

# FORUM

## Fond memories of Sen. Ervin



**R. Lewis Ray**  
Guest Columnist



The late Sen. Sam Ervin was one of North Carolina's most beloved leaders.

By 1974, I, R. Lewis Ray, a graduate of Winston-Salem State University and a 1969 graduate of N.C. Central University Law School, had become a well known local trial lawyer and decided to try to fulfill an old dream.

While serving as an Air Force enlisted man, I had envied the privileges, as well as the pay, of commissioned officers, and knew that, as a lawyer, it was possible to be directly commissioned as a captain, skipping both grades of lieutenant.

In seeking one of the rare commissions in the Judge Advocate General Corp of the U.S. Army Reserve, knowing there were only 20 to be granted that year to lawyers in 50 states, I decided to solicit the help of Wilmer Mizell, who was then the U. S. Representative in the 5th District, asking him to in turn to contact Senator Jesse Helms for his assistance, since they were both members of the same political party.

Their response letters

evoked little enthusiasm and no encouragement. Both Mizell and Helms sent me copies of Army letters pointing out that "the competition is very keen for the few vacancies" and saying, "there is no assurance that Mr. Ray will be selected."

Now, not willing to give up, I then wrote to Senator Sam Ervin, who was rather busy that summer as

Chairman of the Watergate Hearing Committee, whose actions led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Quickly, Ervin dispatched this reply: "In an effort to be of all possible assistance to you ... I have intervened with the Secretary of the Army and with the Commanding General of the First United States Army at Fort Meade, Maryland. I shall keep you advised."

Within days, First Army headquarters recommended approval. I got my silver captain bars.

My relationship with Senator Ervin dates back to 1968, beginning when I was a third-year law student and president of the Student Bar Association at North Carolina Central University Law School in Durham.

In the minds of state budgetary legislators, NCCU Law School, a product of the Separate but Equal Doctrine Era, had served its purpose, and so UNC Chapel Hill Law School began just 12 miles away. The law school at Central was being threatened; there was talk of closing it.

I wrote Senator Sam Ervin a letter, and he responded. He said the school had been a real service to the community, and that he had some good friends who had graduated from Central.

He said he knew some people in higher education in state government and that he would certainly speak to them on the school's behalf. The school was saved and has since prospered. It has produced such graduates as our own Governor Mike Easley, Class of 1976, and nationally renowned attorney, Willie Gary, known for his class action lawsuits, among many other well known graduates.

The next year, when I began to practice law, Ervin, himself a member of the North Carolina Bar, wrote me a personal letter, addressed to "Honorable Robert L. Ray."

"I wish to extend to you my heartiest congratulations upon your passing the North Carolina bar examination," the Senator wrote, adding: "I know of no field of endeavor which offers more satisfaction. Furthermore, no one can fire you except your clients, and they will never do so as long as you render them intelligent and loyal service."

For me, the brief association with Ervin, even from a distance, had been pleasant. I kept the letters and assumed the I would have no further contact with Ervin. As you have seen, I was wrong.

R. Lewis Ray is an accomplished local legal professional.

## Feds run HIV/AIDS numbers game



**George Curry**  
Guest Columnist

**MEXICO CITY** - When it comes to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, the federal government has been running a numbers game. That was verified this week when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledged that it has been underestimating the number of HIV cases each year by 40 percent.

That means instead of 40,000 cases annually - the CDC standard estimate - there were, in fact, 56,300 new infections.

AIDS activists have been saying for years that CDC understated the extent of the epidemic. But government officials turned a deaf ear, haughtily saying they were the experts, and community activists, who were closer to the community, did not know what they were talking about.

Phill Wilson, the executive director of the Los Angeles-based Black AIDS Institute, was one of those voices screaming to be heard.

"The CDC's announcement makes me very angry," he said after learning about the new figures. "Had the government listened to the Black AIDS Institute and others - had they respected what we were telling them - there is a possibility that we could have been able to prevent some of these infections."

If the numbers game

stopped there, it would be bad enough. But it doesn't. Equally disturbing is the gap in global and domestic spending on AIDS.

"Over the last five years, the White House and Congress have increased spending on HIV prevention, treatment and support programs for low-income countries dramatically - at the same time that domestic spending has remained all but flat," concludes a report by the Black AIDS Institute titled, "Left Behind."

A chart in the report makes the point. In 2005, U.S. spending on AIDS globally increased by 21 percent while domestic spending on AIDS remained unchanged. The following year, global spending increased by 22 percent and domestic spending decreased by 4 percent. In 2007, international spending jumped by 46 percent while domestic spending increased by only 2.5 percent. This year, global spending is expected to increase by 34 percent while domestic spending inches up by 1.2 percent.

"Black communities throughout the United States continue to bear a disproportionate share of the AIDS epidemic," the Left Behind report states. "More than 500,000 Black Americans are living with HIV, and more than 20,000 or more become infected each year. Blacks living with HIV have an age-adjusted death rate more than twice as high as HIV-infected whites."

Nearly one of every two people living with HIV in the U.S. is Black. AIDS is the



Phill Wilson

leading cause of death among Black women between 25-34 years and the second-leading cause of death in Black men between 35-44 years of age. Black women are 23 times more likely to be diagnosed with AIDS than White women.

Blacks make up 70 percent of new HIV diagnoses among teenagers.

Stung by those numbers, the Congressional Black Caucus prodded Congress in 1998 to establish a Minority AIDS Initiative, with the goal of reducing HIV-related racial and ethnic disparities.

"Between 1999 and 2008, federal appropriations for the Minority AIDS Initiative roughly doubled, rising from \$199 million to \$403 million," the Black AIDS report noted. "During that same period, by contrast, U.S. govern-

ment funding for global AIDS programs (excluding research) rose 37-fold - from \$146 million to \$5.5 billion."

The U.S. should be applauded for taking on the leadership role in combating AIDS internationally. But it has a lot more work to do at home.


"While international spending on AIDS by the U.S. government increased by more than 14-fold between 1995 and 2004, HIV prevention spending rose by a mere 46%, or at rate roughly comparable to the increase in the cost of living."

On Monday, a group of AIDS experts attending the international AIDS convention here proposed that the U.S. spend \$1.3 billion a year to implement a comprehensive national prevention strategy.

"It is outrageous that the U.S. AIDS epidemic, especially the Black epidemic, gets no attention, and that we American citizens have to fight so hard for basic, life-saving services," said Pernessa Seale, founder and CEO of the Balm in Gilead. "...As the U.S. has chronically neglected its own AIDS epidemic, that the epidemic has continued and grown - a tragedy that is completely unnecessary and that must be reversed."

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of *Emerge* magazine and the *NNPA News Service*, is a keynote speaker, moderator, and media coach. He can be reached through his Web site, [www.georgecurry.com](http://www.georgecurry.com).

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