

OUR VIEW

Drugs and Pain

No matter how you look at the situation, Black people can't win with drugs. A 2000 report by the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice shed light on some heartrending statistics:

- While Blacks made up about 13 percent of regular drug users in the United States, they comprised 62.7 percent of all drug offenders admitted to prison.

- Though there were five times as many White drug users as Black drug users, Black men were admitted to state prison for drug offenses at a rate that is 13.4 times greater than that of White men

- In seven states, Blacks constitute 80 to 90 percent of all drug offenders sent to prison. In 15 states, Black men were admitted to state prison for drug charges at a rate that is 20 to 57 times the White male rate.

Last month's Justice Policy Institute report on the incarceration rates of large counties (those with populations of 250,000-plus) offered more sobering data:

- While tens of millions of people use illicit drugs, prison and policing responses to drug behavior have a concentrated impact on a subset of the population. In 2002, there were 19.5 million illicit drug users, 1.5 million drug arrests, and 175,000 people admitted to prison for a drug offense. While African-Americans and Whites use and sell drugs at similar rates, African-Americans are 10 times more likely than Whites to be imprisoned for drug offenses.

- Of the 175,000 admitted to prison nationwide in 2002, over half were African-American, despite the fact that African-Americans make up less than 13 percent of the U.S. population.

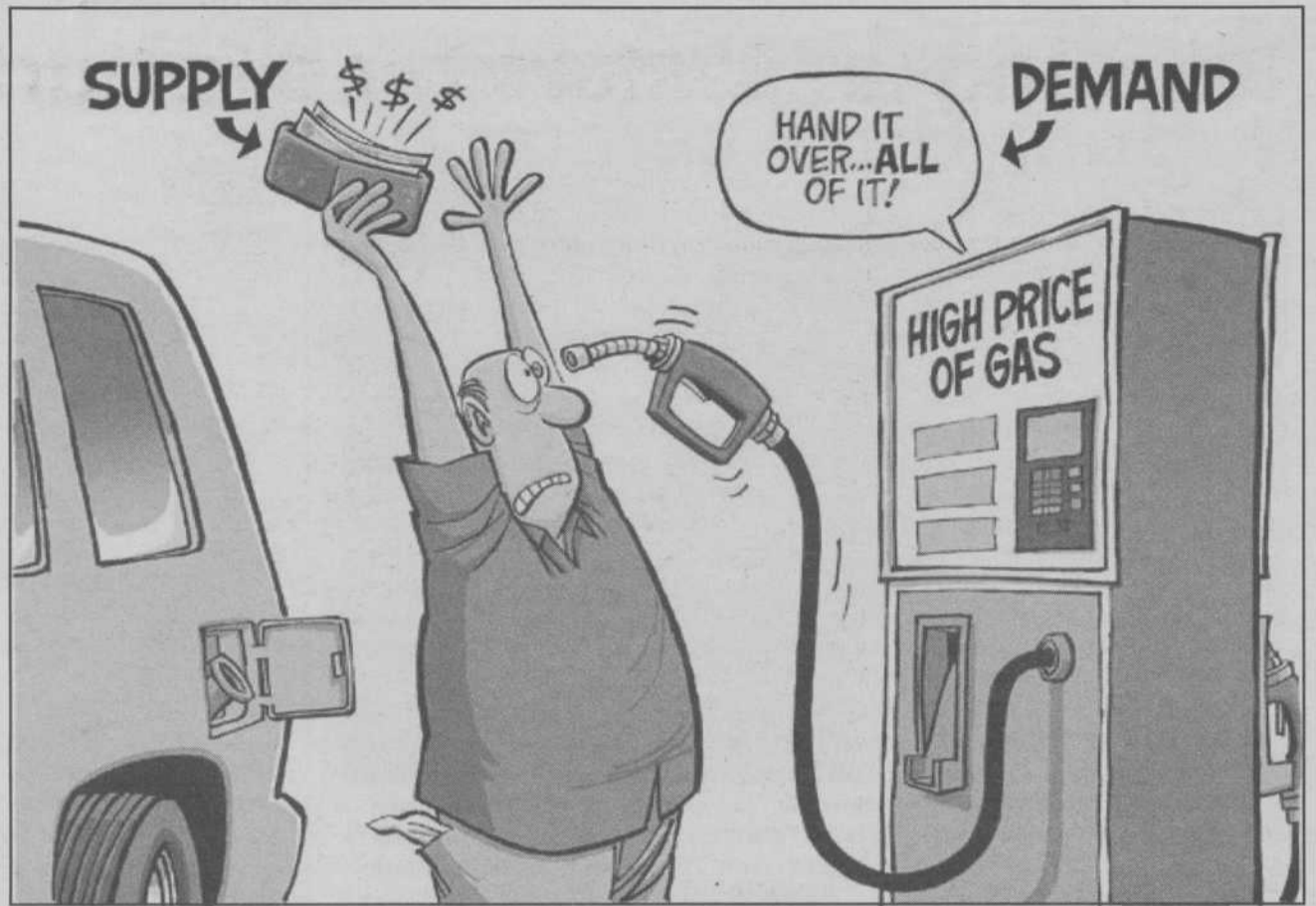
- There is no relationship between the rates at which people are sent to prison for drug offenses and the rates at which people use drugs in counties. For example, although Rockingham County, N.H., has a larger percent of its population reporting illicit drug use, Jefferson Parish, La., sent more people to prison for a drug offense at a rate 36 times that of Rockingham.

Closer to home, the *Reno-Gazette Journal*, citing a report by the Justice Policy Institute, notes reports that 16 times as many Blacks as Whites were sent to prison from Washoe County for drug offenses in 2002 — 60 percent more than the national average." So the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision allowing judges to ignore controversial guidelines in drug sentencing seems like a case of delayed justice. The court's ruling, passed 7-2, could go a long way to reduce the wide disparity between sentences dealt for crack versus powder cocaine.

On the legal drugs side of things, a new study by Dr. Mark Pletcher shows that the situation for African-Americans isn't much better. Researchers looked at 375,000 emergency room visits over 13 years and found that Black and Hispanic patients in pain are less likely than Whites to get powerful painkillers while hospitalized in emergency rooms. Thirty-one percent of Whites in pain received opioid drugs, compared to 23 percent of Blacks and 24 percent of Hispanics. Conversely, 36 percent of minority patients received acetaminophen and ibuprofen — which are less-potent, non-opioid pain relievers — during emergency room visits, compared to 26 percent of White patients. The study appeared in a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

"Studies in the 1990s showed a disturbing racial or ethnic disparity in the use of these potent pain relievers, but we had hoped that the recent national efforts at improving pain management in emergency departments would shrink this disparity," Pletcher, of the University of California at San Francisco, said in a statement.

According to the report, healthcare providers exhibit racial bias in determining if a patient is telling the truth about pain or is lying in order to obtain painkillers to either abuse or sell. The largest racial disparity, the study notes, was in providing stronger medications to hurting patients aged 12 or younger, a group unlikely to abuse drugs. We can only hope that the Supreme Court ruling and Pletcher's report can be the impetus for pushing for better pain treatment all around: that fair guidelines also lead to fairer policing procedures; that the racial discrepancies in pain management can be eradicated for good.



A message in 'The Great Debaters'

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Having watched one of the best movies I have ever seen, namely, "The Great Debaters," and having read a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* by Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, titled, "Separation Anxiety," I thought of the ironies of so-called HBCUs and the issues they face today.

I thought about the students these schools have graduated and the professionals they have produced. I thought about the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution and how they were expressly written for Black people but have, over the years, evolved into laws that some believe, and others profess, to have been written for "minorities."

I also thought about the trick-bag we have found ourselves in because many of us have all but given up on the very educational institutions that did more than any others to elevate Black people in this country.

The irony of a Black college like Wiley, home of the "great debaters," not being one of the top schools in this country is interesting, to say the least. The school at which James Farmer studied and Melvin Tolson taught should be on a very firm foundation by now.

Morris Brown, Central State, Prairie View, Grambling, Barber Scotia, and now even the iconoclastic Fisk University, as noted in the article by the Thernstroms, along with several other HBCUs, have ei-



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ther closed their doors or are fighting for their lives.

The irony of thousands of graduates, diplomas in hand, many of whom would not have had the opportunity to attend college were those schools not available, now having turned their backs on their alma maters by refusing to help them financially, is a sad commentary.

And now, the greatest of ironies is the fact that many HBCUs are portrayed as segregated institutions because they want to carry on their traditional approach to educating Black students. My, how the tables have turned and how they keep turning, not to the benefit of Black people, but to the benefit of "minorities" and others.

"The Great Debaters" illustrated part of the proud history of Black people in this land; it also displayed part of the seedy side of American history. In full context, the movie illuminates the value of Black colleges and universities, not only in their ability to educate and graduate outstanding young people, but also in their dedication and determination to see that Black students attain the kinds of values and insights that will carry them to

and through their chosen fields of endeavor.

The movie is not mere history, brothers and sisters; the same thing is occurring right now — to this day — at Historically Black College and University member institutions.

So the logical questions that follow are these: Why are our Black colleges falling by the wayside? Why are so many of them financially strapped? Why are so few of their alumni giving back to their alma maters? Where are the billion dollar endowments for Black schools of higher learning?

Something to ponder, especially during this time of uncertainty, is the attack on HBCUs from without. Painting them as bastions of segregation and discrimination, and insisting they be brought down from their previous lofty position among Black folks, are part of the latest strategy to turn us into a non-people.

Is there anything Black people can and will have in this country that will not

carry the connotation of separatist and discriminatory "in reverse?"

I am not suggesting that others cannot or should not attend HBCUs. I think they should, but not to the degree that the tradition and culture are lost in bureaucratic red tape and governmental intervention.

Black schools are our beacons of encouragement, bastions of pride, and havens of concern by teachers who sincerely want each student to be successful and will do what needs to be done to make that a reality.

So, don't be lulled to sleep with yet another ploy to reduce Black folks to an even lower point of identity in this country.

Support HBCUs with your money and your intellect, much of which was obtained on an HBCU campus; and even if it wasn't, you should support HBCUs anyway. Heaven knows, we need something we can call our own, and we need to continue the line of Samantha Booke, (See Clingman, Page 9)

NEVADA'S ONLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER
LAS VEGAS Sentinel Voice
GRIOT COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.
1997-2007

Nevada's only African-American community newspaper.
Published every Thursday by Griot Communications Group, Inc.
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Member: National Newspaper Publishers Association
and West Coast Black Publishers Association