

Point of View

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CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

CRIME IN AMERICAN

By Bernice Powell Jackson

We Americans like everything instantly. Fast food hamburgers, instant oatmeal, and ten minute oil changes are just a few indications of our impatience. We also like quick fixes to our problems.

It's that quick fix mentality that popped up in President Clinton's State of the Union Message last month and in two versions of the Omnibus Crime Bill passed by the Senate and the House last fall. "Three strikes and you're out," they cry as the solution to America's crime problem.

Americans, all Americans, are concerned and deeply troubled about crime—and rightly so. There are twice as many murders now as there were 30 years ago. Violent crime is up 23 percent over the past ten years.

Much of this violent crime occurs in the nation's inner cities, where homicide is now the leading cause of death for young African American men.

But the reality is that while quick fixes work for oatmeal, they do not work for people. As Congress works toward one version or the crime bill, they will be re-examining such provisions as mandatory sentences for three or more serious crimes. Even Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware calls the three strikes and you're out provision "wacko", attributing it to who's-the-toughest-on-crime attitude of the Congress. One of the major provisions in the Senate version of the crime bill is the building of an additional ten federal prisons. Our own recent history and statistics show us that building more prisons is not the solution

to crime. Over the past 20 years we spent \$37 billion dollars in prison construction alone, with another \$5 billion already planned.

But, instead of alleviating the crime problem, the United States has become the world's number one jailer. Some 1.4 million Americans are now in prison. Americans are more likely to be victims of violent crimes now rather than less likely. Many states with logic tells us that violent crime should have dropped over the past 20 years. Prisons alone do not work.

The Omnibus Crime Bill is one of the largest expansions of the use of capital punishment in American legislative history. No longer would capital punishment be reserved for murder cases. History also tells us that the poor and people of color always suffer disproportionately when the

death penalty is imposed. Indeed, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas once said, "One searches our chronicles in vain for the execution of any member of the affluent strata of our society."

The Congressional Black Caucus has said that the crime bill has stressed the building of prisons and the mandatory minimum sentencing too much over the more long-term solutions to crime. What are the real problems to crime in America? The Congressional Black Caucus bill names some. They have offered their own alternatives, including gun control, training for police, judges and court officials and more police on the streets.

We must also commit to educating all of our children. Minnesota, for instance, found that 35 percent of it's inmates

are functionally illiterate. In large cities it is not unusual for half of the high school students to drop out before graduation, ensuring that they will never be able to get good-paying jobs.

We must commit ourselves to providing nurturing, supportive communities for our children. Over and over again, as we talk with young gang members across this nation, we find they are products of dysfunctional families, with no outside support systems. We've got to teach parents how to be parents. We've got to provide positive alternatives for gangs — recreation programs, after

school tutoring programs, counseling programs.

We must commit ourselves to creating jobs. Tens of thousands of inner city residents have given up looking for jobs and are no longer counted in the unemployment numbers. Millions of jobs have been lost the past two decades, impacting all Americans, but especially the poor.

These are not quick fixes or easy answers. But had we chosen to spend that \$37 billion on people instead of prisons 20 years ago, we might not be mourning the loss of an entire generation to prisons and to cemeteries right now.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I live in West Las Vegas; otherwise known as the 'Westside'. Many services have been denied to the people in my neighborhood, including the delivery of the Review Journal. Most people, including politicians, completely ignored the 'Westside' while it slowly rotted. Councilman Frank Hawkins, with strong determination, has fought hard to bring positive development, improvements, and an offer of hope to a forgotten community. We can now see a spark of light at the end of the tunnel.

It has pained me deeply to see the manner in which the Review Journal has chosen to present the stories on Councilman Hawkins. The Las Vegas Sun has reported the stories, but, without the sensationalism. What I have seen, in the Review Journal, is a blatant abuse of the freedom of press.

The flavor of these articles

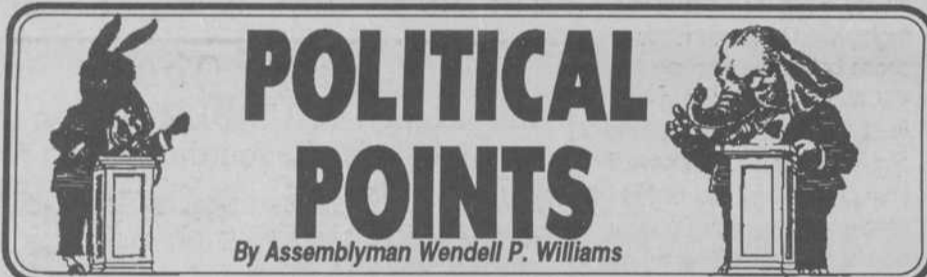
and editorials have been the same as the weekly scandal sheets.

The book COINTELPRO explains the personal attack and political assassination of African American leaders who are perceived as being too powerful or help their people too much. It has been documented that the media played a significant role in this.

Regardless of his personal problems, Councilman Hawkins focused on his constituents and actually tried to keep his campaign promises. Most politicians hide in their offices once elected and develop amnesia.

I support and respect Councilman Hawkins. I am confident that he is strong enough to weather the storm. I hope that the Review Journal reporters write future stories with more decorum and professionalism.

Sincerely,
Deborah L. Jackson



OFF IN THE CAN

5:45 a.m., late Tuesday morning I stepped outside the front door after listening to the boobtube blast the dreadful accounts of the life-threatening weather in many parts of the country. Even though I shared the pain of the families suffering in the blistering winters of the east, it felt great to step outside my house here in Las Vegas, and bask in weather straight from heaven.

As I reached the end of the driveway, mom's birdfeeders were engulfed with birds munchin' out on their daily breakfast. How great! As I stooped to grab the R.J. I caught a glimpse of my garbage cans chillin' empty on the curb. After stepping over quickly to grab them, I noticed that something was still in the first one I approached. As I slowly peeked over in the can, down at the bottom of the can stood a crowd of people looking up with faces

with lines as fine as old parchment. One gentleman walked forward with eyes as restless as the wind. As I stuck my face completely over the opening of the garbage can, the man said, "Just call me Woodson, it's been 43 years since I left this place and I would never believe what I hear is going on here in this place." He then went on to say, "I worked hard with hopes that we as a people would research and continue to understand our history and contributions. If people of today really appreciated learning more about their history, then they would not sit by and pretend not to understand what is happening to the locked-out families of Silver State disposal." At that moment he turned to another little man standing behind him. Woodson then asked the man to join in with him. At that moment the man came forward and said, "My name is A. Philip Randolph and I would like to remind the people today as I did many years ago of

the links between the labor movement for social and economic emancipation. At the banquet table of nature there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take, and you keep what you can hold. If you can't take anything, you won't get anything, and if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything. And you can't take anything without organization. In concert with their fellow workers, African-American people can take decisive control of their own destinies," with a union, they can approach their employers as proud and upright individuals, not as trembling and bowing slaves. Indeed, a solid union contract is, in a very real sense, another emancipation proclamation. "The Randolph asked the question, "why would the mayor put the sanitation workers off on councilman Brass and Hawkins when they requested a meeting with her? And why didn't she suggest that they meet with all the councilmembers opposed to



Assemblyman
Wendell P. Williams

just the African-American councilmen? Is this a racial issue? Then I thought, he's got a point because there are all kinds of people locked-out, not just African-Americans.

At this point as I leaned closer into the can, Dr. Woodson explained to the group in the can with him, each who had a tear in their eye, that "the lives that were lost fighting for human rights were still on the line today as the Silver State workers fight for basic dignity and manhood." And that history is still on their side.

As I picked up the cans and walked them back to the house, I wondered if Dr. Carter G. Woodson really knew how we are slacking off in our need to propel the study of our past, have we forgotten that when anything goes (See Political Points, Pg 4)

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