

# Point of View

## Carl Rowan's Commentary

I wish with my whole being that the U.S. was a Shangri-la where no one needed welfare help from neighbors, friends or our government.

The irrefutable fact is that from America's beginning, through slavery times, right up to this weirdly embattled Congress, America has been governed by people who believed that we needed a wealthy class whose money would drive commerce, and a semi-slave class to do the dirty work.

Historically, the top one-fifth of America's families have popped champagne during the holiday season while the bottom one-fifth waited for charity baskets and welfare checks.

President Clinton fired up the chronic anti-poor outrage by making a campaign promise to "abolish welfare as we have known it." He lit the passions of the greedy, the ignoramuses, who blindly assail "welfare queens" and "deadbeat dads" and pretend that the poor are the villains who bring great economic woes to more privileged Americans.

Mr. Clinton learned, slowly, that it is easy to tell a welfare mother to get a job; it is harder to show her an available job for which she is trained. It is simplistic to say to a woman, "You've got three children; now get off your derriere and work to feed them." But it becomes very complicated when the mother asks who will care for her three young children while she works at a wage that won't come close to lifting her family out of poverty.

The Republicans want to cut welfare costs by \$58 billion over seven years while making inadequate grants to the states that will decide whether and how to fund welfare schemes. History tells us to beware not just of 31 Republican



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governors, but also of the Democratic politicians whose top priority, truth be told, is not to use scarce money on poor, hungry, ill-sheltered, medically neglected Americans who carry no political clout at the polls.

What kind of conscience allows politicians of any stripe to be so mean to the most-abused children in the land? The conscience of people who rationalize with phony "studies" that purportedly prove that welfare programs are intrinsically destructive to poor children. You've heard it all: welfare stunts IQs, destroys character, encourages out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancies...

President Clinton has rejected these specious defenses of governmental child abuse. He refuses to believe that giving an impoverished child a school lunch, rudimentary shelter, some food stamps and a doctor's occasional care is "crippling" that child.

This war of philosophies about "welfare" is a large part of what the budget crisis and the recent shut-downs of government are all about. This is a war for the heart, mind and soul of this nation.

However much I dislike welfare, I pray that President Clinton will hang tough until the Republicans stop trying to balance the budget on the backs and stomachs of children who do not deserve to become the miserable pawns of political ideologues.

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## THIS WAY FOR BLACK EMPOWERMENT

# MISSING DR. KING

By Dr. Lenora Fulani

The celebration of the New Year came and went in a hurry, but I had the chance to do some reflecting while snowbound in the midst of the "Blizzard of '96," which paralyzed much of the Eastern seaboard for several days. At some point, my thoughts turned to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we commemorate and whose loss we mourned on January 15. His powerful voice for justice and his extraordinary personal integrity seemed to me to be more vivid than ever. And, though I am a generally hopeful and optimistic person, I have to admit to feeling some sadness — even fear — about the condition we, as African Americans, find ourselves in. And I find myself wishing what I could speak with Dr. King about the terrible problems and challenges we face.

Recently, in New York at the Castillo Theatre, my very dear friend and long-time colleague,

Dr. Fred Newman, co-directed a play called *Sally and Tom (The American Way)* — which he also wrote — about the controversial 30-year relationship between our third president, Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemings.

In the final scene of the play, which takes place in history, after all the characters are long dead, Sally turns to their son, Madison Hemings (Madison Jefferson) and says, "Everyone's a politician nowadays, Madison. And everyone is usin' hate to grab a little somethin' for himself. It's the politics of hate, Madison. It's the hatred of darkness, like you sing about, becoming the darkness of hatred." Sally and her inconsolable son have found that hatred of darkness is the American way.

Indeed it is. And so, too, is the constant manipulation of that hatred, of the haters and of the hatred, for political gain. If there is anything we most remember about the year 1995, it is that the

tragic fire at Freddy's department store on 125th Street in Harlem claimed 8 lives in a blaze of provocation that had been smoldering for years.

And even before the dead bodies were extricated from the rubble, a parade of politicians of every race, color and creed appeared on the scene to extricate what political gain they could for themselves. And so it goes with every national so-called debate on welfare, Medicaid and Medicare, shutting down the federal government or sending troops to Bosnia. It's all about politics, not human beings. And until we create a way to reject that framework and go beyond it, we will be unable to see the mountaintop, no less get to it.

Nowadays many Black people, profoundly despairing over the racial polarization that has become the American way, ask me whether racism is on the rise. That certainly is the question as we approach the



DR. LENORA FULANI

new millennium. But in seeking an answer, we must understand that racism is not a virus which spreads through the population. Racism is a social process, a product, not a fixed thing. Whether racial polarization overtakes and destroys America will be a function of whether we can create a new social and political process, a new form of human relations, in this country.

The present day politicians will not create such a change. But perhaps you and I, and millions of other ordinary Americans, will.

## CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

# America's Growth Industry

By Bernice Powell Jackson

Soon we'll no longer be known for our automotive industry or our Silicon Valley computer technical industry. Prisons are fast becoming the United States' growth industry. We'll be known around the world as the nation which makes a living by incarcerating its citizens.

We now incarcerate somewhere around 1.5 million Americans, about half of whom are African American or Hispanic. The number grows by leaps and bounds every year, with prisoners often being double bunked in already overcrowded and outdated facilities. With the recent passages of the so-called three strikes and you're out bills and mandatory long sentences for crack cocaine, the prison population can only continue to grow.

In our capitalist tradition, private enterprise is looking at these numbers and the privatization of the corrections industry is now occurring in many states, particularly the South and West. While the number of private companies running prisons is still small, The Corrections Corporation of America now has about 42 percent of the private corrections market and is seeking to expand to other states, including Ohio. In 1994, CCA saw profits of \$7.1 million, nearly double its 1993 earnings.

With the clamor for tax cuts, many argue that private prisons



Bernice Powell Jackson

will save taxpayers dollars. But the numbers show that privately-run prisons are slightly more expensive than public ones.

Many criminal justice advocates worry about this new trend toward privatization, recalling earlier abuses, when inmates were forced to build railroads, dig mines and work in textile factories under horrible conditions which often resulted in death. They also question the accountability of private corporations and point out that it should be the government's responsibility to incarcerate.

On the other hand, private prisons tend to be new, modern facilities and in at least one survey prisoners rated them better in health care, discipline, cleanliness, educational programs and inmate food and mood. Some private facilities, however, have experienced prisoner revolts, based on complaints about spoiled food, abusive guards and beatings and shacklings.

For many communities across the country the issue around prisons, whether public or private, is jobs. As more and

more blue collar jobs are eliminated, communities are turning to prisons as a source of employment for their displaced factory workers and increased state tax revenues in the case of private prisons. For instance, Youngstown, OH is proposing to give 100 acres of industrial brownfields (land polluted from toxic wastes) to be used for the construction of a private prison. With a 10.7 percent unemployment rate, this former steel and manufacturing town sees prisons as a source of jobs and income.

The O.J. Simpson verdict pointed to the racial divide in this nation when it comes to criminal justice issues. As more and more people of color are incarcerated, these will take on increased significance. There are a multitude of difficult

questions which must be faced by us all. Are prisons becoming the steel mills and manufacturing plants of the 21st century — the employers of unskilled European Americans, for whom little training is being done? Are prisons becoming the warehouses for young African Americans and Hispanics Americans, whose labor is no longer needed by our nation? What happened to the concept of rehabilitation, upon which our prisons supposedly were based? Do we really believe we can have a stable society when one in three young African American men is involved in the criminal justice system?

As a nation must realize that no one is safe if prisons are our country's growth industry for the next century. And then we must do something about it.

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