

# OUR VIEW Words Hurt

Sticks and stones break bones, the old saying goes, but words will never hurt me. What a fallacy. If words haven't caused more damage than actual weapons, then words have arguably been a primary factor in violence since time immemorial. The power of words is unmistakable. Loose lips sink ships. Freedom of speech—just watch what you say. If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all. We give as much attention to words as we do actions because words cause action.

We've been inundated with examples in the past few months. The controversy over the comments by Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity Baptist Church in Chicago was/is—Sen. Hillary Clinton's camp won't let the incendiary comments by Sen. Barack Obama's pastor die—all about words. By now, his inflammatory comments are fairly well known; he blamed the United States for the Sept. 11 attacks, which is a sentiment that is shared by a lot of people. Lost in the hype about how Obama could affiliate with such an anti-American proponent is the fact that Wright served his country. He gave up his student deferment, left college and joined the U.S. Marine Corps, becoming a part of the 2nd Marine Division. He held the rank of private first class. After two years, he transferred to the Navy, graduating as valedictorian of the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. He was later trained as a cardiopulmonary technician at the National Naval Medical Center.

Much has also been made of Obama's own choice of words. He said that people in small towns often become "bitter" and "cling to guns or religion" when they're upset with government. A firestorm ensued. It shouldn't have. However inarticulate the phrasing, Obama's assessment was dead on. As he explained in Wednesday's debate in Pennsylvania, tiffs over semantics distract Americans from the real issues and make it easy for hot-button wedge issues like immigration reform and abortion to decide the tenor of political discourse.

At least Obama sticks to his guns when it comes to word choice. Rep. Geoff Davis, R-Ky., is eating his words. And he should. Davis called Obama a "boy" during a dinner in northern Kentucky. Yes, very dumb, particularly in these racially charged times. "My poor choice of words is regrettable and was in no way meant to impugn you or your integrity," Davis wrote in a letter to Obama. "I offer my sincere apology to you and ask for your forgiveness. Though we may disagree on many issues, I know that we share the goal of a prosperous, secure future for our nation. My comment has detracted from the dialogue that we should all be having on legitimate policy differences and in no way reflects the personal and professional respect I have for you."

Heated rhetoric is part and parcel of the political process. People are passionate, which is good. Clearly people need to take into account the full context of all that's floating in the atmosphere and be careful not to pull out only the things which fit with their worldview. Taken in context, one can be patriotic and still think America is fundamentally, if not fatally, flawed. However, there's no other context into which to read using the term "boy" to describe a Black man. It's derogatory through and through.

## More on words

Maybe it's not the same controversy as Hurricane Katrina, when Whites escaping the flooded New Orleans area were called evacuees and Blacks referred to as refugees. That was explicit racism. This is something less nefarious but no less nettlesome. The Mormon commune in recently raided in Texas has been referred to as a compound. Authorities swooped in after reports of child endangerment. Who knew that a call was all it took?

Perhaps we should rename rough neighborhoods compounds. Maybe then those areas, where children face a vast array of dangers—from drugs and gangs to parental abandonment and physical abuse to substandard housing and limited educational opportunities to sparse recreational amenities and lack of jobs to a dearth of role models and high incarceration rates, and the list goes on—will get attention of federal officials and lawmakers who will finally devote the resources to these neighborhoods.



# Let's liberate Blacks from prison

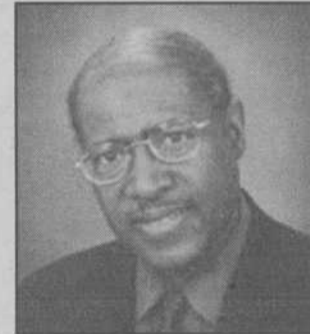
By Ron Walters  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

A new study by the Pew Center has just confirmed something we have known for quite a while. The United States went on an incarceration binge in the first Bush and Clinton administrations that now finds America holding one-quarter of all the prisoners in the world. It says that one in every 100 Americans is in jail, while one in every nine Blacks are there, with one of 15 Blacks between the ages of 18-39.

Whether it is that America is embarrassed or, in the case of some politicians, see that the "tough on crime" era did not amount to crime reduction, or financial savings, or added safety, this approach to the drug epidemic did not work. And while 66 percent of crack cocaine users are White, policing drugs led to policing Blacks, resulting in the fact that 80 percent of those locked up are for petty drug offenses.

Now it seems that there is a developing mood in the Congress among both Democrats and Republicans that something should be done. Virginia Rep. Bobby Scott has introduced HR 5035, a bill that is supported by the NAACP and other groups to reduce the sentences for possession of crack cocaine.

The bill would eliminate the added penalties for cocaine base use, eliminate the mandatory minimum sentence associated with it and use the savings for drug treat-



RON WALTERS

ment and counseling. Scott recently held hearings that featured an array of people, from a Black former drug dealer, a judge, an NIH official, a state official and others who all agreed that the disparities in cocaine sentencing together with mandatory minimums has failed..

As I listened to the hearings, I remembered the era of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when each and every politician running for office was obliged to show that he or she could be tougher on crime than the other person.

In fact, what transpired before our eyes was a discussion about race, justifying the long sentences given Blacks, suggesting that since crack cocaine fostered violence in their neighborhoods severe punishment would cure the problem.

Now, more than 1 million imprisoned Americans later, we know that not only has it not worked, it has created bloated state expenditures on jail construction rather than schools, leading to the need for intensified policing to fill the jails and in the process provide the cheap labor for

prison industries associated with them.

But I also remember that in 1997, Rep Maxine Waters called on then-President Bill Clinton to provide \$5 billion in construction money for dilapidated schools and to ease the drug sentencing guidelines for powder and crack cocaine.

But while Al Gore advocated equalizing the penalties before an organization of Black journalists, the Trotter Group, Bill Clinton clung to the belief that the impact of violence associated with the drug trade was a justification for keeping some inequality between the drugs.

This weak rationale associated with sentencing that was never fully vetted, since both drug crack and powder influenced Black and White communities dramatically in some way.

So, even as Supreme Court Justice Stephen Bryer and other lower-level judges rebelled against the use of

mandatory minimum sentencing as unfair and racially biased, and the Sentencing Commission recommended equalization to the Clinton administration, Rep. Waters received neither the \$5 billion, nor the drug equalization change from Clinton. She had a special reason, of course, because it was her district that was flooded by the importation of crack in the mid-1980s, as a result of the Reagan administration inspired Iran-Contra scandal where the CIA used money from the drug sales to finance the war against the Contras in Nicaragua.

In this election, there is perhaps no greater issue for the Black community than liberating as many of its members as possible that were legislated into prison by the anti-crime craze of an earlier era. What makes it appear to have been an action taken against the Black community is the fact that an FBI (See Walters, Page 11)

NEVADA'S ONLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

## LAS VEGAS Sentinel Voice

GRIT COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.  
THE FUTURE BEGINS WITH YOU FIRST

Nevada's only African-American community newspaper.  
Published every Thursday by Griot Communications Group, Inc.  
900 East Charleston Boulevard • Las Vegas, Nevada 89104  
Telephone (702) 380-8100  
Email: lvsentinelvoice@yahoo.com

**Contributing Writers:**  
Shirley Savage  
Lés Pierres Streater  
Kanika Vann

**Ramon Savoy**, Publisher, Editor-in-Chief  
**Don Snook**, Graphics  
**Ed & Betty Brown**, Founders

Member: National Newspaper Publishers Association  
and West Coast Black Publishers Association