

Black state of the union: Need more power

By Ron Walters
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Now is the time to make an assessment of the State of the Union, and in the coming weeks, you will hear a president claim a sweeping mandate for his policies. He went into an election with his favorable ratings below 50 percent, with most of the country feeling that we were on the "wrong track" and rejecting his signature policy defined by the war in Iraq. So, where is the mandate?

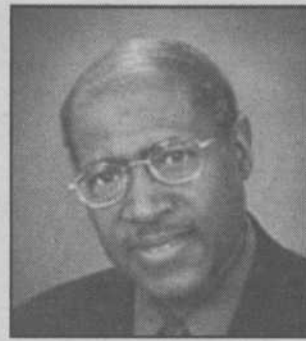
First of all, Americans have to be careful about the meaning of the election. It was not, in fact, an election that gave legitimacy or substantial support to the policies pursued by the president. It was an election that benefited from enormous sums of money poured into voter mobilization, and in that battle, George Bush's forces won. So, this was not an election won on the strength of the issues, but on the strength of tactics and voter turnout.

The most recent authoritative analysis of

the president's status is contained in a January 18 Washington Post poll; it contains enough "disapprovals" to fill a room. For example, people disapproved of Bush's handling of many of the most important issues facing the country: the economy (52 percent), Iraq (58 percent), Social Security (55 percent), health care (51 percent), and the federal budget deficit (58 percent). These are not just Black people, this is a sample of the entire country.

So, under what conceivable thinking can Bush claim, as he recently did, that the election gives him a mandate to pursue his policies in Iraq? As I have said many times, this kind of thinking is pure nationalist braggadocio.

Given this context, the State of the Black



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Union is contained in the items above and mirrors the views of the rest of the country. They represent the top issues on which most Blacks agree: access to an excellent education, economic development for communities, economic opportunity for individuals, opportunity for home ownership, wealth creation, and most of all, a fair chance at employ-

ment and promotions commensurate with their skills.

In a few days, the Bush administration will roll out a series of cuts in the domestic side of the federal budget to pay for the Iraq war and for tax cuts. Bush will propose deep cuts in the community health budget, in the home ownership program, in community economic development projects at HUD, and in many of the other programs that serve poor and

disadvantaged people disproportionately. He has no mandate to do that, but it is a necessity because of the skewed agenda he is following that he will attempt to legitimize by his flawed election.

Black leaders need to roll out as realistic picture of the state of their community, as the National Urban League does each year about this time, and build an agenda around it that encompasses both public policy and community action. We have been short on the community action, but several of the civil rights and political organizations, such as the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Congressional Black Caucus, have or is seeking new leadership. Perhaps, this is an opportunity to begin afresh with new strategies to achieve an empowerment agenda.

Ron Walters is a professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland-College Park.

Tsunami, other disasters affecting African ignored

By Bill Fletcher Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Within days of the tsunami in December, I started getting e-mails and phone calls from people I did not know. They were very similar in both content and form. The writer or caller would be a bit hesitant and wanted to make sure that they were not misunderstood. "It's not that I don't care about the people in Asia, because I do! It's just that...No one is talking about the impact of the tsunami on Africa."

The terrible tsunami of 2004 not only devastated Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, but swept into the east coast of the African continent. Little media attention has been given to the impact on Africa, and it is fair to ask why this is the case.

I would suggest that there are two main reasons.

First, it is important that we understand that the impact of the tsunami on Africa paled in comparison to its impact on Asia. Rough estimates seem to indicate that somewhere between 300-400 people were killed in Africa. In Somalia, the country that seems to have been the most affected, somewhere around 50,000 people are homeless, with approximately 4,000 permanently displaced.

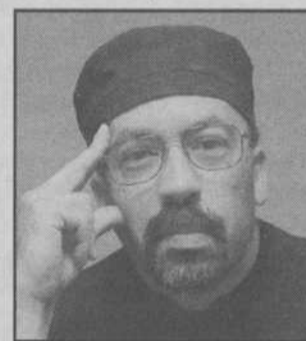
In contrast, Thailand lost approximately 5,000 people. India reported nearly 11,000

dead. Sri Lanka had at least 31,000 dead. Indonesia lost 110,000 people. This does not include the wounded or homeless. So at one level, the scale is so entirely different that this will affect attention.

If this were a just world, there would be attention to Africa, but there would also be greater attention to the heart of the disaster. This is not, however, a just world and this leads to the second reason for the lack of coverage. Africa is treated as if it is the world's basket-case.

We in the global North (Europe, Japan and North America) have become numb to the disasters that Africa faces. While at one level it is understandable that greater attention goes to Asia, it is fair to say that even if 110,000 people had been killed in East Africa because of the tsunami, there would have been little attention and outcry. It would have been treated as one more African disaster.

I am sure that someone will cry out that I am being paranoid or simply fixated on race, but consider the facts. Since 1997, somewhere between 3.5 million and 4 million people have died as a result of the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We



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all know that in 1994, 800,000 to 1 million people were butchered in the Rwanda genocide. We know that ethnic cleansing and genocide are being used in the Darfur region of the Sudan as a method of counter-insurgency, resulting in approximately 50,000 to 100,000 deaths. Yet, the world has not stopped and focused massive media attention and

aid, except when prodded, as in the case of Darfur, or much belated attention, as in Rwanda.

We have to face the reality, and actually challenge this reality, that Black life is undervalued in the global North, and the disasters that affect Africa particularly are viewed as unfortunate but not critical, including the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The global North can look at the tsunami and its devastation and believe that they can help to address this rare occurrence.

The global North does not have to strain to understand any dynamics or history, as it does when it comes to Africa. It especially does not have to examine its own culpability in the problems of the African continent. It can simply throw up its hands in frustration and mutter that nothing can be done.

The depth of the racial blindspot to the scope of Africa's challenges means that people who are concerned about Africa and the African world have to keep issues in front of the public, even at the risk of creating discomfort; actually, in order to encourage discomfort. Africa's challenges will never be addressed by Europe, Japan and North America as long as addressing these challenges is viewed as offering charity for a dysfunctional continent.

Africa's challenges must be understood as the continuing effects of the slave trade, colonialism, the Cold War, and structural adjustment. This does not mean that Africans are blameless for hideous actions, such as the Rwanda genocide.

To the contrary, Africans must be held accountable for their decisions, but these decisions do not take place in the abstract, but in a context in which the rules of the game have been set by others who have no particular interest in our success.

[If you are interested in offering assistance to African tsunami victims, please contact Africare at 440 "R" St., NW, Washington, DC 20001-1935, 202-462-3614. www.africare.org]

Bill Fletcher Jr. is president of TransAfrica Forum, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit educational and organizing center.

Social Security

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"People work so hard and I think they should be able to look forward to retirement. I think the system should be fixed. But with privatization, there is no guarantee."

After reforms to the program in 1983, the government began taking in more money for Social Security than it expended and created a trust fund that is invested in U.S. Treasury bonds.

Proponents of privatization say this fund exists only on paper, since the money is used for general government expenses and would need to be replenished through cutting spending, raising taxes or borrowing more money.

But those who want to preserve the current system say the federal government will pay up, since the alternative—defaulting on the bonds—would create financial meltdown.

(They also say that if President Bush's tax cuts are made permanent another top priority of his administration—the budget shortfall thus created over the next 75 years would be five times the shortfall in Social Security over the same time period.)

The Cato Institute has been promoting privatizing Social Security for the past 25 years.

A policy paper on its Web site claims the average annual real return on U.S. stocks

from 1926 through 1996 was more than 7 percent. It describes privatization as a "choice" that all retirees should have, and women in particular.

The Institute's Michael Tanner also considers it downright sexist to suppose that those less experienced in investing—those with lower incomes, and thus disproportionately women—can't make investments that are equally lucrative as those of more experienced investors.

Tanner says women will benefit because everyone will benefit (historically the return on the stock market is higher than the return on bonds, which is where Social Security funds are invested

now) and women will benefit disproportionately because women make up 60 percent of the beneficiaries.

But Sunhwa Lee, who specializes in older women's economic issues for the Institute for Women's Policy Research, say privatizing runs too much of a risk of increasing poverty among the elderly.

"I think the Cato claim is painting too rosy a picture about our stock market performance, which we all know is not true given our recent experience," Lee told *Women's e-News*.

"Most stock market analysts say past performance is never a good guide for future performance. Stocks tend to

yield higher returns than bonds, typically because investing in them runs a higher risk. The bottom line is that we cannot afford to put our basic tier of retirement income at risk."

Tanner says his organization has scaled back its estimated future rate of return to a more conservative 6.5 percent, and with a 50-50 mix of stocks and bonds he believes a 5 percent return is very realistic. "The current system is not sustainable," he said, "with too few workers supporting a growing number of retirees."

An article in the January bulletin of AARP points out another bone of contention: "If current workers divert

some of their Social Security payroll taxes into private accounts, the government would have to make up the difference to cover benefits. Estimates for such transition costs range between \$1 trillion and \$2 trillion over 10 years."

Tanner responds, "There will be short-term costs to privatization, but it will save money in the long-term."

With momentous shifts possibly in the offing, Americans facing the most secure retirement are those currently in their 50s and 60s. They won't be affected—for good or ill—by any of these proposed changes.

Melinda Tuhus writes for *Women's e-News*.