

# Point of View

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United Church of Christ • Commission for Racial Justice

## CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

# U. S. IMPRISONMENT & AMERICAN APARTHEID

by Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

Once again new research data has revealed the devastating reality regarding the plight of African-American males in the United States. The Sentencing Project, a national criminal justice research group, has released new data that indicates that the overall "rate of imprisonment" in the United States is the highest in the world.

The incarceration rate in the United States is even higher than the incarceration rate in racist South Africa. The United States presently imprisons 426 persons per 100,000 population. In South Africa the rate of imprisonment is 330 per 100,000.

Alarming, African-American males are imprisoned in the United States at more than 4 times the rate African males are imprisoned in South Africa. In the United States 3,109 African-American males are imprisoned per 100,000 African-Americans as compared to South Africa's rate of 729 African males per 100,000 Africans.

This is indeed a statistical verification of the existence and persistence of an American version of apartheid which under the color of the law has institutionalized racial discrimination against African-American males resulting in massive disproportionate imprisonment.

Race continues to be a significant factor in the sentencing and imprisonment of persons in the United States criminal justice system. There are numerous examples that occur every day in every section of the nation.

For example, in the metropolitan area of Washington, D.C. an African-American male teenage was sentenced to 39 years in prison for allegedly "throwing rocks onto a highway" which caused a severe traffic accident. A white family was injured in the accident. We do not condone violence or criminal behavior in any circumstance. The youth responsible for such an act should be punished. Yet, the issue here is the fact that if this young man had been white and the injured motorists had been Non-productively, the United States spends more than 16 billion dollars per year to main-

tain the imprisonment of more than one million prisoners in federal, state and local jails. Nearly half of the million U.S.

prisoners are African-American. This nation has its priorities in the wrong place. When will there be a national priority established

to end racism in the United States?

American apartheid consigns African-Americans and others to

lives of alienation, poverty, exploitation, pre-mature death and imprisonment. How many more research studies do we need to

verify what we refuse as a nation to admit, i.e. that racism is the malignant and fatal cancer destroying the "soul" of America.

## TO BE EQUAL

# START VOTER DRIVES NOW

by John E. Jacob

Now's the time to start mobilizing a nationwide campaign in the African-American and minority communities to get people registered to vote and to become politically active.

Last November's election saw another dip in overall national voter turnout, something all observers agree reflects a troubling weakness in American democracy.

Minorities and poor people have the lowest voter participation rates, demonstrating the effects of voting regulations that discourage citizen participation and the results of poverty-driven alienation.

It's a fact that alienated people don't vote, whatever their race, and there are an awful lot of alienated citizens today.

A large part of the low voter turnout in America can be traced to general feelings that politicians don't care about ordinary folk; that big contributors call the shots, and that election campaigns are a dirty business without relevance to people's real concerns.

Some politicians tapped into that alienation by playing on racial fears. Senator Helms' reelection campaign in North Carolina, for example, was one of several campaigns in which candidates tried to build voter support with open appeals to racial divisions.

We're likely to see more of that in the coming months. When William Bennet was named Republican national chairman—a post he then quit—he launched an attack on "quotas," the code word for affirmative action calculated to spur white racial resentments.

Politicians in both parties should make such racial appeals out of bounds and frame political

strategies to bring the nation together, instead of dividing it along racial lines.

Not only is a race-driven political strategy morally wrong, it is likely to be self-defeating in the long run because it will rally decent people in opposition to it.

But we can't afford to wait for such a reaction. That opposition has to start building its strength right now, to send a message that white and black voters will not tolerate a politics based on divisive racial appeals.

The persistent harping on the phony quota issue; the stirrings on the far right, typified by Klan leader David Duke's support in the Louisiana primary, and the

failure of either party to articulate a coherent vision for an integrated, pluralistic nation, all argue for action now, rather than later.

What kind of action? Overcoming the apathy and alienation that keeps people with a huge stake in electoral outcomes from voting.

Our democracy won't work unless the young, the poor, and the victims of class and racial discrimination are registered to vote and become involved in political issues.

Changes in voting regulations will help. We need to adopt a nationwide universal voter registration system and tear

down local barriers that discourage citizens from voting.

But that's only part of the solution to widespread non-voting.

The other part is getting people involved in the political process and helping them to understand that their vote counts and that election results have a direct impact on them.

Everybody looks to 1992 as the time to do that. It's a presidential election year and that always stirs more interest in politics.

But 1992 is too late, and the usual September to November voter registration drives don't reach enough people or allow



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enough momentum to build.

So political parties, unions, civic groups and other organizations ought to start now to mount a nationwide voter education drive to help bring today's alienated citizens back into the democratic process.

# WHY THE "EDUCATION PRESIDENT" ISN'T

by Norman Hill

One has to admire the skill with which our conservative opponents practice judo on us. Just before the holiday season, they sprang a surprise judo gift on us. The "gift" was the controversy over minority scholarships stirred up when a medium-level bureaucrat in the Bush Administration, in fact a black conservative, decided that such scholarships broke a 1987 law against racial discrimination in higher education. Civil rights and education organizations protested this decision, an embarrassed Bush became involved, and the decision was reversed, at least partially.

Judo was practiced even in the wrapping of this gift; the law in question, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, had been passed by a liberal Congress to overturn a conservative Supreme Court ruling in 1984 that allowed a school to discriminate against blacks and minorities and still receive federal funds. Our clear victory for racial

equality was then turned around and used by conservatives to attack minority scholarships. These experts in political judo strive to make it near impossible to word or create a law or a policy that opposes racism or its effects, taking advantage of the fact that such laws or policies tend to target, and benefit, certain minorities, and thus "discriminate" on the basis of race.

Bush's claim that he is "long committed to affirmative action" makes him hard to attack. This "commitment" is part of an overall conservative strategy to deflate black opposition, co-opt white moderates, and appease white conservatives. Perhaps "judo" is too kind a word. In December, Republicans convened to agree on a "color-blind" policy opposing "quotas"; in their own words, "a dynamite issue, both virtuous and politically rewarding." By claiming to be "color-blind," conservatives can also pretend to see no evil in the effects of historical racism, and can combine eloquent rhetoric

with a loaded emotional appeal to racism.

The issue of minority scholarships must be considered within a larger economic context that allows us to understand, and challenge more effectively, Bush's "color-blind" racism. The early 1990s confront us with three severe and interrelated economic problems that join forces to benefit the privileged and conservative power base of

the Bush Administration and attack racial equality: first, many of America's workers, white as well as black, increasingly lack the skills and education to compete in the world marketplace; second, our industrial infrastructure continues to erode and abandon workers to a low-wage, low-skill economy; and third, we face a recession over the near future caused by conservative  
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