

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

The politics of race

The politics of race. The race for politics. So different, yet seemingly inseparable.

The latest Las Vegas saga in the marriage occurred last week when Judge Kessler, respected for his redistricting acumen, unveiled his proposed plan for redistricting Las Vegas' bulging wards.

Each ward contains upwards of 120,000 residents. By expanding from four wards to six, council representatives would serve between 70,000 and 80,000 residents, giving them more opportunity to meet constituents and be a voice for their concerns.

As expected, the politics of race entered the process and rightly so, because African-American and Hispanics have been herded into one ward since the 1996 redistricting process. Theoretically, the move increased chances for a minority council representative. In reality, the opposite has occurred. Since Ward 3's minority concentration was still trumped by the White majority, the two ethnic groups were left to fight it out. When former Councilman Ken Brass was appointed in 1993 to replace Bob Nolen as Ward 3 councilman, the Hispanic community groused — Ward 3 contains a significant Hispanic population. Brass was trumped by 38 percent in his re-election bid by Gary Reese in 1995.

This year, Reese barely escaped losing his seat to political novice Nevada Stupak, son of casino executive Bob Stupak. The younger Stupak forced the incumbent into a run-off election in June. Black dissatisfaction with Reese's record had much to do with that. The Hispanic community saved Reese's job.

In 1997, the Legislature passed a bill mandating the creation of additional wards. Championed by North Las Vegas Sen. Joe Neal and Education Chairman Wendell Williams, the legislation sought to slice up the city into smaller pieces and, in theory, increase the chances of minority representation. The typical name is racial gerrymandering, but that doesn't apply in this case.

Unlike in Louisiana, North Carolina and other states, there are no Z- or L- or other awkwardly-shaped districts that smack of indefensible and constitutionally-weak redistricting policy. But there are rumblings that Kessler didn't do much to change the present situation.

The wards are still overwhelmingly white, not surprisingly when weighed against the city's make-up. Ward 3 is one-fourth Hispanic and Ward 5 is nearly one-third black — Whites comprise 58 percent of Ward 3 and 52 percent of Ward 5. Granted, minority representation in those wards is high, but not high enough to do serious damage. Even if the ethnic mix was considered monolithic, the pendulum of power is still not in their favor.

There's a danger in majority-majority districts that minorities will never get a chance to serve though that's more often the exception than the rule, circa the more than 8,000 black elected officials nationwide. But Las Vegas is a different beast. Few minorities have won election to any post, leaving many to ponder whether the city is still the "Mississippi of the West" as it relates to politics.

Then there's the census and it's likely that the wards will be redrawn again after the decennial count of American citizens begins. Let the race for politics begin.



Going where we're needed


Special to Sentinel-Voice

They've been calling for us in Wilmington, Delaware. And Atlantic City, New Jersey. And San Antonio, Texas. And Albuquerque, New Mexico. And Las Vegas, Nevada. And Anchorage, Alaska, too. In all of these cities, civic leaders are in the preliminary stages of establishing new Urban League affiliates. Why? Because the problems which since 1910 have led to the establishment of our existing 115 affiliates in 34 states and the District of Columbia exist everywhere. Why? Because the Urban League has a proven effective method of combating the poverty, apathy, poor schooling and housing, and other social ills afflicting urban America. Start with commitment. Add public and private resources and advice. Leaven with intelligence and common sense. And don't forget interracial and inter-ethnic cooperation: The problems of urban America are an American problem—nothing more and nothing less.

What's happening in Wilmington is a typical, and welcome, example of how Urban League affiliates are born. There, a cross-section of civic leaders is working to make it happen, not because they are "overwhelmed" by the problems, but because they know that an inclusive partnership is the best way to attack the persistent problems of urban America. James H. Gilliam, Sr., a longtime Wilmington community

To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price  
President  
National Urban League



leader and a former Urban League national board member, is directing the organizational effort. But he has plenty of help: Wilmington's Mayor, James H. Sills, its City Council President James M. Baker, and the executives of numerous Wilmington businesses and charities, such as Wilmington Trust, the DuPont Company, the United Way, the YWCA and the YMCA.

And, oh yes, Charles Brittingham, president of the Delaware state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

His contributions continue the long history of mutual support that's existed between our two organizations at national and local levels since the NAACP's founding in 1909 and our founding in 1910. We know we can always count on them, and they on us, because as Brittingham told the *Wilmington News Journal* recently, "There are enough civil rights issues to go around." Indeed, that is so even now as we prepare to begin our annual Conference

in Houston August 8 to 11. Some of these problems are specific to, or more exacerbated among African Americans. But, as I said before, they are American problems. For example, as President Clinton's recent tour underscored, poverty, although now "invisible" as an issue, has not disappeared from the American scene. As Senator Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., has pointed out, 14 million American children—close to one in four—are growing up poor.

Nearly one in three children of color are growing up in poverty. More than six million children live in households with family

incomes less than one-half those at the poverty line. More people in America are poor now than in the 1960s, and childhood poverty has grown by 20 percent since the 1980s. The income gap between the wealthiest and the rest of America also has grown wider, while the average family has less real income than in the 1980s. Senator Wellstone cited these figures not to overwhelm us with despair, but to inspire us to action in this period which, as he says, "offers probably the best opportunity in our lifetime to rejoin the fight against poverty."

"Defeating poverty in this country will never be easy," he went on to say, "but it's not rocket science, either. We know what works. The only thing missing is sustained commitment and leadership." That is what the National Urban League, among many other organizations, has been provided throughout the twentieth century. We promise to work even harder

(See League, Page 14)

NEVADA'S ONLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

LAS VEGAS Sentinel Voice

GRIOT COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

Nevada's only African-American community newspaper.  
Published every Thursday by Griot Communications Group, Inc.  
900 East Charleston Boulevard • Las Vegas, Nevada 89104  
Telephone (702) 380-8100 • Fax (702) 380-8102

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