

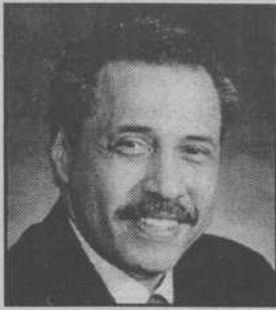
COMMENTARY

Privileges versus rights

By Louie Overstreet
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Most dictionaries define privileges and rights in synonymous terms. However, within our various political systems I believe the meanings are very different.

Supposedly, in a free nation privileges are conferred and rights are guaranteed.



LOUIE OVERSTREET

From the very beginning of its effective date of March 4, 1789, the U.S. Constitution has guaranteed rights for white males. Creating the same rights for persons of color and females took 95 years (1865-1961) and four amendments (XIII, XV, XIX, and XXIII) to accomplish.

When we elect fellow citizens to administrative, legislative and judicial offices, we confer a number of decision-making powers (privileges) to these persons. However, I have an growing concern that in an increasing number of instances, some politicians are using their conferred privileges to abridge our basic rights as citizens.

Before you conclude that, "Man, Overstreet has gone off the deep end this time" because "ain't nobody" going to abridge my rights as a citizen, you had better check out what is happening nationally, statewide and locally before you determine that I am a couple of bricks shy of a full load.

Because of the horrific events of Sep-

tember 11, many people have forgotten that a few short months ago there were serious concerns raised during confirmation hearings about the far right leanings of now Attorney General John Ashcroft. Unfortunately, yet understandably, the tragic events of two months ago created such a climate of fear that surveys concluded American citizens were willing to sacrifice some of their rights in order to feel safe.

As a result of a tragedy of unparalleled historical proportions and fear for our individual safety, the concerns expressed by a number of U.S. senators about the Attorney General's lack of regard for the rights of private citizens have fallen by the wayside.

He proposed a law that places a citizen's right to privacy (Amendments IV, V, and XIV) in jeopardy under the color of the national security interest of the United States.

While Ashcroft did not get all he wanted, there is enough in the law that was passed by congress and signed by the president to cause some very serious concern for proponents of civil liberties.

It is one thing to believe that undocumented aliens could pose a national security threat to our country, and quite another

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It should be CIA's job to get ride of bin Laden

By Emory Curtis
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Modern wars have two fronts: a fighting front where people are killed and an image front that justifies the killings.

The U.S.-led War on Terrorism clearly has the winning hand on the killing side; on the image side, the U.S. wins inside this country but has a losing hand outside, especially in countries with a high percentage of Muslims.

To strong supporters of the killing effort such as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), key leaders in the administration, and an overwhelming majority of the public, that's good enough: In their view, we won't have a winning image hand with many Muslims, no matter what we do. To that they say, "So be it."

They are right, if their only concern is the Afghanistan fighting front. They are wrong if their primary concern is the abatement of terrorist acts against U.S. citizens and interests within and without our borders.

Losing the image front in an Islam-dominated country results in that country having an increase in extremists, from which terrorists are recruited. It also makes it more difficult for the country's leadership to keep its level of support for the War on Terrorism. It can even result in a complete overthrow of the government.

The British Broadcasting Corp. said this message was conveyed by Osama bin Laden: "The entire West, with the exception of a few countries, supports this unfair, barbaric campaign, although there is no evidence of the involvement of the people of Afghanistan in what happened in America...The campaign, however, continues to unjustly annihilate the villagers and civilians, children, women and innocent people."

In extremists' eyes, that message reflects and is supported by the TV images carried day by day by the CNN of the Muslim world, al-Jazeera (The Peninsula). That popular Arab satellite TV channel is the only broadcaster covering the Afghani-

stan war on the ground on a day-by-day basis. You can see some of their footage on CNN. CNN has rights to broadcast their footage.

As a result, the Islamic world sees footage from the ground in Afghanistan every day. That footage shows the on-the-ground effects of our bombing campaign-buildings destroyed, deaths, injuries, children in distress, refugee populations, people searching for food and the overall effect of our bombing campaign on the Afghan people, who are part of their own Islamic world.

On our part we see a day-by-day report on the Afghanistan war from the outside in Pakistan and from cameras on bombing runs. They show how the bombs hit a target identified as a military target, which it may be.

We also get an explanation that must fall on deaf ears with the overwhelming majority of al-Jazeera's 37 million viewers. Also, the U.S. explanation that the Taliban is responsible for the

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Cipro alarm unearths need for change in foreign trade policies

By Salih Booker
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The anthrax attacks demonstrate the importance of a vigorous public-health system. In such a system, public health should take priority over private profits.

With every new case of anthrax, the demand for the antibiotic Cipro goes up geometrically. This is a boon to Cipro's manufacturer, Bayer AG, but a burden to U.S. patients and consumers. Cipro, which can cost almost \$5 a pill to consumers, is much more expensive than the generic equivalent. The Bush administration succeeded in pressuring Bayer to cut its price for government purchases, but still seemed as interested in protecting Bayer's patent as in meeting the health needs of the public.

The anthrax scare is a reminder to all of us that in public-health emergencies, governments have both the right and the obligation to act to protect their citizens, regardless of patents.

Africans and others in developing countries who are

trying to combat AIDS don't need this reminder. They have been forced by the AIDS epidemic to take on the Western drug companies. The companies blocked generic production of anti-AIDS drugs, helping keep them inaccessible for more than 30 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa and other parts of the developing world. Brazil and India have taken full advantage of exceptions for public health in current trade agreements, but other countries have been intimidated by pressure from the drug companies and the United States.

The anthrax crisis should make the Bush administration change its tune. Until now, U.S. trade negotiators have consistently taken a hard line for generous patent protection for drug companies. They argue the temporary monopolies granted by patents and ratified by a 1994 international agreement are essential to encourage the industry to invest in research on new drugs. But that agreement was "unbalanced" and "driven by commercial inter-

ests," commented Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz in an Oct. 11 press conference at the World Bank. It has permitted drug companies to raise prices so high that people die because they can't buy the drugs, he noted.

In principle, patents are justifiable to encourage research. But the United States and the drug companies have gone too far. Double-digit profit rates in the industry are based on prices that far exceed production and research costs. Even Cipro's new discounted price of less than a dollar a pill to the federal government, for example, is still far more than the price offered by generic manufacturers in India. For AIDS sufferers, generic producers can provide life-prolonging antiretroviral "triple therapy" drugs at less than \$1 a day, compared to more than \$25 a day for the brand-name products in developed countries.

In response to protests, drug companies have offered discounted prices for some anti-AIDS drugs. But, with Washington's support, they

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Federalizing airport screeners can possibly lift ailing system

By Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Recently a man carrying several knives, a stun gun and a can of pepper spray in a plastic bag breezed through an airport checkpoint at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

If that doesn't strongly suggest something is seriously wrong with the system, then what will?

This is not the first such incident where an armed passenger passed through airport checkpoints undetected since Sept. 11. It is a laxness that cannot be tolerated at a time when extremists have already made Americans pay for the vulnerabilities in our system.

This latest incident at O'Hare strengthens the case for federalizing the nation's 28,000 airline passenger and baggage screeners. They are now on the front line in our nation's war on terrorism, yet we still depend upon poorly trained, minimum wage employees of private firms whose performance in this area has even led to the imposition of criminal penalties. Here are some of the problems:

- Rapid turnover among screeners has been a long-standing problem. Studies have shown 90 percent of all screeners at any given checkpoint had less than six months experience.

- Private screening companies at many of the nation's largest airports paid screeners a starting salary of \$6 an hour or less. At some airports the starting salary was the

minimum wage, which is less than the starting salaries at some airport fast-food restaurants and for parking lot attendants.

Clearly the Senate did the right thing when, on Oct. 11, it unanimously passed legislation to allow the screeners to become part of the federal workforce. Through a national uniform system, accountability can be maintained. Better pay, training and promotional opportunities could also stem the high turnover rate.

Unfortunately the House, after fierce lobbying by the White House and private security firms, some which have already demonstrated their failure, rejected the proposal and gave President Bush the option of establishing a screening workforce partly public and partly private.

Hopefully in a House-Senate conference to resolve the differences between the two bills, the Congress will come up with a final bill that provides real protection to air travelers.

What we have now is a classic case of the failure of the private marketplace at a time when business-as-usual is not an option. The government does not contract mercenaries out to fight our wars. We hire professionals and give them the tools and the training to do the job. We can afford to do no less with those on the front line of the war on terrorism whose job it is to ensure our safety.

Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas, is chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus