

## POINT OF VIEW

## Our View

## Chief Washington

The City Council on Wednesday appointed 27-year firefighting veteran David Washington to head the Las Vegas Fire and Rescue Department. Washington's ascension to the post marks the first time in Las Vegas history that an African-American has served as city fire chief. (Earl Greene, head of the Clark County Fire Department, was the first African-American to lead a Southern Nevada fire brigade).

In the days leading to his appointment, Washington was quoted in local newspapers as saying he didn't want to be viewed as the city's first African-American fire chief, rather as a fire chief that happens to be African-American. If only it were so easy. After all, this is Las Vegas, a place still struggling mightily to separate itself from its former moniker, the "Mississippi of the West."

A quick check of history shows that while African-Americans should celebrate appointments such as Washington's—which would seem to portend progress—we shouldn't dub it a harbinger of things to come. That we're still accomplishing such "firsts" in the year 2001 is emblematic of this city's topsy-turvy history of race relations. While we've been spared the racial violence that's occurred in cities such as New York and Los Angeles, we've also missed out on their progress—each of those cities has had a black mayor. Moreover, 11 predominantly white cities have elected African-American mayors. Yet, in Las Vegas, a city that's predominantly white, there only have been three elected African-American Las Vegas City Council members and, until Washington, no African-American city fire chief. So much for progress. (More telling is the absence of black faces in the corporate boardrooms of the casino industry, the city's and this state's economic engine).

Local history also shows that Washington must wield his power wisely. Blacks who achieve power either learn to toe the fine line of the status quo or risk hustled off to the fringe. As affable and civic minded an individual as David Washington is and as powerful as he now is with this position, he too must tread lightly when broaching matters of race in his department, lest subversives find something to impinge him with. Media reports noted behind-the-scenes work by backers of the other candidates for fire chief.

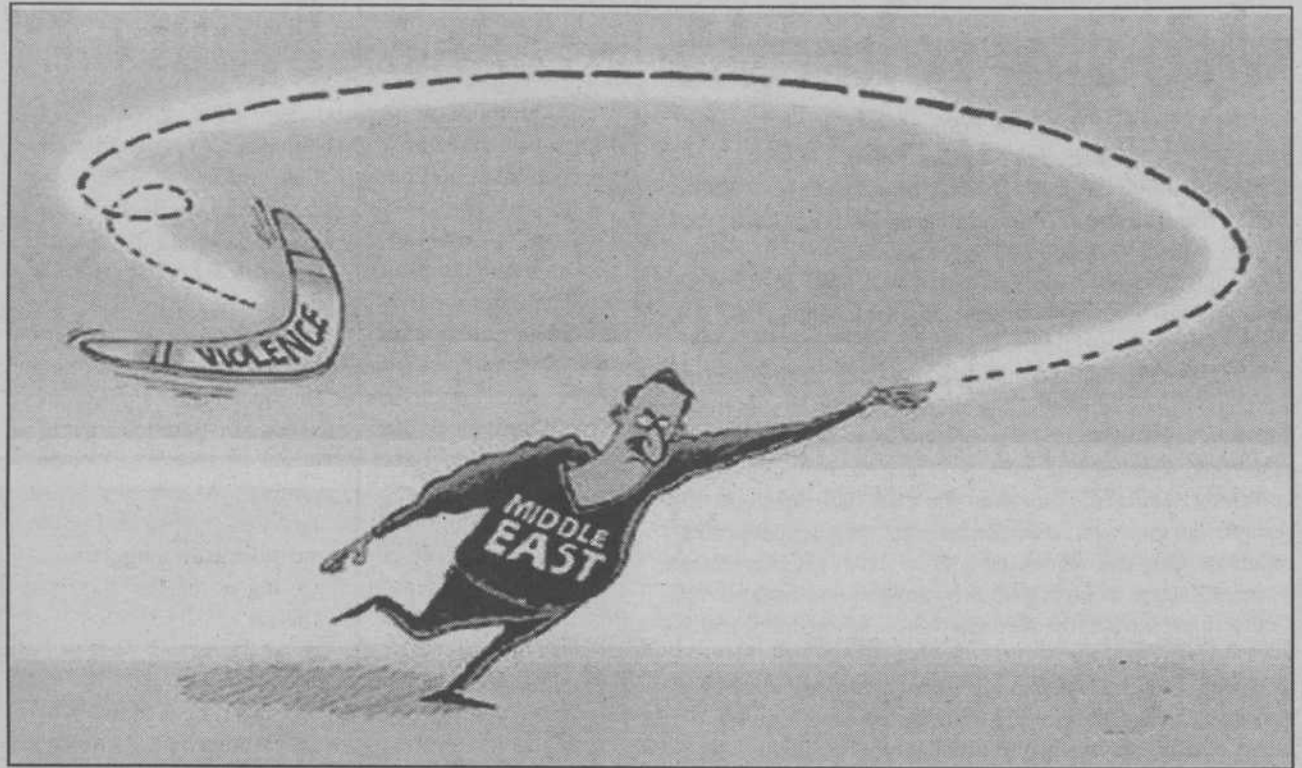
The City Council deserves no special commendation for choosing Washington. After all, he was eminently qualified, serving on numerous boards, earning various certifications and being an active member of a slew of professional and civic organizations. The council merely recognized a long-known fact: Washington's resume is peerless. In the end, he was simply the best person for the job. Now, we can only hope that Oscar's round table stays out of the way and let Washington do his job.

## Hoggard a pioneer

Las Vegas lost a dedicated community stalwart last Wednesday. J. David Hoggard, former president of the local branch of the NAACP, the first black administrator of the Economic Opportunity Board—the state's largest anti-poverty agency—and co-founder of the EOB's non-profit radio station, KCEP-FM 88.1—died at age 86.

Hoggard leaves behind a tremendous legacy of dedicated activism and a litany of firsts, including being the first black school attendance officer and one of the first blacks to serve in the Las Vegas Police Department. Hoggard was a relentless proponent of equal rights and equal opportunity, railing against Strip segregation and blight in predominantly black West Las Vegas.

Hoggard's stamina, verve, commitment, energy, fierceness, friendliness, kindness, personality, manhood and scholarship will be sorely missed.



## America's task: Reclaiming ex-felons

Special to Sentinel-Voice

There's a bomb waiting to go off beneath American society, a bomb set by the mindless get-tough-on crime rhetoric and laws of the past three decades that fueled an explosive, insane boom in prison-construction—and thus, in the number of Americans in prison or jail.

In the 1990s, a new federal Justice Department report says, states built prisons with a total capacity for 528,000 individuals. At an average construction cost of \$50,000 per bed, the boom cost states more than \$26 billion. Annual operating costs for state and federal prisons now total \$30 billion. These dollar outlays have put a significant financial strain on states' capacity to provide other services—such as funding for public higher education.


The more dangerous consequence has to do with the future of those who were in prison or who are in prison now.

Thirty years ago, there were a total of 200,000 Americans in jail or prison. Now there are 1.3 million Americans in state or federal prison. If one adds in the youth in juvenile detention centers, the number rises to just over 2 million people, according to the report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

There is, of course, an in disputable racial facet to this: of the 1.3 million in federal and state prisons, 428,000 are black men 20 to 29 years old. Currently, about 10 percent of black males between 25 and 29 years old are in fed-

## To Be Equal

By **Hugh B. Price**  
President  
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eral and state prison, compared to 2.9 percent of Latino males, and 1.1 percent of white males in the same age group.

Central to this racial disparity is incarceration for drug usage. Although whites are by far the majority of drug users in the country, and blacks, 12 percent of the population, use drugs in roughly proportional terms, there are currently 50,700 whites in prison for drug offenses, and 144,700 blacks.

Of course, blacks who commit crime ought to be subject to the processes of the criminal justice system. African-American themselves have spoken loud and clear—most recently in the National Urban League survey published in *The State of Black America 2001*—about the importance of reducing crime in their communities.

But it is the undeniable element of racism that pervades the criminal justice system from the exercise of police discretion on the street to the imposition of the death penalty that has produced the mistrust between blacks and law enforcement—and set that bomb ticking.

Race was central to the continued feverish expansion of prison construction

throughout the 1990s—even as crime rates all over the country dropped sharply. Three significant political forces pushed that expansion: private for-profit prison companies, and construction companies, correctional guards' unions, and, not least, economically depressed rural local and county governments desperately seeking financial rescue.

In a recent, brilliant essay in the journal *Dissent*, Paul Street, director of research for the Chicago Urban League, describes the alarming implications of this ill-considered incarceration policy. He points out that, given the sharply disproportionate number of blacks in prison, it has produced the "spectacle" of the "predomi-

nantly white composition of the keepers and the predominantly black composition of the kept in the prisons towns that increasingly look to the mass incarceration boom as the solution to their economic problems.

"As everyone knows, but few like to discuss," he continues, "the mostly white residents of those towns are building their economic 'dreams' on the transport and lockdown of unfree African-Americans from impoverished inner-city neighborhoods..."

Street also looks at the other side of that perverse equation—the devastating social and economic damage to the poor black communities where some significant number of its men (and increasingly, women) in their prime "workforce-entry years" are in prison.

This results in a loss of both immediate and future earning power to individuals and the community as a whole, since job prospects in the legitimate market for even ex-offenders who have skills and want to "go straight" are virtually non-existent

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