

# Capitol Hill turns into Capitol Grill

By Harry C. Alford  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

It has been just two months since the full congressional takeover by the Democrats. The intense activity since that moment has been as furious as a hurricane.

The White House is reeling from the Iraq War quagmire. How do we win? Can we win? How do we get out? How many more American soldiers and Iraqis must die?

There is also the scandal of the U.S. Attorney firings. The sinister scenario of firing someone for not building up a case for prosecution, factual or fictitious, against political foes is a little too much to stomach for the normal human being.

But there it is, and presidential aids and an attorney general have their jobs and reputations on the line. Congress is not going to let them slide by.

We also have the shock of the White House "dropping a dime" on a CIA undercover operative. Is there no shame or boundaries? Democratic-chaired committees are anxious to find out. One White House official is bound for jail because of this matter.

One thing about this 110th Congress is the fact that there have never been more committee and subcommittee chairs who are Black, Hispanic and/or female. The Congressional Black Caucus alone has 5 committee chairs and 17 subcommittee chairs. This is

not a bad thing.

It appears that a lot of neglect and inequities are about to be addressed, and that is good for America.

The volatile and change-making congressional hearings are again popping up, and Black advocates are getting back into the action. Change is indeed coming, and change is good.

The Small Business Administration has been shrunk to a skeleton, and when Katrina and Rita hit, the agency was simply too overwhelmed to adequately address the needs of the disaster victims — persons and businesses. Now, the new Congress is increasing SBA staffing and funding even though the agency is trying to resist.

It's like forcing money and authority down its throat. However, it is going to happen, and the next time disaster strikes, we won't be left helpless. Also, contracting to small, minority-owned businesses is going to turn around and go upward at long last.

Fraudulent reporting and anemic results will no longer be tolerated by the new Small Business Committee in the House of Representatives and Senate. When this happens, economic development and job growth are going to experience a growth spurt in the



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Gulf and in urban neighborhoods.

Oh, the quiet halls of the office buildings around Capitol Hill are once again busy with thousands of people walking fast with authority and a purpose. It is purely intense and everyone can sense a big change coming. Thank you, Lord!

Now, let's talk about the biggest change of all.

The Chair of the Homeland Security Committee for the House is the Honorable Bennie Thompson from Mississippi, and he is not going to tolerate a FEMA that ignores Black folk and treats them like a stepchild. There is a new "sheriff" in town, and he is not going to play around like the last one. The transformation of the Gulf Recovery has now begun, and the people of Louisiana and Mississippi finally have reason to hope.

The Housing Subcommittee has a new chair also.

It is the undeniable warrior, the Honorable Maxine Waters, and she has already started blitzing southern Louisiana.

The slow and miserable pace in financing and housing replenishment has turned for the better. One congressional hearing and a come-to-Jesus meeting with the principals in

the New Orleans housing situation has already resulted in positive change.

As Waters has said to them, "Some say you should be afraid of me, indeed you should."

Malfeasance, incompetence and lack of concern will not be tolerated by this Congresswoman.

The money is starting to flow, and she considers that a start. Her demand is that the funding and progress start rolling to the people like the mighty Mississippi River. It is her tenacity and vision for what is right that is going to do it.

We must support her.

From now until the job is finally done, she has pledged to do this: Every Monday morning, while she flies back from her home base of Los Angeles to DC, she will make a stop in New Orleans and inspect the progress of the Gulf Recovery. Each and every Monday there must be signs of progress, or those in charge of federal funding will have hell to pay.

She is going to, as we say in my old hood, "kick butt and take names." It is rough, ruthless and hard but it is what's needed, and this sister is the one who can do it.

The heat is on and that is good for the all of the American people.

Harry C. Alford is co-founder and CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce.

# Re-opening rights cases right thing

By Marc H. Morial  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

During the summer of 1960, when the body of 12-year-old Freddie Robinson washed up on the shore of a local creek in Edisto Island, S.C., law enforcement authorities there concluded that he must have drowned accidentally. But, Robinson's family suspected otherwise — that he had been murdered for dancing with White girls. Seven years later in Memphis, Tenn., and just a few days after participating in a civil rights demonstration, 16-year-old Larry Payne was found shot to death in a city housing project — allegedly by a police officer who accused him of looting.

The deaths of Freddie Robinson and Larry Payne are just two of nearly 100 unsolved Civil Rights Era deaths that the U.S. Justice Department, in conjunction with the FBI, will consider re-opening as part of a widespread agency initiative announced last month.

The National Urban League, NAACP and Southern Poverty Center will also be working with federal authorities to help produce evidence and witnesses that could be helpful in solving some of these "cold" cases from a bygone era when, to quote a recent *Seattle*

*Times* editorial, it was "open season on Blacks in the South."

Recent successful prosecutions of three high-profile Civil Rights Era murders brought out of the cold case file prompted national law enforcement officials to consider taking another look at unsolved deaths of Blacks occurring in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 2001, a jury convicted Thomas Blanton Jr. and Bobby Frank Cherry for the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. In 2003, Ernest Avants got life in prison for the 1966 murder of Ben White, an elderly Black farm worker. And Edgar Ray Killen was sentenced in 2005 to three 20-year terms for his involvement in the 1964 deaths of three civil rights workers in Mississippi.

And I have to say, it's about time. Our federal government needs to take comprehensive action to wash the stain — of 1950's and 1960's senseless violence against Americans of color throughout the South — out of



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the fabric of our society. But better late than never.

The news of the new Justice Department initiative, interestingly enough, came down on the same day that a grand jury failed to deliver an indictment against Carolyn Bryant, the wife of one of the suspected killers of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Chicagoan who made the fatal error of whistling at a

White woman in Mississippi. Bryant was thought to have been in the truck that hauled Till off to his death. Her husband Roy and J.W. Milam, the two main suspects in Till's killing had died long ago.

The Till case illustrates just how difficult it is for the justice system to deliver indictments, let alone convictions in murder cases in which the witnesses are getting on in years and/or the evidence has been lost or damaged or has aged. Attorney Doug Jones, who in 2001 won convictions against two of the Birmingham 1963 church bombers, expressed skepticism over whether the initiative would break down the reticence of witnesses of murders from so long ago and bring about a deluge of new information in these cases.

"We brought tons of people to the grand jury (for the church bombing case), some of whom I'm absolutely convinced committed perjury, saying they didn't know about something. Could I prove it? No way," Jones told the *Birmingham News* recently.

"But if there was ever a case for people to step forward to do some reconciliation or right a wrong, it was one when four innocent girls were killed in a bomb in a church. And guess what? We didn't have anybody like that."

But I must respectfully disagree with Mr.

Jones. Re-opening these cases may seem like a waste of time and resources to some, in light of the years that have lapsed.

But even if the Justice Department's initiative garners no new indictments or no new convictions, it is well worth the effort. At the very least, it serves as a symbolic gesture of a nation trying to come to grips with a tumultuous past. African-Americans who lived in the South before the Civil Rights Movement know all too well about terrorism — decades before the nation witnessed religious extremists slamming commercial jets into the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001.

The brand that affected southern Blacks came packaged differently or rather, euphemistically, in the form of "Jim Crow" or "the southern way of life."

In the century after the Civil War, southern Blacks endured a reign of terror. They watched their homes, businesses and churches burn to the ground. They grieved for their loved ones and friends who were beaten and murdered by lynch mobs. Not in a million years would the federal government resist seeking justice in the World Trade Center terrorism case. Why should it be any different in the cases of innocent African-Americans taken out by lynch mobs in the South?

With so many years passed, closure may not come for all the Civil Rights Era lynchings, but at least we as Americans can say we tried to right a grave wrong from our past. That way we are much less likely to repeat it.

Let me applaud the Justice Department and FBI for attempting to prove, to quote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

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## Curry

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expected to be approved by the Senate.

Two months ago, Bush ordered 21,000 additional troops to the troubled war zone. On Monday, he said: "It can be tempting to look at the challenges in Iraq and conclude that our best option is to pack up and go home. While that may be satisfying in the short run, the consequences for American security would be disastrous."

However, Democrats, who regained control of Congress largely because of voter dis-

satisfaction with a seemingly intractable war, feel pressured to change the course. Still, they are reluctant to move boldly for fear of being portrayed as not supporting combat troops.

Just how they react to Bush's threat to veto any bill that would establish a pullout date may well determine whether they win back the White House in the 2008 election.

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