

# commentary

## Obama and The Elephant In the Room



By George E. Curry  
George Curry Media Columnist

It's been whispered for years so let's deal with the elephant in the room: Many African Americans have privately complained that President Obama has catered to the needs of immigrants more than those of blacks.

The fact that neither group fits in a separate and unique block notwithstanding, an examination of government figures shows that in at least two areas - deportations and presidential pardons - that's not true.

Let's first address immigration.

"Since coming to office in 2009, Obama's government has deported more than 2.5 million people - up 23% from the George W. Bush years," Fusion observed. "More shockingly, Obama is now on pace to deport more people than the sum of all 19 presidents who governed the United States from 1892-2000, according to government data.

"...And he's not done yet. With the clock ticking down his final months in office, Obama appears to be running up the score in an effort to protect his title as deporter-in-chief from future presidents. To pad the numbers, Homeland Security is now going after the lowest-hanging fruit: women and children who are seeking asylum from violence in Central America.

"This is the only time I remember enforcement raids on families of women and children who are fleeing some of the most violent places on the planet," says Royce Bernstein Murray, director of policy for the National Immigrant Justice Center. "The families came to the U.S. looking for a hand, but they got the boot."

Under the headline, "Barack Obama, deporter-in-chief," the Economist magazine declared, "America is expelling illegal immigrants at nine times the rate of 20 years ago (see article); nearly 2m so far under Barack Obama, easily outpacing any previous president. Border patrol agents no longer just patrol the border; they scour the country for illegals to eject. The deportation machine costs more than all other areas of federal criminal law-enforcement combined."

Also troubling are accusations of racial profiling.

In February, Heartland Alliance's National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC) filed a federal lawsuit demanding that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) release data about the use of racial profiling in the controversial program known as the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP), formerly Secure Communities.

Despite the soaring deportations under Obama, Republicans accuse Obama of being soft on immigration. Meanwhile, progressives give Obama little credit for advances he has made trying to reform the criminal justice system.

"Today, the President announced 61 new grants of commutation to individuals serving years in prison under outdated and unduly harsh sentencing laws. More than one-third of them were serving life sentences. To date, the President has now commuted the sentences of 248 individuals - more than the previous six Presidents combined. And, in total, he has commuted 92 life sentences, the White House said in a statement March 30.

While Obama has commuted the sentences of 248 people, Ford commuted 22, Jimmy Carter 29, Ronald Reagan 13, George H.W. Bush 3, Bill Clinton 61, and George W. Bush 43.

A prisoner's commutation of sentence involves the reduction of time being served. Unlike a pardon, it does not remove the conviction from that person's record. Clemency reduces the penalty but also does not remove the conviction.

Obama met last week with commutation recipients from both his administration and those granted by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to discuss how the process can be strengthened.

Following lunch, Obama said, "But we're not done, and we're going to keep on working on this until I leave. It's something that I'm going to keep on working on even after I leave the presidency, because - some of you know we had an Easter Prayer Breakfast with ministers, pastors from all around the country of all denominations in which we read Scripture and were reminded of Jesus's teachings.

"And at the heart of my faith, and what I believe is at the heart of the American ideal is, is that we're all imperfect. We all make mistakes. We have to own those mistakes. We have to take responsibility and learn from those mistakes. But we as a society have to make sure that people who do take responsibility and own and learn from those mistakes are able to continue to be part of the American family. It's the right thing to do. It's the smart thing to do."

The president's embrace of Kemba Smith, who was given a 24.5 year mandatory sentence at the age of 24 and pardoned in 2000 by Bill Clinton, was posted as photograph of the day on the White House website.

The White House statement, issued by White House Counsel Neil Eggleston, said,

"Despite the progress we have made, it is important to remember that clemency is nearly always a tool of last resort that can help specific individuals, but does nothing to make our criminal justice system on the whole more fair and just. Clemency of individual cases alone cannot fix decades of overly punitive sentencing policies. So while we continue to work to resolve as many clemency applications as possible - and make no mistake, we are working hard at this - only broader criminal justice reform can truly bring justice to the many thousands of people behind bars serving unduly harsh and outdated sentences."

Obama has additional work to do on both criminal justice and immigration reform.

George E. Curry is President and CEO of George Curry Media, LLC. He is a keynote speaker, moderator, and media coach. Curry can be reached through his Web site, [georgecurry.com](http://georgecurry.com). You can also follow him at [twitter.com/currygeorge](https://twitter.com/currygeorge), [George E. Curry Fan Page on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/GeorgeE.Curry), and [Periscope. www.georgecurry.com/columns](http://www.georgecurry.com/columns).

## Child Watch

## The Time is Always Right to Do Right

By Marian Wright Edelman  
President, Children's Defense Fund  
via George Curry Media



March 31 was the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last Sunday sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. in 1968 before his assassination four days later: "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." Dr. King said he believed a triple revolution was taking place in the world - a technological revolution, a revolution in weaponry, and a human rights revolution. To face this triple revolution, he said we must figure out how to develop a world perspective, eradicate racism and economic injustice, rid our nation and world of poverty, and find an alternative to war and bloodshed - all with great urgency:

"It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, 'Wait on time.' Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right."

We must act upon his warnings if our children, nation's future and founding principles - subverted and still sullied by the legacies of slavery, Native American genocide, exclusion of women and nonproperty-owning men of all colors from our electoral processes - are to be saved.

I have said often that too many Americans would rather celebrate than follow Dr. King. Many have enshrined Dr. King the dreamer and ignored Dr. King the "disturber of all unjust peace," as theologian Vincent Harding said. Many remember King the vocal opponent of violence but not the King who called for massive nonviolent civil disobedience to challenge the stockpiling of weapons of death and the wars they fuel and the excessive materialism of the greedy that deprives the needy of the basic necessities of life. And many celebrate Dr. King the orator but ignore his words about the need for reordering the misguided values and national investment priorities he believed are the seeds of America's downfall.

Dr. King's greatness lay in his willingness to struggle to hear and see the truth; to not give into fear, uncertainty and despair; to continue to grow and to never lose hope, despite every discouragement from his government and even his closest friends and advisers. Contributors deserted him as he spoke out not only for an end to the Vietnam War but for a fairer distribution of our country's vast resources between the rich and the poor. Why was he pushing the nation to do more on the tail of the greatest civil rights strides ever made and challenging a president who had declared a war on poverty? Because he saw that our nation's ills went far deeper and that fundamental structural and priorities changes had to be made and that the War on Poverty and Vietnam War were inextricably intertwined.

In the Cathedral sermon he announced that in a few weeks he would be coming back to Washington leading a Poor People's Campaign: "We are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses . . . We are going to bring children and adults and old people, people who have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives . . . We are not coming to engage in any histrionic gesture. We are not coming to tear up Washington. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists.

"We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible. Why do we do it this way? We do it this way because it is our experience that the nation doesn't move around questions of genuine equality for the poor and for black people until it is confronted massively, dramatically in terms of direct action . . . And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion."

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose *Leave No Child Behind(R)* mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)

## Make Election about Economic Justice

By Jesse L. Jackson, Sr.  
President, Rainbow PUSH Coalition  
via George Curry Media

This year's presidential primaries have highlighted the importance of people of color to the Democratic Party coalition. Hillary Clinton's lead in the party's nomination race comes almost entirely from her strength among African-American and Latino voters. When people of color favor one candidate by large margins, they make the difference.

That will be true in the general election as well. Democratic nominees win if people of color vote in large numbers. If turnout is down or the vote is split, Democrats - who regularly lose the majority of white voters - will lose.

This reality means that African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans can make political demands. Politicians must compete to win our votes. The power of this can be seen with the Dreamers and the Democrats' embrace of comprehensive immigration reform, with Black Lives Matter and Democratic candidates putting criminal justice reform at the top of their agendas. Voting rights and equal rights under the law also gain traction.

Missing, however, is any concerted demand for economic justice, even though African Americans and Latinos still face a stark economic divide. African Americans lost the most wealth in the Great Recession and have recovered the least. They were the most targeted and harmed by the fraud committed by mortgage peddlers. The gap between black and white household wealth has tripled in the past quarter-century (with blacks' median level at \$11,030 while the white median is \$134,230). Black unemployment remains higher and incomes remain lower.

African Americans and Latinos are more likely to be in poverty. Thirty-eight percent of black children are in poverty, as opposed to 11 percent of whites. Worse, blacks and Latinos are much more likely to grow up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. They are 10 times as likely to be in poor neighborhoods in Chicago than poor whites are. Nearly 30 percent of poor blacks live in poor neighborhoods in St. Louis, compared with 1.6 percent of poor whites. Concentrated poverty - what scholars term the "double burden" - digs children into a deeper hole of unsafe streets, impoverished schools, inadequate health facilities, poor markets, poor mass transit, lousy parks and more.

We need a movement that does for economic justice what Black Lives Matter has done for criminal justice. We need to develop a plan for targeted investment in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (many of which are rural and white). We need a summit on urban reconstruction that brings together the relevant agencies of government and lays out a plan. Movements like the fast food workers calling for a \$15 minimum wage and unions need to gain real support from elected political leaders.

Some say targeted investment is inappropriate, even discriminatory. Somehow it is legitimate to target African Americans for voter registration, legitimate to target us for getting out the vote. Yet targeted investment based on need draws objections. That doesn't make sense.

Some say a rising tide will raise all boats, but we know that is not true. Some boats are stuck on the bottom. Those who came here on ocean liners as immigrants came looking for a job. Those who were brought here on slave ships found themselves up for sale. The former worked for wages and, with struggle, were able to build wealth. The latter worked for the lash and were stripped of any wealth they helped to create. Race-neutral standards simply ignore a reality where race hasn't been neutral.

African Americans and Latinos remain the most optimistic about America. We are far more likely to believe our children will do better than we have. Part of this is President Barack Obama and the natural desire to defend his presidency. Part of this comes from the progress African Americans have witnessed, with ancestors who came over on slave ships and parents who grew up in segregation, and now an African American in the White House.

That appreciation should not, however, stop us from pushing for economic justice. It is clear that Democrats can't win without the enthusiastic support of people of color. Surely, we should insist on an agenda commensurate with the size of our problems from those who want our support. We now have the political opportunity that Dr. King dreamed of to demand justice. The question is whether we have the will.

Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. is founder and president of the Chicago-based Rainbow PUSH Coalition. You can keep up with his work at [www.rainbowpush.org](http://www.rainbowpush.org)