

# State of Union: Separate, unequal

By Jamal E. Watson  
THE AMSTERDAM NEWS

NEW YORK — Marcia Brooks wanted to give President George W. Bush a chance.

The 48-year-old African-American mother of two from the Queens is a self-professed Independent. And while she isn't a big fan of the Republicans, she hasn't exactly been lining up to support the Democrats vying to unseat Bush next November either.

In short, Brooks votes her interest. She always has.

"I really look at who is trying to help out the working and lower middle class folks," said Brooks. "And with racism being such a big issue in our country, I always factor in race, too."

So when she tuned in along with millions of other Americans last week to watch Bush deliver the State of the Union address, she was hoping to hear about new initiatives and programs that would economically help working class people as well as ease the country's divide.

"It was just a waste of time," said Brooks, an administrative assistant who works in Manhattan. "I had no clue what Bush was talking about. None of his ideas or his words hit home

for me. He was not talking about my reality."

Brooks is not alone in her thinking. The State of the Union address angered so many Black constituent groups that they were forced to quickly put out statements questioning Bush's commitment to the African-American community.

Even the Democratic National Committee — which is hoping to maintain its widespread support among African-Americans — released a scathing report shortly before the president's speech called "The State of the African-American Community." In it, the Democrats charge that under the Bush administration, unemployment in the black community is much higher than the national average.

"Under Bush, up to 700,000 more African-Americans now live in poverty," according to the DNC report, adding that the 8-year decline in unemployment in the African-American community during the Clinton administration has suddenly been reversed.

The group also charged Bush with failing to invest in education, an issue dear to Brooks. Unable to save a substantial amount of

money over the years, she is now worried about how she will be able to afford the escalating costs of sending her 17-year-old daughter to college.

"Where is the leadership today?" she said, reminiscing about the "good old days" when President Jimmy Carter inspired the country by being a man of integrity. "He wasn't the best president, but he was an honest man. That's something missing today — good-old-fashion honesty."

In his 54-minute address before a joint session of Congress, Bush defended his decision to oust Saddam Hussein from office and said that the country will not leave the Iraqi people to fend for themselves.

"We have not come all this way — through tragedy and trial and war — only to falter and leave our work unfinished," the president said.

But Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean criticized Bush, saying that he is out of touch with working class people and African-Americans.

"The State of the Union may look rosy from the White House balcony or the suites of George Bush's wealthiest donors, but hard-working Americans will see through this president's

effort to wrap his radical agenda with a compassionate ribbon," said former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, who has received more endorsements from black political leaders than any other Democratic candidate.

For Brooks, all the bickering back and forth is just so sad.

"I know that voting is important, and I will vote next November," she said. "But it really is too bad that there are no real candidates out there who is talking to our issues. I can start to see why people are so complacent these days."

The cynicism that Brooks feels is easily expressed in urban cities all across America, where poverty and unemployment are on the rise and millions of Americans remain uninsured.

The solution? Some say he's hidden away in his 125th Street office building in Harlem.

"Say what you will about President Clinton," Brooks said. "But he made us all feel like we were important people. We're missing that today."

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## Caribbean media freedom at risk

By Michael Christie  
REUTERS

MIAMI — Besieged by economic troubles, disgruntled voters or racial tension, governments across the Caribbean cracked down last year on a wellspring of criticism — the free press.

The Caribbean has long been home to one of the worst suppressors of free speech — communist Cuba — where the only permitted voice is the state's, media advocates said. Cuba last year detained 26 independent journalists, according to French media watchdog Reporters Without Borders and other rights groups.

But formerly untroubled democracies from the Dominican Republic to the tropical island of St. Lucia are now also witnessing assaults on media freedom,

or are crafting new laws that activists said could muzzle dissent.

Latin America and the Caribbean once enjoyed some of the freest media outside Europe, said Karin Karlekar, a senior researcher with U.S. human rights group Freedom House.

"But it's slipping back," she said.

In Haiti, the poorest nation of the Americas, clashes between President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's supporters and his foes have escalated, catching journalists in the cross-fire. Attacks on radio stations, the main source of news in a country with sky-high illiteracy rates, are frequent and as many as 40 reporters have fled abroad in fear of their lives.

On the Caribbean coast of South America, oil-rich Venezuela is mired in a conflict between backers and opponents of President Hugo Chavez. Both the pro-Chavez state media and virulently anti-Chavez private media have abandoned all pretense of objectivity and become warriors in the fight.

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