

# OPINION/ FORUM

THE CHRONICLE

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## Blacks must advocate for health care reform

Congress seems to be putting the final touches on health care reform legislation, arranging to provide health care, especially, for the uninsured.

Anyone who has made the summer rounds of civil rights conventions understands that African-American policy makers care about this issue. Still, there seems to be no passionate advocacy for health care reform.

Our presence in this debate is much needed – we have a dog in this fight. African-Americans are more likely than others to be uninsured, so the many ways our new legislation will make insurance available is important. And even when we are insured, the way that health problems hit us are most different. According to the Centers for Disease Control, African-Americans and Hispanics “bear a disproportionate burden of disease, injury, and disability.” African-Americans, in particular, are more likely to be killed or to die of HIV than others are.



**Julianne Malveaux**  
 Guest Columnist

There is more – we are more likely to be obese, to have high blood pressure, diabetes, or to experience strokes. The obesity hits us early – our children are carrying more weight than they need to, and our community has done little to promote healthy eating. We experience cancer earlier than others, especially breast cancer, and we are often diagnosed too late for diagnosis to save us.

We should be clear that many health disparities are the outcome of racial bias and racism in our lives and experiences. And many health disparities are the result of our own unwillingness to deal with the health challenges that face our community. For example, the fact that African American women are about 11 times more likely to be diagnosed with HIV than majority women is partly a function of sex education in our community.

We really can't blame racism for the fact that in an age of easily available information, too many sisters continue to put themselves at risk. Ditto obesity. While we can talk about the availability of healthy food choices in inner cities, the fact is that there is also much information available about how to eat and live more healthily.

Race may play a role in the ways our health disparities play out, but our own engagement in our health outcomes also plays a role.

As health care reform legislation snakes its way through the congress and senate, it is disheartening to see the few who are involved in the legislation and the many who are silent.

You can't live without a healthy life, can't agitate for justice without the stamina for agitation. Yet there are so many African-American people who are proud, passionate and sidelined by their health challenges. Where is the intense advocacy in our community, an advocacy that will propel us to be key activists in the health reform legislation?

African-American people need the means and ends to healthy lives. We need to push hard for the health care reform that the Obama administration is promoting.

Possibly, our legislators will kick the can toward health care reform, producing legislation in the next several days. The goal was that they would have come to conclusion by Aug. 7, but there is a clear possibility that discussion of this legislation will continue after the recess.

What needs to happen, now and later, is that we need to hear black voices raised in support of health care reform. We need to hear black voices put all of this in context. We need to make sure that we all understand how critical it is for people to have access to health insurance and to health care.

In so many ways, access to health care is the foundation of our energy and survival. A community that has been economically marginalized gains much when health care is made available to the broadest range of people.

Health disparities are a function of the many racial inequities that plague our society. If you scratch an African-American, she can tell you what she thought of the Henry Louis Gates arrest or the beer summit. How many can recite the details of the health legislation and the many ways it can enhance the African-American community. Priorities, priorities. Health care reform will improve the health status of the African-American community.

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## Nothing Learned During 'Teachable Moment'



**George Curry**  
 Guest Columnist

When it was announced that President Obama, Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Police Sgt. James Crowley would hold a beer summit in the White House, the suds tag lines began flowing. They included “The Audacity of Hops,” “A Thousand Points of Bud Light” and my favorite, “Yes, Three Cans.”

Late night comedians also got a buzz from the event. Bill Maher said, “I don't know if this is a case of racism. The police in Cambridge say it had nothing to do with Gates being Black. They said they would have given the same treatment to any minority.” Conan said, “The meeting got off to a rough start when a neighbor called the police to say Gates was breaking into the White House.”

Jokes aside, the president said Gates being arrested on his own porch by police should be used as a teachable moment.

But three weeks after the highly-publicized arrest, nothing has been taught to the public about race relations. Not only have there been no lessons, there hasn't even been a lesson plan. Because President Obama stated that Cambridge police “acted stupidly,” he was sub-

jected to a barrage of criticism. And for tactical reasons, the focus was shifted from using the incident as a teaching moment to putting it behind us. From the president's perspective, the controversy over his use of words detracted from the administration's major push to get a health care bill passed by Congress.

For the rest of us, however, we shouldn't rush to put the controversy behind us. That's because whether most Americans admit it or not, we are not past our past.

Historian Eric Foner, former president of the American Historical Association, observed: “For two and a half centuries, the large majority of African-Americans were held in slavery, and even after emancipation were subjected to discrimination in every aspect of their lives. Other minority groups have suffered severe inequalities as well. Today, while the nation has made great progress in eradicating the ‘color line,’ the legacy of slavery and segregation remains alive in numerous aspects of American society.”

America's racial divide has been a sharp one. On the guilt or innocence of O.J. Simpson, Whites and Blacks were sharply divided. Even on a non-racial topic such as Hurricane Katrina, there was a difference of opinion.

There have been some hopeful signs as well. For example, New York Times/CBS poll released in April found that the election of Barack Obama has

improved the perception of race relations. Two-thirds of Americans describe race relations as generally good and the percentage of African-Americans holding that view has doubled since last July.

But improving race relations is too important to be left to President Obama or a beer summit at the White House. A major impediment to racial progress is the lack of meaningful interaction between the races away from the workplace. One of the things that helped race relations in the 1960s were structured programs that allowed people of all races to talk directly with one another.

Perhaps they should be revived. Today, we still talk about race, but usually among our own racial group. Of course, we need to do more than talk.

When I began my journalism career as a reporter for Sports Illustrated in 1970, most of my friends growing up in segregated Alabama were African-Americans. Also starting at SI in New York were Larry Keith, a proud North Carolinian, Ron Scott, a devout Mormon from Utah, Kent Hannon and Stephanie Salter from Indiana, Jim Kaplan from Boston and Don Delliquanti from New Jersey. At the time, I was the lone Black reporter at the magazine. Although we came from different backgrounds and in a way were competing for the same promotions, we developed genuine friendships, many of

which continue to this day. No one set out to break any racial, religious or social barriers. Rather, we spent a lot of time together away from the office, playing touch football, basketball, softball, and attending parties together. Friendships developed naturally from those interactions.

A similar thing happened to me in Washington. I developed a close friendship with Craig Trygstad, executive director of Youth Communication, a teen news service. Craig grew up in a White farming community in Minnesota. We came together through our interest in training young people for careers in journalism. I eventually became chairman of his Board and later served as the best man in his wedding.

My experience over the years has been that racial progress is aided by genuine interaction between equals. The problem is that too many of us, both Blacks and Whites, have stopped trying to bridge the racial gap. With the nation becoming increasingly diverse – Latinos and Asians can't be left out of the equation – all of us have an obligation to eradicate crippling barriers. If we don't, we'll have nobody to blame but ourselves.

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).

## Attacks on President Obama



**Al Sharpton**  
 Guest Columnist

It's been just over six months since the first African-American President assumed the reins of leader of the free world, and thus became arguably the most powerful man on earth. Following slavery, centuries of institutional racism, unequal access to education, jobs and the pursuit of prosperity, America voluntarily voted for a Black man to hold the highest office in the land. And after running on a platform of unity and staying above the fray of racial divisiveness, President Obama finds himself at the center of bigotry, race-baiting and hatred – and this time the right wing fringe is attempting to portray him as the racist.

A few weeks back, Fox News anchor Glenn Beck engaged in an all-too-familiar rant where he began attacking the President of the United States. Literally pulling out a wobbling Black doll holding an umbrella that he called ‘Obama’, Beck went on a tirade over how the President's proposed health care reform would ‘remake



**Glenn Beck**

America’ and that people should be very, very afraid. With neurotic-type gestures, Beck espoused that Obama was taking the “beacon of freedom and turning it into an apologetic, hey, what can you do for me, wannabe European, spread the wealth, socialist wonderland.”

As if such vitriol and fear mongering wasn't incomprehensible enough, the Fox loud mouth went one step further last week in a move that even astonished his bosses when he called Obama a flat out ‘racist.’

Following the election in November, the nation was immersed in the progress of finally electing an African-American into a house that was literally constructed on the backs of slaves. Many, in an idealistic manner, hoped

that society would now advance into a post-racial environment where skin color, ethnicity, creed and religion wouldn't play such intense roles, and discrimination would subside.

Unfortunately, what we must remember is that despite having a Black President, inequities in education, housing and work still exist, and that the institutional structure of society hasn't shifted all that much. The CEOs of most corporations are still White, the hiring managers are mostly White, the heads of police departments are predominantly White and the executives in media (and that's TV, print and radio) are more often than not White. Yes, we have made some advances, but there is a tremendous way to go before anyone can even begin to speak of equality and a fair playing field.

In January, President Obama inherited an exacerbating housing crisis, two wars and the worst economy in years. And as people continue to lose jobs and face tough times, those on the right continue to exploit the fears of the downtrodden.

Several in the GOP have utilized health reform as a wedge to scare White folks – especially poor Whites – that Obama is using health care as ‘reparations’, when in fact those same poor

Whites would be among those who benefit the most from this reform.

Just last week, two officers in Georgia were put on leave after being accused of running a criminal check on the President. This outrageous behavior followed last year's security breach of then Senator Obama's passport. And since inauguration we have witnessed dangerous words like ‘socialist’ and ‘Marxist’ touted around as if they didn't hold an ugly and troubling history.

Never before in our nation's history has the President of the United States been undermined and attacked so blatantly in the media, on Capitol Hill and in the court of public opinion.

It happens in small manners when someone refers to him as ‘Mr. Obama,’ rather than ‘President Obama,’ and in more blatant manners by the Glenn Becks and Rush Limbaughs of the world. Instead of supporting the President as he undertakes the daunting task of restoring the country out of our plethora of challenges, some choose to divide, incite fear, push their own agendas and reinforce age-old stereotypes. Now I ask you, who is the real racist?

Activist Al Sharpton is head of the National Action Network.