-American political activism did not occur at the ballot box, but in the streets, in the factories, and through collective group awareness. A strategy for African-American empowerment means that African-American elected officials must be held more closely accountable to the interest of our people. Power implies the ability to reward and to punish friends and enemies alike. Can we

continue to afford to conduct voter registration and education campaigns, and then do nothing to check the voting behavior of our elected officials? Accountability must be measured objectively according to a list of policy priorities, and not determined by political rhetoric at election time. No single African-American man or woman in America will ever transcend the impact of racism and class exploitation unless all of us, and especially the most oppressed among us, also gain a fundamental level of cultural awareness, collective respect, material security and educational advancement.

We're All In This Together - It's Up To Us - We Can Make It Happen!