



The Charlotte Post

The Voice of the Black Community

1531 Camden Road Charlotte, N.C. 28203

Gerald O. Johnson CEO/PUBLISHER

Robert L. Johnson CO-PUBLISHER/GENERAL MANAGER

Herbert L. White EDITOR IN CHIEF

MATTERS OF OPINION

White House's spotty AIDS record

Shifting burden of funding onto American families isn't the way to handle epidemic

By Phill Wilson

NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

President Bush marked World AIDS Day with a moving and remarkable speech. "At the start of this century," the president offered, "AIDS causes suffering from remote villages of Africa to the heart of America's big cities. This danger is multiplied by indifference and complacency. This danger will be overcome by compassion, honesty, and decisive action."

Unfortunately, those words articulate a clarity of vision and purpose that we are sorely lacking in Washington, D.C., today.

In the speech, President Bush ticked off his administration's domestic achievements in fighting AIDS. He described "funding that brings life-saving drugs and treatment to hundreds of thousands of low-income Americans" and has turned AIDS into "a long-term illness like heart disease or diabetes."

Yet, Congress is right now finalizing a budget — shoved through by this White House — that will transfer the costs of our state-run public health insurance programs onto the desperately poor families those programs were intended to help.

The Medicaid budget recently passed by the House would cut tens of millions of dollars out of the program by removing federal regulations that limit how much states may force beneficiaries to put up in co-pays and premiums, among other "savings" taken out of consumers' pockets. Worse, analysts predict that the savings will come not from the actual co-pays but by discouraging people in the program from actually seeking care.

Medicaid is the nation's largest payer for AIDS treatment.

Meanwhile, the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, which funds anti-HIV drugs for uninsured people with HIV/AIDS, continues to teeter on the brink of collapse — the victim of malign neglect on behalf of federal purse-holders. As of September 2005, 2,187 Americans were on waiting lists to get medication through ADAP. A little more than 1,300 of those people were getting medication through an emergency funding program that will expire in March. Why? Because year after year Congress and the White House have worked together to drastically underfund the ADAP program.

Meanwhile, our community is being disproportionately killed by AIDS — much like we are by the president's examples of heart disease and diabetes. African-Americans — who rely far more heavily on public insurance programs for AIDS care — remain seven times more likely to die from an HIV infection once they get it than Whites.

The president also rightly reminded us all that HIV/AIDS is "a special concern in the gay community, which has effectively fought this disease for decades through education and prevention." He added that AIDS is "increasingly found among women and minorities." That's one reason why it is unfortunate that, under this administration, funding for abstinence-only sex education in our schools has more than doubled. Abstinence-only education teaches that the only way to protect yourself from HIV and other STDs is to not have sex outside of heterosexual marriage. Such "educational" programs typically bar instructors from discussing how to use condoms at all.

The Black AIDS Institute applauds President Bush's moving words on World AIDS Day — for an administration in which the vice president acknowledged just over a year ago that he hadn't realized the intensity of the epidemic among African-American women — that is certainly progress. We now urge the administration and Congress to start putting action behind their words on the other 364 days of the year.

PHILL WILSON is founder and Executive Director of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles. He has participated in numerous international conferences on AIDS and was selected by the Ford Foundation in 2001 as one of "Twenty Leaders for a Changing World." Wilson has been living with HIV for more than 25 years and with AIDS for 15 years. He can be reached at Philw@BlackAIDS.org.

Abstinence-only education teaches that the only way to protect yourself from HIV and other STDs is to not have sex outside of heterosexual marriage.



Taking Christ out of Christmas

This is the season to be jolly, but you'd never know it, considering all the attacks on Christmas. In a well-intended but misguided effort to be



GEORGE E. CURRY

more inclusive of other religions, some government units, businesses and civic groups are urging everyone to stop saying, "Merry Christmas" and replace it with a bland, and presumably more acceptable, "Happy Holidays."

This is where I part company with many of my liberal friends. The purpose of Christmas — the commercialization issue notwithstanding — is to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, which is recounted in the first chapter of Matthew, beginning with verse 18.

As a Christian, I make no apologies for celebrating my faith. There is no getting around it: Christmas is about the birth of Christ. Period. It would be the ultimate insult to relegate Jesus to the background in an effort not to offend non-Christians. We can celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ while wishing our Jewish friends, for example, a Happy Hanukkah. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Like it or not, the reality is that this nation was founded by Christians and estab-

lished, at least in principle, on Judeo-Christian values. The Founding Fathers, most of whom owned slaves, did not always exhibit the Christian spirit but they at least held it up as an ideal. So much so that our currency still reads, "In God we Trust." At Christmas, the last people that should be offended are Christians. But that is exactly what's been happening in recent years.

A controversy erupted in Boston recently over what to call their city's 48-foot spruce tree in a December 1 ceremony. The city's Web site called it a "holiday tree" instead of a Christmas tree and that touched off an angry backlash, especially among Christian conservatives. Evangelist Jerry Falwell told Fox television, "There has been a concerted effort to steal Christmas."

City official finally relented. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino told reporters that he would keep calling the spruce a "Christmas tree." He explained, "I grew up with a Christmas tree, I'm going to stay with a Christmas tree."

Some of the back-and-forth over what to call the trees, has taken place with less fanfare.

Until the late 1990s, the lighted, decorated tree on the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol was called a Christmas tree. Someone came up with, shall we say, the bright idea of referring to it as the Holiday Tree. Now, House Speaker Dennis

Haster (R-Ill.) has instructed federal officials to return to the old name — the Capitol Christmas Tree.

Last year, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger reversed a decision by his predecessor, former Gov. Gray Davis, and began referring to the state's Christmas tree, not a Holiday Tree.

It's astounding how far some have gone in recent years to be politically correct — or incorrect, depending on your point of view.

Last year, the Plano, Texas Independent School District banned students from wearing red and green at their winter break parties because they were considered Christmas colors. Students were forbidden from exchanging gifts with religious messages on them, apparently fearing "Merry Christmas" and reindeers might offend others.

While that was happening in Texas, the Maplewood and South Orange, N.J. combined school system was banning Christmas carols, even those about Santa Claus. Christmas without "Silent Night" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing?" I can't even imagine it and I have a pretty lucid imagination. I suppose that would be tantamount to trying to have an Easter egg hunt without eggs. Oops, I guess if we're not suppose to make references to the birth of Christ, then celebrating his resurrection is really off-limits. My bad.

Speaking of bad, things got so bad that a public school in Wisconsin told students to change religious words in Christmas carols for an upcoming concert. In Jackson County, Ga., they reportedly banned certain jewelry, which would presumably include pins that read, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season."

Finally, let me address the political aspects of this controversy. Make no mistake about it: the driving force behind reclaiming Christmas is conservatives, through such organizations as the Alliance Defense Fund and Liberty Counsel, both affiliated with Jerry Falwell. The televangelist and others at the forefront of this movement also actively oppose affirmative action and other social programs that I support.

But as a free thinker, I don't take positions only if right-wingers don't take them. They are not part of my thought process. We should take positions because they are right and not oppose a view simply because it is supported by the Right. And if we get confused, we can always fall back on: What Would Jesus Do?

Merry Christmas!

GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service and BlackPressUSA.com. He appears on National Public Radio three times a week as part of "News and Notes with Ed Gordon." His web site is: www.georgecurry.com.

Freedom, believe it or not, is not free

During the Thanksgiving holidays I listened to an interview of Bruce Gordon, the new head of the NAACP with Brian Lamb on C-SPAN's "Questions and Answers" programs. It was interesting and mostly about Gordon's life and his perspective on the work of the NAACP.

One thing struck me: the budget of the organization is now \$24 million a year. So, one of Gordon's objectives is to raise enough money to endow parts of the organization. To me, that should be an easy task, but I want to call attention here to the contradiction between the vastness of our expectations of such organizations and the lack of our measuring up to the funding necessary to meet them.

Why do I say that? Well let's see: Forward Lattrell Spirewell was mad at the Knicks because he didn't make the average salary of \$5 million per year; wide receiver Terrell Owens dished the Philadelphia Eagles because his \$46 million 10-year contract wasn't enough; Halle Berry and Denzel Washington now are able to demand \$7 to \$10 million per movie; we have scores of

Black millionaires in significant corporate jobs beginning with the CEO of Time Warner Corp.; the budget of Howard University, a black organization, is now more than \$500 million per year; and Oprah Winfrey and Bob Johnson (and his ex-wife, Sheila) are black billionaires. In fact, I could put together 100 black people with disposable incomes of \$1 million per year, an amount that would triple the NAACP budget, but just one of the billionaires could endow the entire organization.

My point is that there is something wrong with our commitment to achieving social justice that affects our integrity when our fighting organizations have among the lowest budgets in the black community. Why shouldn't the NAACP national budget be at least \$50 to \$100 million per year? Our people have benefited from the legal genius that fought to provide for integrated education in both K-12 and white colleges and universities, so that the black middle class could go through and take advantage of the opportunities that now yield them untold riches.

The courage of many overcame barriers to home ownership, business ownership, access to political power, and leveraged these assets to become players in the corpo-

rate world, managing billions of other peoples money, but very often deciding not to give back to blacks.

In a substantial way, we have become comfortable with that decision and settled for the chump change that is doled out by black surrogates of major corporations who give just enough to get our organizations through a given annual conference with the sponsorship of receptions, the purchase of booth spaces and modest contributions to the overall causes.

The pain is that this kind of funding is not consistent with our clout within the Democratic Party, or with our clout in the consumer market for autos, CDs, DVDs, sneakers, movies or other things. In short, we forgo the millions upon millions of dollars that our causes deserve and accept that which settles everybody's conscience and avoids confrontation. It's a cozy relationship, but ultimately lacking in integrity, honesty and substance.

So, let me ask again. Why are our fighting organizations the least well off? Politically, it could be because their mandate is to speak truth to power. But the nature of the truth is gentle enough to keep the chump change coming. This is not a white problem, because the leadership of American corporations have followed the

path of least resistance with black leaders for along time. It is a problem that exists with our leadership not driving a hard enough line with neither whites nor blacks, in revealing the scope of resources such as: staff, research, press, facilities, publication, mobilization, and etc. necessary to be effective in an era dominated by conservatism, and by the lack of black social movement.

Here, they could learn from the brash youth who run part of the hip-hop universe who have the guts to demand money for their art and to throw down if they don't get it.

I don't mean to elevate the hip-hoppers too high however, because they are, in some ways, worse than the black middle class, raising billions of serious cash and not knowing or caring how to positively impact the quality of life for most black people. To see the massive economic resources wasted in the rapper's world of mindless materialism and the lack of a strategic direction for mass development, is to see the missing element in the resources for our grassroots social and political struggle and the seeds of new black controlled corporate empires.

RON WALTERS is a professor of politics at the University of Maryland College Park.