

COMMENTARY

A VOICE FROM THE HILL

The GOP elephant blinks on preferences

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When affirmative action is muttered on Capitol Hill, the result is a bitter partisan battle.

On one side there are some Democrats who like to portray themselves as the guardians of equality and fairness. These are lofty ideals even if they don't accurately capture their true feelings.

Most Republicans say that they are opposed to affirmative action because it promotes quotas and preferential treatment.

With both sides locked into their positions, the House of

Representative began consideration of a bill that would permanently affect equality for those seeking an even playing field.

Congressman Charles Cannady, R-Fla., introduced a bill sarcastically named "The Civil Rights Act of 1997." The intention of the legislation was to permanently abolish affirmative action in all federal programs. Cannady's proposed legislation had been languishing in the House Judiciary Committee, because the House Republican leadership knew what the reaction would be from those

in support of affirmative action and in this case they were "on the money."

The Congressional Black Caucus joined hands with the Hispanic Caucus and a coalition of civil rights organization to alert their constituents to "prepare for battle over the Cannady Bill." However, Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights said that Republicans had the numbers to get the ill-conceived bill out of the Judiciary Committee.

"It appears that they have the votes," he said. "However,

we want to make the political cost high for support of the bill," he said. Henderson and the coalition opposed the bill. They have their hands on the political pulse of the nation and identified those moderate Republicans who represent districts that have fairly large groups of women, Hispanics, Asians and African Americans. The intent was to put political pressure on GOP members and make sure they had a difficult time explaining their vote when they returned to their home districts.

With the stage then set for a real political battle over

affirmative action, the House decided to set a vote on the controversial issue.

Members of the Congressional Black Caucus were in place and the heads of the nation's major civil rights organizations were joined in the hearing room by scores of supporters, indicating that the sometime slumbering civil rights establishment had come alive.

I don't know if it was the sight of this packed hearing room or pre-election year common sense, but when the "moment of truth" arrived the Republicans decided to table

the Cannady Bill. After all of the blustering and posturing, the Republicans accepted the fact that pursuing the abolition of affirmative action would be a political "poison pill."

By tabling the bill it simply means that the legislation can be brought back at any time for consideration. However, the chances are slim that the Republicans will want to push an issue like affirmative action anytime soon with major elections scheduled for 1998.

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The politics of pragmatism

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It's been fashionable in recent years in both national politics and the news media to frame many domestic policy debates in stark ideological extremes.

But there's a vastly different reality outside of Washington and some newspaper

Opinion/Editorial pages: the closer you get to the ground, the more pragmatic American politics get. National politicians would be well advised to keep a close eye on a healthy trend back home.

Consider some of this month's elections, for example.

In city after city, highly practical voters re-elected or rejected mayors based on their ability to fix local problems and improve the quality of life.

Successful mayors like Mike White in Cleveland, and Dennis Archer in Detroit won re-election in a walk because they're engineering the economic revival of their cities.

In New York City, despite our own disputes with some of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's policies, it's clear that many looked at the steep drop in crime and the surge in tourism that he's help produce, and concluded he deserved re-election.

Some have made much of the significant support Giuliani picked up from Democratic politicians and voters across the city, including African-American ones.

But, in fact, there's nothing "new" in blacks voting Republican. That's a common occurrence in local and state races where Republican candidates treat black voters with respect.

That is to say, where the candidates treat black voters as they do other voters and appeal to both their self-interest and their broader civic interest.

The emphasis Giuliani put on reducing crime and the resources he devoted to it aided the intense mobilization against crime by organizations and individuals in several of New York's most crime-

To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price
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what the polls of the California electorate done by the backers of Proposition 209 showed, too.

In those polls' aftermath, they successfully maneuvered to keep the words "affirmative action" off the ballot. Instead, they substituted language about "preferences," which spark a far

more negative reaction with voters everywhere.

The attempt to turn that trick did not work in Houston, where a well-organized campaign led by the city's outgoing mayor, Bob Lanier, succeeded in keeping the words "affirmative action" on the ballot so that voters would know just what was at stake.

Berkeley professor Chavez said the mobilization of support for affirmative action in Houston — which involved both the downtown business community and the black electorate — was another difference from the situation in California, where the pro-affirmative action effort was decidedly disorganized.

By contrast, Lanier, who is white and was a wealthy developer before he took office, campaigned for affirmative action by saying, "Let's not turn back the clock to a time when guys like me got all of the city's business." Put succinctly, that is what the battle over affirmative action is all about — will white Americans succumb to attempts to turn back the clock.

The *Houston Chronicle* editorialized that in its city a majority of the electorate "understood and appreciated the importance of minority-owned and women-owned firms having the opportunity to share in city business and contracts ... Houston is a diverse city. Its future and its greatness will depend on Houstonians taking the steps to give all its citizens generous opportunities to share in its prosperity."

Those who support affirmative action realize that it is both the moral and the pragmatic thing to do.

besieged black and Hispanic neighborhoods. That's why he got their votes.

Mayors Giuliani, White and Archer all got the voter's reward for effective management of their city governments: re-election.

Another city's electoral activity also exemplified the pragmatism of American voters.

That was the one in Houston where 55 percent of the electorate voted to reject a referendum that would have destroyed the city's affirmative action program.

The program sets targets in city agencies and contracts for the participation of white women and people of color.

The contest there was looked upon as significant, coming amid the continuing strife over the passage of California's anti-affirmative action initiative, Proposition 209. (A day before the Houston vote, the United States Supreme Court without comment let stand an Appeals Court ruling upholding Proposition 209, thereby refusing at this time to address the merits of the case.)

And indeed it was, according to Lydia Chavez, author of *The Color Bind: California's Battle to End Affirmative Action*, a forthcoming book on the California case.

Chavez, an associate professor of journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, said that the Houston vote confirmed what poll after poll has shown down through the years: when Americans are asked whether they support affirmative action, a majority, about 55 percent, say they do.

Indeed, according to Chavez, that's

Clinton to target housing discrimination

By C. Stone Brown
Special to Sentinel-Voice

After meeting with his race relations advisory commission, President Clinton announced that his administration would be cracking down on housing discrimination against minorities.

Recently, Housing Secretary Andrew Cuomo awarded \$15 million to fair housing groups to vigorously investigate complaints.

Clinton's willingness to target housing discrimination is an admirable act. And the \$15 million being allocated to fight this form of discrimination sends a strong message. I doubt, however, that either of these actions will succeed in ending the problem. Americans often take a myopic view of housing discrimination as just another form of discrimination. Actually, it is the seed from which all other forms of discrimination blossom.

The effect of segregated housing has far reaching effects on how Blacks and Whites interact with one another socially and professionally in America. Housing discrimination makes other forms of discrimination tolerable because people from different backgrounds never get to become "neighbors," neutralizing racial and ethnic stereotypes.

As Americans, many of us have uttered the phrase: "He's OK, he lives in the neighborhood." This simple phrase embodies how Americans define acceptance or approval. Indeed, he or she must be from the "neighborhood" either physically or mentally. Unfortunately, there are not many Whites who utter this phrase when referring to a Black person. This is why segregated housing reaches far beyond denying Blacks and other minorities the right to live where they choose.

If a person is welcome in one's home or neighborhood, he or she is welcome on your job, at your country club, or any other professional or social setting. Breaking down institutionally-sanctioned segregated housing will, by default, break down other racial barriers.

The best working model to illustrate this point would be police officers who are required to live in the city in which they work.

Why? Not only because the city residents pay their salary, but also to prevent officers from developing an alienated view of the community.

Studies have shown that when police officers do not reside in the city where they work, they naturally begin to associate only negative behavior with the group they most often arrest. In turn, Whites who do not interact with minorities as "neighbors" begin to acquire their opinions of non-Whites via the media which often portrays them negatively.

If the Clinton administration is serious about tackling housing discrimination (which I doubt), it must put its resources into addressing institutional practices and not small-time private property owners.

To vigorously fight housing discrimination, the Clinton administration must focus on the institutional practices of rental location services that use an internal marking system to notify the agency employees if its "all right" to rent to Blacks. The administration must also scrutinize the practices of mortgage companies and banks that "redline" urban areas to illegally deny Blacks and other minorities business and mortgage loans.

In many aspects, I regard the enforcement of housing discrimination laws a parallel to forced school busing. Although well-intentioned, it is not in the best interest of either party to force a union.

Studies have shown that Whites will move from a neighborhood if "too many" Blacks move in. Sociologists have coined this reaction "white flight." In a 1990 National Opinion Research Center opinion survey, 40 percent of whites said they favored a law giving a white homeowner the right not to sell a house to a Black person. If Clinton is to succeed, he will have to challenge many of America's deep-seated racial and ethnic stereotypes, and convince the nation that a desegregated nation is stronger than a segregated one.