

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Bias claims rock fire department

For centuries, people have praised the U.S. system of democracy, trumpeting it as the form of government that best helps human beings reach their dreams.

Democracy is supposed to reward progress and production, its denizens ardent promulgators of the intangibles needed to spirit achievement and innovation—hard work, perseverance, intelligence, sacrifice.

Lorraine Russell-Williams exhibited all those qualities. But instead of living her dreams, the rookie firefighter languishes in a nightmare.

Russell-Williams was dismissed from the Clark County Fire Department's training academy just two days before graduation. Fire officials claim she violated a handful of regulations such as hazing, allegations Russell-Williams disputes. Exacerbating matters, the fire department fired her husband, a three-year veteran.

Russell-Williams' ordeal began shortly after her January hiring and her 16-week training course began. Sexist taunts and racist epithets were the order of the day, she claims. Nevertheless, she scored exemplary on academic and athletic skills tests. The better she did, the more vicious the vitriol. Democracy be damned.

"Every day I heard, 'Look at that black bitch. She doesn't deserve to be here. She's incompetent. She can't do the job,'" said Russell-Williams, who contends that male administrators perpetrated the majority of the harassment.

Worse yet, Russell-Williams says she nearly died after being forced to throw a 24-foot ladder, something she claims the fire department training manual lists as a two-person event. She complied, despite an injured shoulder and moved to succeeding events. During an event that involves pulling a hose, the air in her oxygen tank began running low. Though she struggled to breathe, teachers repeatedly admonished her to pull the hose. She eventually passed out.

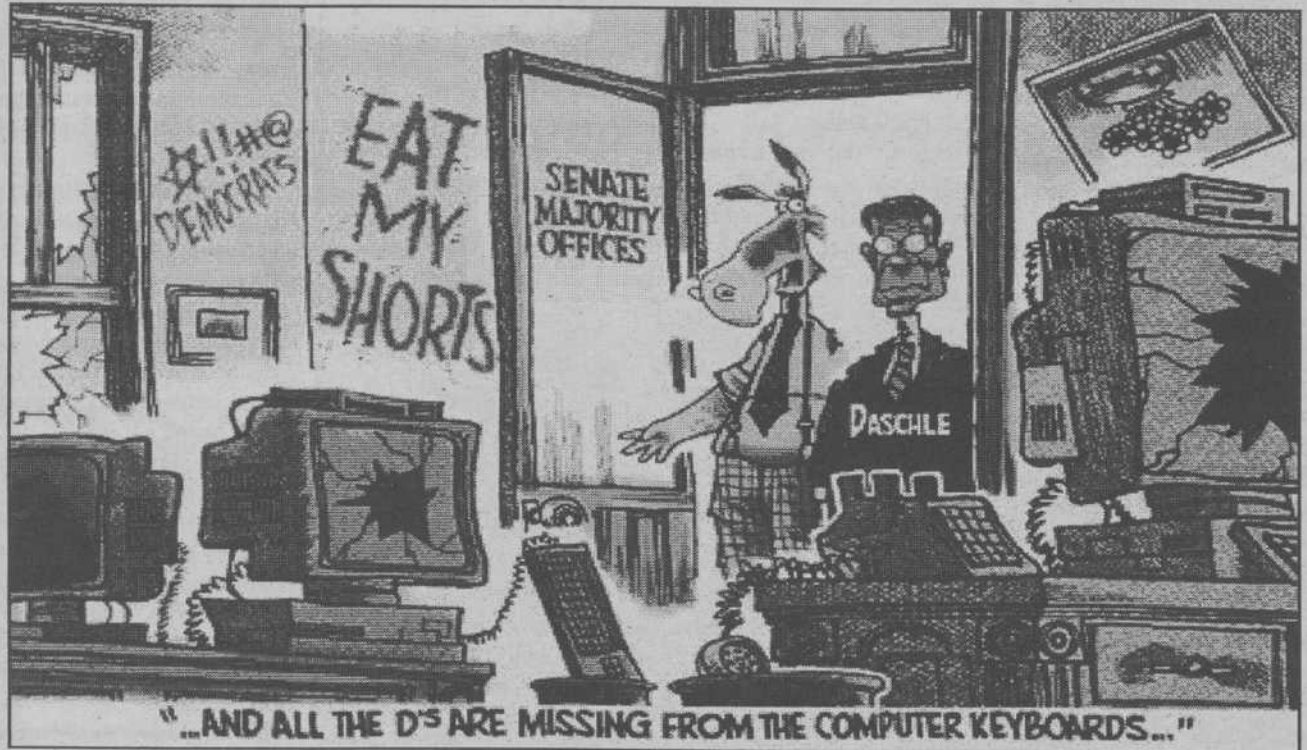
Disturbing to say the least. More disturbing is the fact that the feds are snooping around, and have been doing so for the past six months, investigating the fire department on its record of hiring and promoting women. The feds should expand their search to include Russell-Williams' case and other discrimination cases filed against the fire department.

If Russell-Williams' allegations are true, wholesale firings are in order. No, it's not up to government to legislate morality, but it is up to politicians to punish criminals. And make no mistake, what Russell-Williams alleges was nothing short of criminal.

Official response from the fire department is that Russell-Williams' termination stemmed from her failure to pass probation. Fire officials refuse to elaborate, saying that they're prohibited from discussing issues currently under investigation.

But that explanation doesn't jibe with the tangible results of Russell-Williams hard work—the perfect score on the physical agility test; the perfect score on the Clark County Practical, one of several tests administered to rookie firefighters.

What happened to Russell-Williams was anathema to everybody our democracy salutes: fairness, reward for work. Luckily, democracy provides a vehicle for recourse rule breakers: litigation.



Keep Social Security safety net sound

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Living up to campaign promises, President Bush recently appointed a commission to develop a formal plan to privatize the Social Security system.

The President's action is no surprise. He made privatizing Social Security one of his major campaign pledges last fall; and he also vigorously pushed creating personal investment accounts which would allow individuals to invest their benefits in the financial markets.

Nor is it a surprise that his 16-member commission is heavily weighted with Democratic and Republican politicians, and others who favor the same approach. Expectations are high that, after months of study, its recommendations will be significantly congruent with the President's sentiments.

But the political, and financial obstacles to making such a drastic change in the Social Security system are formidable: It's generally agreed that revamping the system in that way would demand an infusion of as much as a trillion dollars over the next decade, along with raising the retirement age and reducing cost of living increases.


As one can easily see, all of these possibilities are political hot potatoes.

That side of the privatization mirage underscores how unwise talk of privatizing Social Security is. One need only look at the shakiness of the financial markets recently to understand the havoc playing the market could bring to Social Security beneficiaries.

African-Americans must especially speak out against

To Be Equal

By **Hugh B. Price**
President
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tampering with Social Security in this way because the Old Age Survivors and Disability Insurance program — its formal name — is so important to the economic stability of African-American families at all stages of life.

For more than a half-century, Social Security has protected American families from falling into poverty because of the loss of income due to retirement, death of a breadwinner, or disability. Because it provides people with a guaranteed retirement income, protected from erosion by inflation for a lifetime, it is the most important source of income for more than 80 percent of elderly Americans, and virtually the only source of income for the poorest 40 percent of them.

African-Americans are particularly reliant on Social Security benefits. They're 12 percent of the U.S. population; but they make up 17 percent of those receiving Social Security disability benefits and 22 percent of all children receiving Social Security survivor benefits.

A recent study by the National Urban League's Institute for Opportunity and Equality, "The Impact of Social Security on Child Poverty," defined Social Security's importance to Black America in a dramatic

way. It found that African-American children are almost four times more likely to be lifted out of poverty by Social Security than white children.

Overall, Social Security benefits protect nearly one million children from falling below the poverty line. In fact, the Institute report determined that, were it not for Social Security benefits, 63 percent of very poor white families would fall into abject poverty, as would 71 percent of African-American families and 75 percent of Latino families.

Even families in a higher income bracket, those with children and incomes between \$21,000 and \$36,000, benefit dramatically from receiving Social Security benefits: those funds represent

more than 30 percent of their annual income. Numerous studies have shown that keeping families with children from falling below the poverty line is critical to those children's scholastic performance, and thus, to their having a viable chance to better themselves.

It is the bedrock, safety-net activities of Social Security — and the people it helps — that would be jeopardized by diverting all or a portion of the payroll tax away from Social Security into individual retirement accounts.

Wealth accumulation and sound investment practices are certainly important goals to pursue.

But should society gamble with the economic well-being and consequent future of America's citizens — especially its children — on untested methods when evidence exists to show that the current system, while flawed, benefits millions? We should remember and be guided by the fact that Social Security was enacted to be the safety net that individuals can rely upon in the event of financial setbacks that may come with private investments.

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