

Point of View

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THE ELDERS EXPERIMENT

By Peter Kirsanow

The nomination of Dr. Joyce Elders as Surgeon General is an abomination. Her judgement is demonstrably appalling. Her performance as a public official has ranged from inept to dangerous. While Senator Carol Mosely-Braun is among the nominee's more ardent supporters, the Clinton Administration should not presume that the Senator speaks for each of us in the black community. Indeed, were she not black, her nomination would likely be met with accusations of racism.

Hyperbole? Consider the following:

In 1932, the famous Tuskegee experiment began under

the aegis of the U.S. Public Health Service. The subjects of the study were scores of black men from rural Alabama who were infected with syphilis. The subjects were purposely left untreated so that physicians could study the progression of the disease. They were not even told that they suffered from syphilis or that they could transmit it to others. The study finally ended in 1972.

The experiment was justifiably excoriated as one of the most ghoulish and depraved episodes in American medical history. Dr. Donald Printz of the Venereal Disease Branch of the Center for Disease Control described it as "almost like genocide...a lit-

eral death sentence was passed on some of these people." Had any of the participating physicians been nominated to a prominent federal post, a political firestorm would have ensued.

Compare the Tuskegee experiment with the Elders experiment. As Health Director for the State of Arkansas, Dr. Elders initiated and supervised the mass distribution of condoms to school children.

According to Dr. Elders, the distribution of condoms would reduce the risk of AIDS and the incidence of teenage pregnancies. Her particular focus was on the high pregnancy rate among black teens. (There is no empirical evidence that school con-

dom distribution programs reduce pregnancy rates. In fact, there is evidence that pregnancy rates increase after such programs are instituted).

During the course of her program, a large batch of defective condoms was distributed to school children. Dr. Elders was fully aware of that fact. But rather immediately alert the public to the danger and call the rapid recall and destruction of the defective condoms, she chose to remain absolutely silent. She stood by as the defective condoms she had distributed were used by school children with the blessing of the Department of Health.

The children of Arkansas,

with the assurance of the Health Director that they were engaging in "safe sex," were completely oblivious to the peril.

HIV infections among Arkansas teens rose 150% between 1989 and 1992. The number of Arkansas youths infected with the HIV virus while using Dr. Elders' defective condoms will never be known. Perhaps there were none. But even a small number of infections would not make Dr. Elders' conduct any less reprehensible than that of the physicians in the Tuskegee experiment. In both cases lives were imperiled by medical professionals who deliberately withheld potentially life-saving information.

Nor will the number of teen pregnancies resulting from the Elders experiment ever be known. But Dr. Elders' silence was curiously inconsistent with her declared objective of making every child "a planned and wanted child."

What is known is that despite Dr. Elders' condom campaign, Arkansas' teen pregnancy rate did not decline. Rather, the rate actually increased by approximately 15%. Moreover, during Dr. Elders' tenure the Arkansas teen pregnancy rate scored second highest in the nation.

Dr. Elders' supporters dismiss the debacle as inconsequential and contend it should not bar confirmation. At the very least, they are being disingenuous.

Were the President to nominate for Secretary of Transportation an airline executive who had failed to alert passengers that his company's planes had defective engines, such failure would not be considered incon-

sequential. Were the President to nominate a head of the Food and Drug Administration a drug company officer who covered up the fact that his firm's polio vaccine is a mere placebo, confirmation would be barred.

Dr. Elders defends her behavior on the basis that public disclosure that the condoms were defective might have undermined public confidence in condoms. That logic would excuse auto manufacturers from recalling cars with defective brakes because to do so might undermine public confidence in cars.

Dr. Elders' experiment bore potentially serious consequences. Nonetheless, her defenders argue that a past mistake should not disqualify her from consideration.

Even if it may somehow be argued that her past mistake, regardless of magnitude, should not bar confirmation, Dr. Elders' should be disqualified for her more recent comments. She has testified that she is still unsure whether her failure to disclose was, in fact, a mistake. Anyone who remains unsure whether it was a mistake not to warn children that their government-supplied condoms are defective is invincibly obtuse and capable of further calamities. Such persons should not be permitted to jeopardize the children of the country as she did those in Arkansas.

Peter Kirsanow, an attorney, is a leading Advisory Committee member of The National Center for Public Policy Researcher's Project 21, an initiative to promote new leaders and new solutions to the problems facing American communities.

POLITICAL POINTS

By Assemblyman Wendell P. Williams

PASS THE TORCH, OR GET SMOKED

August 28, 1963 was a watershed day in American history and a landmark in world history. On that day more than 250,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C. to protest racism, violence and poverty and to demand jobs and freedom. In 1963 the issues were clear and visible. Now thirty years later, the issues are not as visible or as clear cut to most Americans. As a result many have been lulled to sleep assuming that all is well.

A couple of weeks ago the 30th anniversary of the historic March on Washington took place. Aside from the historical aspects of the event, the most important factor was the theme of the 30th Anniversary march, "Passing The Torch, A New Coalition of Conscience." The convenors of the march, Coretta King, Rev. Joseph Lowery, and the Rev. Walter Fauntroy, as well as a host of active leaders from the 1960's and 1970's, each hammered home the importance of passing the torch of leadership to the new and present generation.

At last old leaders are finally beginning to understand

that 1993 is a helluva big difference between the times and places of 1963. It's time to move on and bask in the well-deserved glory. However, if you think that people, good people, by the way of the 60's and 70's can carry us and our agenda's into the year 2000, then you're in for a rude awakening.

Just one way to show you the difference in time, on last Sunday when the 1993 National Football League opened it's season, the L.A. Raiders faced off against the Minnesota Vikings on opening day. In 1963 the Raiders had a total of five African-American players on the entire team and the Minnesota Vikings had a total of six. However, in 1993 both head coaches for these same two teams were African-American and most of the key players. When Dr. King gave his "I Had A Dream" speech in Washington in 1963 he was an energetic 34 year old, today he would have been 64 years old.

As great as our leaders are, regardless of which community it is, there comes a time to realize that the human and civil rights revolution was a revolution that was born in the spirit of youth. Each generation must seek to

make the world over for freedom can never be taken for granted.

Many young people today understand that they have a responsibility to carry on the torch that was lit hundreds of years ago. We must, however, prepare them when possible and assure that they have a torch to receive. It's good that the country is adopting the theme of "Passing the Torch" because nothing hurts our cause more than old tired champions who refuse to realize or accept the fact that just like the once great prize fighters that stays in the ring too long thinking that what they once had in their prime, can carry them once they have surpassed that point. As a result you end up with the Sugar Rays, the Larry Holmes', George Forman's, and the list goes on and on.

As great as it was to see and hear from people like Rosa Parks, Joseph Lowery and others in Washington several weeks ago, we would be stupid to think that they can lead today's generation. We love Dr. King and Malcolm and all the others but they ain't coming back. And those from that generation that are still around should use any energy they have left to pass the



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torch to the youth.

And just as eager as the young people are to receive it, we have outdated leaders who are just as eager to hold on to it, even though they know they are tired and out of gas. As more and more leaders around the country are starting to accept the reality of the need to move over and accept another role, those who refuse to realize it will have to be forced to. They must be made to understand that the struggle of our people did not start and it definitely won't end with them.

I've always believed that we should encourage the energy of our youth while at the same time, harness the wisdom of our elderly and combine the two for the purpose of forging ahead for the good of all. African-Americans cannot afford selfish power addicts who have fell asleep at the switch. It's time to either move on with dignity or be forced out in disgrace. In other words, pass the torch or get burned by it — and you won't like where the smoke is coming from.

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