

Housing protesters tried to hurt Black progress

By Harry C. Alford
Special to Sentinel-Voice

There has been much press and attention given to the active and sometimes violent protesters in New Orleans who are trying to stop the construction of new housing by the Housing Authority of New Orleans.

One must wonder why in the world a group of people would try to stop the building of new housing in a city that drastically needs new housing. It becomes very clear, as you look at the mostly White protesters, that those needing the new housing weren't the ones out there trying to stop it.

In fact, the tenant associations of the major public housing units are very excited about the new four major projects that will now begin construction this summer. Over 1,000 mixed-income units replete with schools, medical clinics and retail centers will replace the structures destroyed by Katrina. As they are being built, up to 30 percent of the jobs created by this construction will go to residents of the targeted housing units or others who live under the poverty level. At least 25 percent of the contracts will go to minority business owners. Of the four projects, two will be performed by 100 percent Black-owned developers, and the other two have significant Black ownership. This is going to be a first for the whole nation. Sometimes I wonder if the organizers of these protests were more upset about that than any-

thing else.

In the beginning, lawyers were provided to tie up the reconstruction process through the courts. It has been more than a year that the city's housing authority had to deal with the legal challenges. However, that probably was a blessing, as our local Black-owned businesses in the New Orleans area were trying to re-establish their businesses from the hurricane damage.

The matter is out of court, and our National Black Chamber of Commerce member contractors have themselves ready for the opportunity. The challengers to the new housing decided to try and stop the demolition of the damaged units to clear the property for the new construction.

There they were, acting like the anti-war protesters of the 1970s. The police department of New Orleans deserves much praise for their patience and restraint. They dealt with the sometimes violent crowd in a very professional manner.

Just who are they? Where do they come from?

Well, I have seen them before. The cause may be different but the tactics are the same. Many will try to act as if they are coming to the aid of the downtrodden and abused. But,



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their middle-class pedigree soon becomes exposed. They are indeed "Poverty Pimps" trying to gain power at the expense of those who need change the most.

A few years ago, they showed up in St. James Parish, LA, to protest the building of the new Shintech chemical plant.

That facility was to provide hundreds of new jobs and economic rejuvenation to a predominantly Black community (80 percent unemployed). But no, the protesters left their comfortable communities and rallied in St. James Parish to protest, sue and disrupt any activity towards progress. They did this under the guise of "Environmental Racism."

Yes, the connivers claimed that the Japanese company Shintech was conspiring with big U.S. businesses to destroy further the health of the Black residents of St. James Parish.

Eventually, Shintech got tired of the adversity and decided not to build in that immediate area. However, they moved 40 miles south and built the facility in Plaquemines Parish, which is predominantly White.

It was such a success that the company is expanding the facility and building a new plant right down the street. In addition, other

companies have come to the friendly Plaquemines community that is now enjoying an economic boom. The wealth and opportunities that Shintech has brought to this community rival anyplace else in the nation.

Meanwhile, St. James Parish is still an economic wasteland suffering from immense poverty. The protesters blew this great opportunity for the Black community that badly needed it.

So now, here they are again on TV, and they are trying to block the rebuilding of New Orleans. Fortunately, the local government of New Orleans is not caving in. The city council unanimously voted to approve the reconstruction, and the mayor and other elected officials are pressing on. This time, they are going to lose.

The stakes are way too high, and we are determined to provide this community with what it needs the most. Power grabbing will not be allowed to happen.

These opportunists try to manipulate the oppressed into believing that they lead their cause while actually conspiring to make things worse. Good things for Blacks and the economically disadvantaged make the "poverty pimps" feel very uncomfortable.

New Orleans is coming back. Better, cleaner and prosperous like never before.

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Crack-cocaine ruling brings early Christmas present

By Marc H. Morial
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Christmas may have come early this year for the families of thousands of federal inmates with crack-cocaine convictions, thanks to recent actions by the U.S. Supreme Court, President George W. Bush and the U.S. Sentencing Commission.

Back in the 1980s at the height of the crack epidemic in urban America, our nation's leaders labored under the misconception that the less expensive form of cocaine was much more addictive than its powder form, based on the testimony of an "expert" government witness. Distorted visions of crack babies overtaking inner cities danced in their heads, much to the detriment of fair and reasonable public policy.

As a result, the U.S. Congress mandated harsher sentences for possession and distribution of crack. Under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, those convicted of possessing

50 grams of the "crack" form of cocaine faced the same time behind bars as those convicted of possessing and/or selling 100 times as much of the power form. The result? Prisons swelled with petty criminals, a disproportionate number — as much as 85 percent — African-American, not the drug kingpins of the world.

"For two decades, the United States has pursued, prosecuted and sentenced cocaine offenders in a way that borders on insanity — targeting petty criminals over serious drug dealers — while fostering contempt, instead of respect, for the policies that have sent tens of thousands to jail," writes Ellis Cose in a recent *Newsweek* online column.

In an early December 7-2 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court decided to give federal



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judges leeway in sentencing for crack convictions. The case in question involved a Desert Storm veteran named Derrick Kimbrough who was found to possess crack, powder cocaine and a gun, offenses that should have sent him to prison for two decades or more.

Had he possessed only powder cocaine he would

have faced half the sentence, concluded Judge Raymond Jackson, who presided over the trial, in giving Kimbrough a lesser-than-mandated 15-year sentence. An appeals court overruled Jackson's decision only to be reversed by the nation's highest court.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who authored the decision with John Paul Stevens, concluded that if powder and crack cocaine, the product of powder cocaine and baking soda crystallized, possess "the same physiological and psychotropic effects," then their users should be treated the same. The ruling deemed the 1986 law that created the disparate sentencing guidelines as "disproportionate and unjust."

Then, in a rare show of mercy a few hours after the decision, President Bush cut the sentence of Michael D. Short, who had been convicted of aiding a crack-cocaine ring, one year short. It was one of only five commutations granted during his presidency. And a day later, the U.S. Sentencing Commission announced that up to 20,000 federal inmates with crack convictions could be eligible for sentence reductions.

Graham Boyd, director of the ACLU's drug reform project, described the recent court decision to *Newsweek* as the first since the mid-1980s "that actually talks about justice, that seems to have some blood in it."

The recent developments provide a welcomed relief for the families left behind, as

well as the incarcerated. Karen Garrison, a Washington, D.C., mother of twin sons who were jailed in 1998 on crack offenses, is just one of many beneficiaries of the recent sentencing decision and subsequent developments. She told the Associated Press that she can now "just plan some kind of life" with her sons possibly on their way home.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Justice Department has sounded unwarranted alarms over the sentencing commission's decision, contending that it would result in unleashing thousands of "dangerous prisoners, many of them violent gang members" back into communities ill-equipped to handle them, according to a statement by acting Deputy Attorney General Craig S. Morford.

The department probably wouldn't be as worried over the prospect of a "mass" inmate release if Uncle Sam made prisoner re-entry programs a priority in the first place.

Overall, the latest developments toward eliminating sentencing disparities are likely to have a limited impact because the vast majority of drug convictions come out of state courts. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice, they outnumbered those in federal courts by a ratio of 15 to 1 in 2004.

Nevertheless, the recent course of events is important. What happens on the federal level could change the course of history at the state level.

But first, the U.S. Congress must act to ensure that the disparities in sentencing are eliminated for good. The recent events, by no means, guarantee an end to harsh punishments for crack defendants. Our nation's lawmakers must give the justice system and its enforcers direct and clear guidance just like they did in the 1980s when they decided to hold small-time crack dealers to a more stringent standard than their drug kingpin counterparts.

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Henry Lowe, James Farmer, and Melvin Tolson, all characters in "The Great Debaters."

Why are we so scared of being proud of who we are? Why are we so reluctant to fight for what our forebears worked so hard for us to have? How are we so easily swayed to believe the nonsense of reverse discrimination, especially when Blacks have been the most tolerant, patient, accommodating, open and accepting of all ethnic groups in this country?

It seems we can be intimidated by just about anything that is promulgated by outsiders as "divisive" or "separate," as in the case of Africa Town in Detroit. HBCUs are among the few traditions Blacks have left in this country; we'd better hold on to them and stop settling for statues and street names.

The Thernstrom article aptly and rightly

pointed to the fact that, "In a free society, many private and public institutions will have a distinctive profile. Group clustering is not necessarily unhealthy; indeed, it's an inescapable feature of a multiethnic nation. No one worries that there are "too many" Jews at Yeshiva and Brandeis, "too many" Catholics at Notre Dame and Holy Cross, "too many" Mormons at Brigham Young. And so it should be with Howard, Fisk and Mississippi Valley State. That's what democratic pluralism means."

Long live HBCUs. Thanks to the many who contribute their time and money to HBCUs. And, kudos to Oprah and Denzel for making "The Great Debaters."

It was a pleasure. When you see it, please don't miss the message.

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