

C O M M E N T A R Y

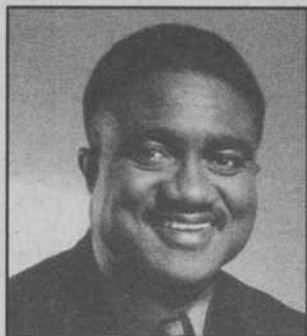
Revolutionary school reform is within reach

By George E. Curry
Special to SentinelVoice

SAN DIEGO - The media does not give much coverage to the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE). Those boards preside over the nation's largest—and most criticized—school systems. After I gave the keynote address last week at CUBE's 66th annual conference, I had an opportunity to meet with school board members from around the county. I was impressed not only by their dedication but with the kind of innovation taking place in some large school systems.

Generally, the news media and public officials are quicker to point out the failures of public education than to give them credit for the advances that are being made.

For example, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) said last December 7 in a statement: "...The United States ranks 24th of 29 industrialized countries when it comes to math literacy among 15-year-old students. In their most recent round of testing, the Program for International Student Assessment finds that the United States falls behind such countries as Finland, Korea, Canada, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Hungary, Spain



GEORGE CURRY

and, yes, France.

"Even more depressingly, these dismal results are consistent with previous international comparisons. American students lag far behind their industrialized cousins in the basic skills of math, reading and science. Contrary to the clamor of the education lobby, it is not for lack of money. The U.S. spends 30 percent to 80 percent more per pupil than other industrialized nations."

Amid those depressing statistics, however, there are some hopeful signs of progress.

Chattanooga, Tenn. has made remarkable progress by pairing the highest-performing teachers with the lowest-performing inner-city schools. Teachers who take on the challenge of improving nine schools that Tennessee ranks among the 20 worst schools in the state are awarded a \$5,000 bonus, and they can earn an additional \$2,000 bonus if students meet certain goals. In addition, the teachers are eligible to receive a \$10,000 loan if they want to buy a home in one of the downtown neighborhoods. Also, they get free tuition to earn their master's degrees, and they are provided free services by local lawyers. This

(See Curry, Page 12)

Frenetic gasoline costs a product of ignorance

By Bill Fletcher Jr.
Special to SentinelVoice

As fuel prices rise at the pump, quite predictably, the news media has begun to ask questions about why this is taking place and what, if anything, can be done about it. There are some hard truths that we have to face, and some of this has a direct impact on the foreign policy pursued by this country.

Most objective observers of the oil industry will admit that we are fast approaching the point where the amount of oil in the ground will begin to decline until it ultimately vanishes. In other words, oil was never limitless, though we in the U.S., especially, acted and were trained to act as if it were. So, by the mid-21st century there will likely be a severe oil crunch.

What is obscene about this situation is that experts have known this fact—regarding the inevitable disappearance of oil—for years, yet the oil industry and their political allies have largely hidden or dismissed such notions as alarmist. Well, the alarm is now beginning to ring.

The second fact is that growing numbers of countries are demanding oil for their own internal needs. This may sound self-evident, but the U.S. government often acts as if oil is being extracted for the benefit



BILL FLETCHER, JR.

of the U.S.—and perhaps Western Europe—alone. As countries such as China, India and South Africa expand their economies, there is the unfortunate reliance on fossil fuels, especially oil.

Thus, in a period where oil supplies will be thinning out, there will be greater numbers of competitors seeking the oil.

The third fact is that oil producing nations want greater control over who gets their oil and at what prices. One can see this playing out right now in the hostility of the Bush administration toward Venezuela.

The government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has asserted that as a sovereign country, they have the right to sell oil to whom they wish in order to benefit the long-term growth of Venezuela. Is this outrageous?

Apparently, the Bush administration thinks so and regularly takes the opportunity to threaten or taunt the Venezuelan government. Venezuela, however, is not by itself in wanting to use oil to help to advance their specific national objectives.

Recently former United Nations weapons inspector Hans Blix noted that he now

(See Fletcher, Page 12)

America's banks perfecting art of fleecing poor

By James Clingman
Special to SentinelVoice

Remember the old movies, where the outlaws robbed banks for a living, or the gangsters did "bank jobs" as they moved from town to town? Noted bank robber, Willie "The Actor" Sutton is said to have responded to the question, "Why do you rob banks?" by saying, "Because that's where the money is." Indeed, banks are where the money was and still is. There was a time in history when men and women made careers and established reputations by robbing banks for various reasons. Now the tables have turned; in many cases, banks are now robbing the people, no doubt under the same rationale that Willie Sutton used: "That's where the money is."

Yes, I said "robbing" the people, and I did not stutter—if that's possible to do in writing. Your friendly local bank of the past has now become a monstrosity made up of impersonal, disingenuous, mega-merger, ego-maniacal, greedy, discriminating hucksters, bent on squeezing every dime out of their customers—and anyone else who has the audacity to come into their bank asking for change for a dollar.

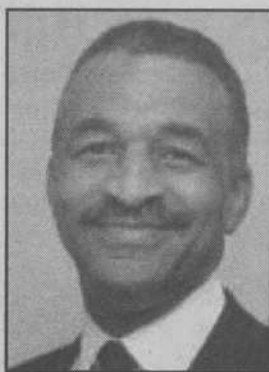
Banks have become robbers of the poor and refuges for the rich. They have grown into bastions of powerful, angry, competitive bullies vying to see who can charge the most, rather than the least, for their services. If you are fortunate enough to be "accepted" as a customer, after having been subjected to a

battery of questions that would make the Inquisition look like child's play, you are saddled with a myriad of charges and fees. There are transaction fees, analysis fees, usage fees, over-usage fees, excess deposit fees, and hosts of others that make your monthly statement look like your local telephone bill.

Maybe banks are paying us back for being robbed in broad daylight by bold, brash, unremorseful fortune-seekers, by morphing into those same kinds of characters. They are so greedy and so arrogant with their greed and actually flaunt it for all to see. Remember when ATM's came on the scene, how they were marketed as "conveniences for our valued customers." Of course, we were all willing to pay an extra 50 cents for each transaction. But \$3 per transaction in some cases? You can keep your ATM "convenience." And have you heard about Check 21?

In short, the banks can now process the checks you write almost instantaneously; no more "float" time for you. Folks who used to write their checks and make their deposits a couple of days later are now penalized for that practice even more than they were before.

However, customers who deposit checks into their accounts, in many cases, still have to wait as many as seven days for those checks to "clear" before they can withdraw



JAMES CLINGMAN

funds from them. Why doesn't Check 21 apply in those cases? Could it be another way for the banks to rob people by holding on to their money for a few more days, accruing interest along the way of course? If all checks can now be cleared instantly, why doesn't it apply to checks you deposit into your account?

Let's talk about a couple of the other fees that are strangling consumers. One is overdraft fees. I can understand charging a small penalty for the inconvenience of having to deal with a "rubber check," especially for the person to whom it is written. Believe me, I have had my share of folks giving me checks that did not have sufficient funds. A lady in Chattanooga wrote a \$15 check for one of my books; the check bounced, and I ended up losing \$25. (All she had to do was ask, and I would have given her the book, as I have on several occasions—and saved that \$10 fee the bank charged me for depositing the bad check.)

I can only imagine what that sister had to pay her bank for a measly \$15 check. You cannot convince me that banks incur costs anywhere near the \$30 charges they impose on some of their customers for bounced checks (Affluent customers, their "homies" and their families' fees are waived, of course). And we won't even go there when it comes to the multiplier effect, when other checks

start bouncing and other charges start mounting up. You can pay hundreds of dollars for a \$15 check if you are not careful.

Now, for the most dastardly fees banks are using to rob the people—the dreaded credit card interest rates, over-your-limit-fees and late payment fees. If Black folks, especially, are not moving swiftly toward being "plastic surgeons" they should be. We all need to perform plastic surgery by cutting our credit cards in two. The fees are nothing short of usury, and to add insult to injury, banks will charge outlandish fees if you inadvertently exceed your limit, the same way they do if you withdraw more than you have in your savings account from an ATM. Can't they deny the withdrawal if it exceeds the limit they gave you?

Banks penalize you excessively if you are just a couple of days late on your credit card payment, and they charge a yearly "maintenance" fee even if you have no balance. By the way, have you ever tried to close one of those accounts? It's next to impossible—and they keep charging you fees while you're trying to get out of their death grip.

I could go on, but you get the picture I'm sure, and you probably have first-hand experience. The recommendation: Use your collective leverage to stop these bank robberies in reverse. Ever heard of the Collective Banking Group?

James E. Clingman is an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati's African-American Studies department.