

COMMENTARY

Myths surrounding death penalty in need of re-examining

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Even with the public embarrassment over the near execution of Illinois death row inmate Anthony Porter, who it appears was wrongfully accused of murder, most Americans still enthusiastically favor capital punishment.

There are essentially two reasons why they do. One is the fear of crime. We can thank the media and politicians for that.

Since the late 1980s the media has stuffed the public with mega doses of gory crime and violent stories while politicians have pounded away on the crime issue as a sure-fire way to gain public approval.

Even though murder rates are at a 20-year low and Americans were more likely to be murdered during the Great Depression of the 1930s than today, the public still demands the speedy dispatch of violent criminals.

Some argue that crime rates have dropped because of the death penalty and tougher crime measures. But the downward trend in murder and major crime happened before the big escalation in the number of executions in the late 1980s.

The other reason for death penalty mania is privately whispered: race and class. More

than 45 percent of those currently sitting on the nation's death rows are minorities. They are almost always the poorest of the poor, and the least likely to have the resources to get top-flight legal representation.

In the public's legal rush to judge prisoners, many of those executed have been mentally incompetent, juvenile delinquents and innocent.

According to a Congressional subcommittee report, 48 innocent persons have been executed during the past two decades. With Porter's case in the public spotlight, this may be just the tip of iceberg.

If his conviction is overturned, which is now likely, he will be the 10th death row inmate freed in Illinois because of doubts about his guilt since the death penalty was reinstated in 1977. This monumental flaw in the administration of the death penalty has forced the American Bar Association to repeatedly recommend a total moratorium on executions.

But, since moral and legal arguments against it for the most part fall on deaf ears, death penalty opponents should hammer away at the two most cherished beliefs of the public: 1) The death penalty is a deterrent, and 2) It's cost effective. Both are huge myths.

The death penalty doesn't deter crime. Eighteen of the 20 states with the highest murder rates are death penalty states. That includes California and Texas, which have the highest numbers of prisoners on death row. Seventeen of 20 major cities with the highest murder rates are in death penalty states. The murder rates in Michigan and Indiana are nearly identical even though Indiana has the death penalty and Michigan doesn't.

Most people are not murdered by a stranger on the street but by a friend, acquaintance or relative. There is not a shred of evidence that those who kill — whether they be a stranger or someone known to the victim — worry that one day they could have a date with the executioner. But, most murderers need not worry about that anyway. There are 20,000 or more homicides in America yearly. Yet, only one of 600 murderers will receive the death penalty. If they are poor, minority, live in the South, and their victim is White and middle-class, they almost certainly will be a prime candidate for execution.

The death penalty is anything but cost effective. Taxpayers pay dearly for special DA units to prosecute death penalty cases, extra jury selection, special motions, a second

penalty phase, lengthy investigations and a battery of witnesses.

The time and costs pile up even higher in capital cases because prosecutors and judges try to be legally correct and avoid reversal. States allocate paltry sums for legal representation for the indigent.

It costs three times more to execute a prisoner than to lock him/her up for life. Florida spends \$3 million per execution, North Carolina and Texas over \$2 million. The estimate is that California would save nearly \$100 million annually by resentencing its nearly 600 death row inmates to life imprisonment and making them pay the families of the victims their earnings from their prison labor.

The worst part of all this is that the death penalty wastes time, fans public hysteria and squanders resources that should be spent on alcohol and drug treatment, counseling, education, job and skills training.

These are far more cost and humane effective deterrents to protecting lives than taking a relatively few lives in execution chambers each month. And, that includes the innocent who weren't as lucky as Porter.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black."

Carl Rowan's Commentary

American military ill-equipped, increasingly ill-educated

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Can you imagine a nation with an abundance of wealth and even greater freedoms entrusting its defense to the poorly educated members of a sort of permanent underclass?

That is what the United States is doing. We provide our military with the most sophisticated weapons that



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man's mind can devise, but we do not supply either the quality or quantity of manpower necessary to use them properly. That's because there is not the political or social stomach to force those who have the most to protect to engage in military service.

For years after the draft ended in 1973, volunteers seemed to fill the needs of all branches of the military. But now, in our blossoming economy, teen-age nerds think of being "day-traders" on Wall Street, not high-tech Air Force stars. A young computer expert wants to work for Intel or AOL, not Uncle Sam.

The result is that my old military branch, the Navy, is sending seriously undermanned ships into combat areas. Even with 4,500 recruiters and an advertising budget of \$70 million, the Navy is at least 22,000 people short of the personnel it urgently needs.

Even though it now accepts more recruits who do not have high-school diplomas, it has had to dispatch aircraft carriers, guided-missile cruisers and other vessels into the turbulent Middle East area with crews drastically short of their normal complements.

This country hasn't faced the fact that,

in war or peace, sea duty (and other military work) is hard. Sea tours can be long and lonely.

Quarters are cramped. The food is often terrible. Yet, we pay a lowly sailor with two years of experience a paltry \$887 a month, and a master chief petty officer with 20 years of experience a measly \$3,207 a month.

President Clinton and congressional leaders are talking about pay increases of about 10 percent, but that is not likely to cause an enlistment rush of young men who now intend to enter private industry.

Our armed forces all say that they are searching for ways of solving this personnel shortfall, but none dares to mention making all young men and women share the military burden by reinstating conscription.

Clearly something drastic is called for when, as *The New York Times* reported, only 9 percent of young men ages 16 to 21 are even considering joining the Navy.

But there isn't even a feeble cry in America to restore the draft, and I doubt that even the middle class, let alone the richer and more powerful upper classes, would entertain the thought of required military service.

They don't even display the generosity of a craven long-ago time when a rich man could pay a poor man to go to war for him.

One thing I'm sure of: It is both morally and militarily untenable that we should say to those Americans with the least in goods and hope, "Get out there and defend America!"

Social Security reform: What else is in Pandora's box?

By Dorothy R. Leavell
and Jeffrey R. Lewis
Special to Sentinel-Voice

As the White House, Congress, economists, academicians, advocates and the myriad of lobbyists comprising what is known as the "Inside the Beltway Washington Establishment" jockey for positions on how best to "save" Social Security without losing on the unified budget and what is required to strengthen and solidify the financial solvency of Social Security, we hear nothing about what else is in Pandora's Box.

There are a variety of proposals being bandied about. What do we really know and more importantly, what don't we know about the impact these various proposals will have on the business community, labor markets, and the overall health of the nation's economy?

The fact is, many of the reform options may cause significantly greater costs for businesses and their employees. Employers need to know if they will shoulder the burden of increased administrative costs to set up individual Social Security Accounts. If so, how would the extra cost affect business growth and expansion? Would the American business community look to foreign markets with cheap labor to produce even more of their goods and services? How many small businesses would be forced to retrench, or even close down?

What about the effect on high-wage earners and high-bracket tax payers? If Congress lifts the cap on income subject to the Social Security tax, can high-income earners expect greater or reduced Social Security benefits when they retire?

How about the middle and lower income employees? Will increases in employer-paid Social Security taxes create an incentive for employers to move away from offering private pension programs for their employees?

Let's not forget the impact on health care. If Congress raises the retirement age - an almost seeming fete accompli at this point - how will it affect employer-provided health care? If employees opt to work longer to receive their full Social Security retirement benefits, will employer health care costs also rise?

Will the workplace gender gap grow even more? Will these changes motivate more employers to integrate pension and Social Security benefits? Will this further intensify the face of poverty being distinctly feminine?

Americans deserve to know exactly who wins and who loses under any plan for Social Security reform. Millions of Americans may very well be adversely affected — directly through changes in benefit structure — and indirectly by employer reaction and labor market effects.

Before Pandora's Box is opened and unleashed on a trusting public and a booming economy, Congressional oversight should closely examine what's inside. Our nation's most important social program is at stake, and we deserve nothing less.

We need deliberative, thoughtful study and debate in the Congress to prevent the partisan feeding frenzy that typically surrounds any mention of changes in Social Security. An informed electorate offers the best potential for true bi-partisan, responsible reform. The prerequisite for that is asking the right questions and making sure we get the right - the true - answers.

Absent such full and open disclosure and discussion, we are headed for a replay of NAFTA and the health care reform debacle. Let's talk openly and honestly with the American people. Congress needs to be reminded that even tiny changes can translate into massive consequences.

There's still time to take a peek inside before we lift the lid.