

C O M M E N T A R Y

Racial disparities in U.S. health continue to grow

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Within the past two months, I have given the keynote speech at a health disparities conference in Chattanooga, Tenn. sponsored by the Tennessee Department of Health, moderated a panel in D.C. on the same subject for the National Medical Association and moderated a panel at yet another conference in Virginia organized by Hampton University's Health Disparities Reduction Project.

At each event, the same point was made: Of the 15 leading causes of death in the United States, Blacks had higher death rates than Whites in 11 areas: heart disease, cancer, stroke, accidents, diabetes, flu and pneumonia, kidney diseases, septicemia, homicide, cirrhosis of the liver and hypertension. African-Americans had lower death rates than Whites as a result of respiratory diseases, Alzheimer's, suicide and aortic aneurysm.

Professor David R. Williams, a senior research scientist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, has done significant research in this area. He presented many of his findings to the audience at Hampton and has written about them in the National Urban League's "State of Back America 2004."

One of the most stunning points made by Williams was that although overall health has improved in the U.S. over the past 50 years, racial differences in health are unchanged or widened.

"The age-adjusted overall death rate for



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African-Americans was 20 percent higher than that of Whites in 1950 but 30 percent higher in 2000," Williams says. "Similarly, a Black baby born in the U.S.A. was 1.6 times as likely to die before his/her birthday than a White infant in 1950, but is 2.5 times as likely in 2000."

To show the significance of the gap, in 1985 the Department of Health and Human Services began using the term "excess deaths," defined as the number of African-Americans who would not die each year if Blacks and Whites had the same mortality rates. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, there were 66,900 excess Black deaths in 1940; 50,900 in 1960; 80,600 in 1980 and 96,800 in 1998. From 1940 to 1998, according to the center, 4.27 million African-Americans died prematurely.

Whites in the U.S. are hardly a model. Williams says that when the infant mortality and life expectancy figures are calculated for Whites alone, Caucasians fared poorly when measured against other industrialized nations. If Whites made up their own country, they would rank 24th in infant mortality deaths. At 5.8 deaths per 1,000 births, Whites would trail top-ranked Hong Kong (3.1), Japan (3.4), Sweden (3.4), Singapore (3.5), Finland (3.7) and seven other countries (Norway, Denmark, France, Austria, Ireland, New Zealand and Portugal).

When looking at international life expectancy rates, White women, averaging

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Despite setbacks, Bush becoming a Teflon Don

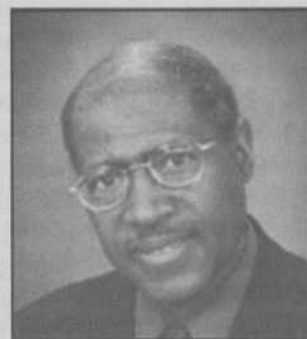
By Ron Walters
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I have watched an interesting phenomenon: George Bush has been rising in the polls at a time he is facing some unimaginable challenges that would bring any Democrat down.

To begin with, he is facing a war in Iraq that he created at the beginning of his administration, even to the extent of manufacturing a rationale that associated this diversion with the specific causes of the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. But his popularity has grown even in the teeth of the growing carnage in Iraq that has killed more than 1,000 American soldiers and put in grave doubt any possibility of the development of an American-styled political system because of the growing intensity of urban guerilla war in Iraq.

Bush's role as the leader of a crisis appears to have buoyed him against the challenge of John Kerry, who has waged a curiously tepid challenge on Bush's terms, the terms that he, too, would pursue the war, except smarter. The real secret of Bush's buoyancy, however, is the strength of his bench, which has mounted strong opposition to any factor that would appear to threaten Bush's chances of being re-elected.

This defense of Bush began with the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth's political ads that had the effect of casting doubt on the underlying events that resulted in Kerry's military awards and medals. By challenging the accuracy of the events,



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even though they were not there, they were able to create enough space for those who wanted to support Bush to believe that Kerry was not the substitute commander-in-chief that his convention had projected him to be. And Kerry's numbers began to fall.

Then, there is the news from CBS-TV that records of George Bush's service in the National Guard that showed him defying a direct order from a superior officer, missing a health check-up and being absent from service for a critical period of time.

Immediately, the Bush machine swung into action and doubt was cast on the accuracy of the documents. Again, this gave enough space for those predisposed to Bush to continue to believe in his credibility. This was Teflon at its best.

In addition, we have to stop and think: Republicans used to believe in balanced budgets in the 1990s, but apparently have forgiven Bush for running up the largest budget deficit in modern history; Republicans used to believe that there was honor in military service, but they savaged John Kerry's record of military heroism while looking the other way at the lack of such meaningful military service by Dick Cheney and George Bush; Republicans follow the religious moral teachings yet look the other way when charges were made implicating with Bush in such behavior.

In fact, most of the rules have been broken to keep Bush in the White House.

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Wake up, get out, vote to protect America's children

By Marian Wright Edelman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I heard a 48-year-old White woman say recently that she had never voted and I heard a 42-year-old African-American man say the same thing. In fact, I've been amazed at the number of people — young and old — I've heard say they don't know if they'll vote this year because their vote won't count.

My blunt response to those who don't know if they'll vote on November 2nd is to wake up, get up, and go vote. Your job, your health care, your child's education and safety, and the Black community's and nation's deepest values and future are at stake. There has not been a more dangerous time in our nation's history.

In this century's defining election year, everybody has to make a difference at the voting booth. Only 59 percent of all voting-age citizens, 57 percent of Black citizens, 45 percent of Latino citizens, 61 percent of women, and 36 percent of young people between 18 and 24 registered and voted in the last presidential election. Even fewer voted in the last congressional elections. Not voting lets our country down, and lets our children

If already enacted tax cuts for the top one percent of super rich Americans fully take effect; if efforts to make them permanent are not prevented; if new tax cuts for the powerful and wealthy keep getting passed; and if hundreds of billions of dollars in military increases continue to finance the Iraq war and to mount a missile defense system for a possible war in the stars, the federal government will have nothing left over to invest in our schools, the 9 million children denied health coverage, more and better paying jobs, and the federal deficit will continue to soar.

If you believe it's all right for political leaders to impose budget cuts on poor children in order to give tax cuts and subsidies to millionaires and powerful corporations sending jobs to other countries, then stay home and don't vote.

If you believe it's more important to send a person to Mars than a child to quality public schools and to college, then stay home and don't vote.

If you believe it's acceptable for leaders to say "Leave No Child Behind", the Children's Defense Fund's trademarked words created by Black community leaders, while doing the opposite, then stay home and don't vote.

If you believe the federal deficit should continue to increase and be left for our children and grandchildren to bear, then stay home and don't vote.

If you don't mind judges being selected on the basis of a single issue or ideological litmus test, then stay home and don't vote.

If you think those in power should continue to cater to the highest campaign contributors and to ignore Head Start children and cut their successful program, then stay home and don't vote. If you believe doing nothing is not taking a position and that it's acceptable for the loudest and strongest to define our nation's priorities, then stay home and don't vote.

Democracy is not a spectator sport. If you stay on the sidelines, so will your needs. Citizens who care enough about our country and our children to vote November 2nd will determine whether our democracy will live or die. Your action or inaction will determine the Supreme Court's direction for the next 50 years and whether the clock of progress for minorities, women and the poor will be turned backwards or move ahead. Your action or inaction will determine whether millions of children and youths will live in peace or die in

war, go to college or go to prison. Your action or inaction will determine whether more jobs will be exported or remain at home. Your action or inaction will determine whether local, state, and federal policies will return our nation to past racial, gender, and religious intolerance, or prepare our nation to move ahead to realize Brown v. Board of Education's still unrealized promise for every child, of every color, income, faith, and place. Your action or inaction will determine whether the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer. Your action on inaction on November 2nd will determine whether our Constitution is a document where everyone in America can find his or her civil and human rights protected.

My faith tells me to seek justice for the poor and the vulnerable and that the test of the morality of a leader and society is how well we protect the least among us. Children are the poorest of any age group in America. They have become poorer each year over the past three years. That's shameful and unnecessary. Your voice and your vote can change these facts. Children can't vote but you can.

Marian Wright Edelman is President and Founder of the Children's Defense Fund.