

OPINION

THE CHRONICLE

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Both Personal and Collective Responsibility



Ron Walters
 Guest Columnist

Lou Dobbs of CNN produced his panel the other night to explain what was underneath the awful image of castration used by Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., in voicing his frustration with Barack Obama.

His panel completely missed the lively underground disappointment among some Blacks who support Obama, reflected in these two headlines: "Obama Calls For More Responsibility for Black Fathers," reflecting his speeches recently to large Black audiences such as the Apostolic Church in Chicago and the AME Convention; then another headline, "Obama Brings Economic Message to N. Virginia" in which - before a largely White audience of 10,000 - he proposed legislation to ensure equal pay for women, expanded paid family and medical leave, child-care services and pre-school programs, all paid for by reducing the Iraq War funding.

The rhetoric of the moral failure of Black men has helped to nationalize an image of their inferiority. But after serving on a Commission on the Black Male, I have become sensitive to the facts that Black families fall apart - or are never consummated - most often because Black men lack education and/or money, and therefore, Black women do not see them as viable partners. Part of the pressure to get money in the absence of an education pushes Black men into bad choices that result in their disproportionate incarceration or other conditions. So they are often not available as fathers to provide for their families.

This image of the mass irresponsibility of Black males also gives a pass to the difficulty for anyone to accept responsibility for a family where access to the economic resources are difficult and they are often blocked by racism. Research shows that Black children arrive at most schools three to four years already behind White children, and their disproportionate poverty places them in schools that do not have the resources - in fact, they need much greater resources than average - just to educate them on an equal basis. The 50 percent drop-out rate manifests this result and so, they become fuel for the streets.

They also become fuel for a racist public policy that sweeps them up by racial profiling, targeted neighborhood policing and long sentences into prison, even though 80 percent of them are there for non-violent, petty drug offenses. Where is the outcry for the collective responsibility of government that put them there and therefore, is

implicated in their inability to support their families? Where are the bridging programs that effectively connect them to their families while they are in prison?

Rep. Danny Davis of Chicago should be applauded for passage of his Second Chance Act that promises to build a foundation for those just leaving prison, but my discussion with him reveals that it has not been funded.

Barack Obama should be applauded for proposing to create a White House Office on Urban Policy because when Black males go to the street for their livelihood, they will find few positive options because urban policy has been on the back-burner of public policy for nearly 30 years now.

How did that happen? Ronald Reagan was able to sell America on "personal responsibility" rather than government assistance to blunt charges of racism as implicated in Black progress.

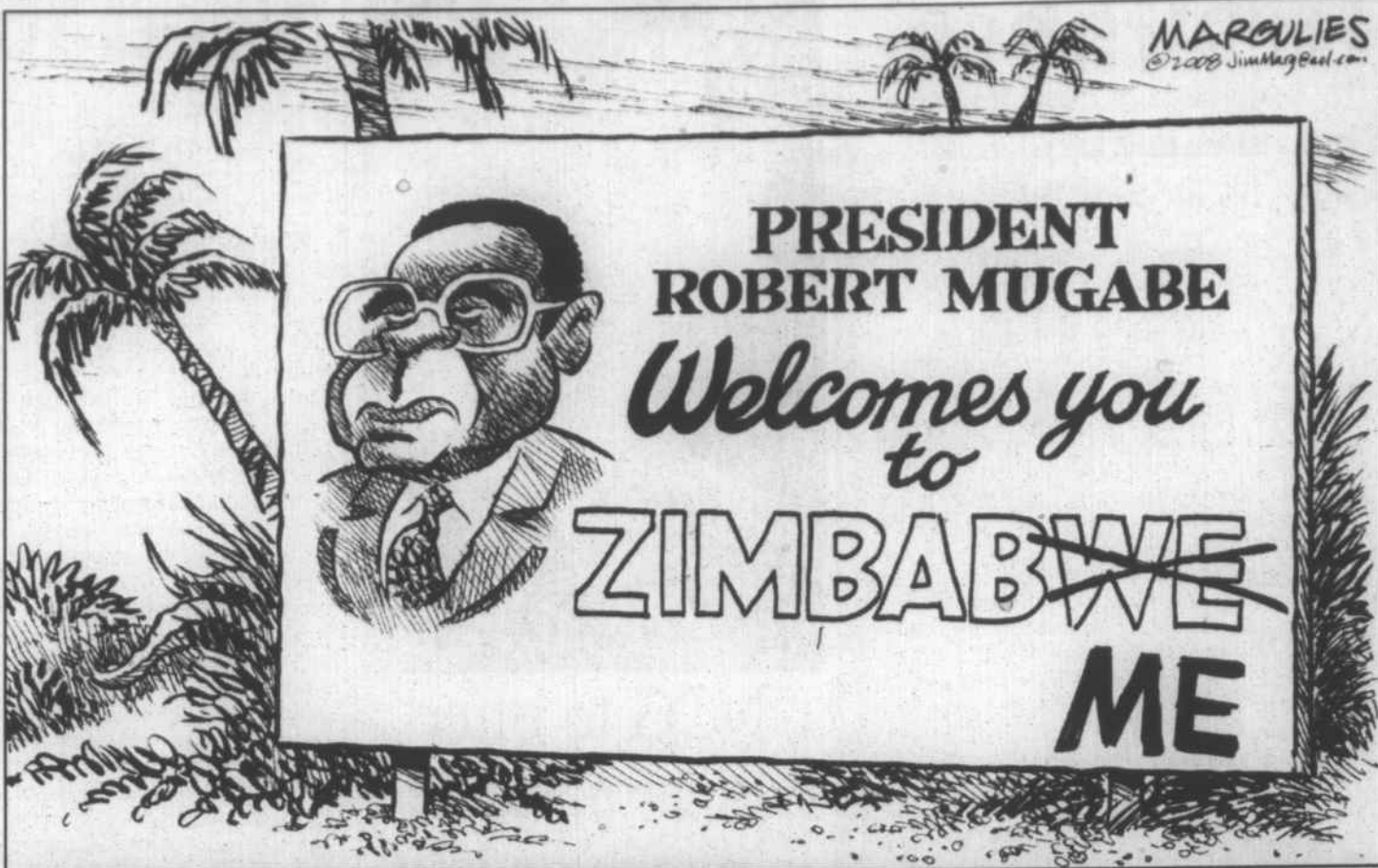
With that support, he was able to take billions of dollars from cities to give to the suburbs, private corporations and the Defense establishment.

Therefore, the sensitivity of Blacks to the principle of "personal responsibility" is the awareness of its danger; it has been elevated from a natural act of virtue that blacks have consistently performed to a powerful political ideology of the Right that marginalized the image of blacks and supported the dramatic shift of government resources out of urban areas. So that, today even a new "urban policy" must be targeted to achieve results.

The sensitivity to the ideology of personal responsibility also reflects the intellectual awareness that in the absence of balanced proposals that also privilege a robust version of the collective responsibility of government, the large structural problems that are faced by the Black community will not be addressed. These problems that ravage cities and their Black neighborhoods now include: the home foreclosure crisis, globalization of the economy and jobs, competition for low-wage employment, depression level unemployment rates, the persistence of poverty and under-education and crumbling infrastructure of urban institutions and places.

This debate should result in both presidential candidates speaking to those needs, giving concrete public policy answers to the question of how they would address them, especially at venues where Black audiences are gathered.

Dr. Ron Walters is the Distinguished Leadership Scholar, Director of the African American Leadership Center, and Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland College Park. His latest book is: "The Price of Racial Reconciliation" (University of Michigan Press).



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

"Black In America" discussion, viewing

To the Editor:

A local coalition effort is being organized to encourage the citizens of our community to watch CNN's documentary, "Black In America" scheduled to air July 23 - 24. A community viewing will be at the Forsyth County Democratic Headquarters, located at 1128 Burke Street (off West 4th Street downtown) on Wednesday, July 23 and Thursday, July 24 at 9 p.m.

According to CNN, "Black In America" examines the complex issues, success and struggles of black men, women and families. "As a community, there is an ongoing need to access our progress and plan for our future. It is imperative that the community remembers that



CNN Photo

Anchor Soledad O'Brien will host the report.

all politics are local," states Fleming El-Amin, chair of the Forsyth County Democratic Party. "This CNN documentary serves as a springboard for dialogue and provides an ideal time

to have courageous conversations about its impact on the Winston-Salem, Forsyth County community."

A forum discussion about the issues presented in the docu-

mentary will be held at Emmanuel Baptist Church on Tuesday, July 29th at 6:30 p.m. A local panel of community leaders will have a town hall conversation about the impact of these issues on our local community. We invite the public to attend both of these events. There will be an opportunity for the general public to enter their commentary on a blog site and list their questions after watching each segment of the documentary. There will also be live opinion polls. It's time to have a frank, honest discussion about us for us.

To reserve a seat at the viewing or for more information, contact Cheryl Harry at 336-793-7462 or Fleming El-Amin at Ntv754@yahoo.com.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Harry
 Winston-Salem

Don't ignore voices of ex-felons



Henrie Treadwell
 Guest Columnist

When Election Day arrives in November, the state of Virginia will likely play a huge role in determining whether Democrat Barack Obama or Republican John McCain is the next President of the United States. Unfortunately, the vote tally from the Old Dominion will be illegitimate because the state will disenfranchise nearly 350,000 individuals who are barred from voting because of felony convictions.

Across the country, Obama's unique ability to energize young, African American and independent voters is turning traditional "Red States," such as Virginia, into potential Democratic pick-ups. But as attention shifts to these new swing states it also raises awareness of the restrictive voting eligibility laws that will disproportionately prevent many blacks from participating in the election.

Nationwide there are several million people who are ineligible to vote because of various state laws that restrict voting by ex-felons released from prison. If those currently serving time for felony convictions are added to ex-felons released from prison a total of 5.3 million people won't be allowed to vote. Clearly, this disenfranchisement could impact the outcome of the election since the vote in swing states will be close. This could hurt Obama because a disproportionate number of ex-felons are African Americans and blacks have overwhelmingly supported his campaign.

Virginia, for instance, is one of two states (Kentucky being the other) that does not allow ex-felons to vote under any circumstances. Currently, there are



340,522 people living in Virginia communities and paying taxes, who cannot vote, according to The Sentencing Project, a national organization seeking criminal justice reforms. Some states allow ex-felons to vote, but disqualify those on probation or parole. In total, 48 out of the 50 states have felon disenfranchisement laws.

Moreover, while health experts have identified prison inmates and ex-convicts returning to their communities as people often facing major health problems, many will not be able to vote even as creating a new health policy in America looms as one of the most important issues in the presidential campaign.

Mark Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, emphasized that point: "The main problem is that we have a very important election coming up and 5 million people won't be able to vote because of previous or current convictions. They legally cannot vote."

In Florida, another key state in November, 1,089,911 people can't vote because the state places voting restrictions on ex-felons released from prison, as well as those on probation and

parole. There are also a number of disenfranchised ex-felons in other key states, such as: New Jersey (99,136), North Carolina (37,352), Georgia (232,972), Louisiana (59,971), New Mexico (10,955), Colorado (6,920), Missouri (60,428) and Nevada (32,440).

Despite voting rights legislation that was designed to ensure that minorities can vote, the felony disenfranchisement laws remain as a potent example of structural racism.

While felon disenfranchisement laws were on the books prior to the Civil War, once the 15th Amendment allowed blacks to vote the laws were updated to include the types of crimes most often committed by blacks back then, such as robbery and vagrancy. Today, the felony disenfranchisement laws have re-emerged as the largest suppresser of minority voting.

One major misconception is the belief that people of color are impacted more because they commit more crimes. The reality, however, is that the nation's criminal justice system arrests and prosecutes people of color at higher rates than whites, and minorities receive longer prison sentences after convictions for

the same crimes as whites. For instance, African Americans make up 14 percent of the nation's drug users, yet our state prisons are filled with blacks convicted of drug related crimes. According to the Americans Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) - blacks are 56 percent of those in state prisons for drug crimes.

Another issue is that the definition of a felony varies from state to state, and in some places, such as Mississippi, writing a bad check is classified as a felony, and can prevent someone from being eligible to vote.

Still, there has been some progress. Florida Gov. Charlie Crist enacted rules last year that made it easier for more than 100,000 former prisoners to regain their voting rights, but the state still has a million felons who are unable to vote. In Virginia, Gov. Tim Kaine is seeking to restore voting rights for ex-convicts, and other efforts are underway across the country.

Supporters of the disenfranchisement laws have never presented any evidence that restricting the right to vote deters crime in any way. It is an undemocratic practice that is followed by few other democracies in the world. Throughout Europe, most nations allow criminals to vote while they are incarcerated and for those that don't, voting rights are usually fully restore upon release.

As voters express their desire for change in America's presidential campaign, part of the change should be ensuring that all Americans can execute their constitutional right to vote.

Dr. Henrie M. Treadwell, associate director of Development at the National Center for Primary Care at Morehouse School of Medicine, is also director of Community Voices, a non-profit working to improve health services, and health-care access, for all Americans.