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The African American 9/11

JAMES
VARNER

FOR THE MAINE CAMPUS

of the prisoners on death row are African Americans. In recent years, based on evidence made available through DNA testing and other means, the governor of Illinois admitted that his state was on a course to putting innocent Americans to death. He suspended the death penalty, and Illinois is now taking the time to re-investigate all cases of inmates on death row and reevaluate its entire justice system. This has resulted in the exoneration and release of a number of black prisoners on death row. What does this say

about the justice system in this country? African Americans make up less than 20 percent of our population. Why do we constitute more than 50 percent of our prisoner population?

An all-out war against racist terrorism in this country is needed. Racist terrorism is a crime against humanity and a crime against most minorities in this country including Jews, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians and especially since "9/11," people who appear to be from the Middle East or Muslims, as well as African Americans. We also need to take a careful look at profiling. Racial profiling presupposes that an individual will commit or has committed, a

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This country might learn something from the black experience. We blacks know all too well about pain, tragedy and feeling insecure from birth to grave. We can say that our "9/11" began more than three hundred years ago when African families were torn apart and transported to this area of the world on slave ships. In the process, millions suffered and died while the inhuman system of slavery reigned in this country for 250 years. Today blacks must endure the terror of racism and continue to die before their time.

African Americans constitute more than 50 percent of the prison population in the United States. Disproportionately, most

crime simply because of their appearance. Profiling does away with our system of innocent until proven guilty. We must not allow Sept. 11 to cause us to move in ways that erode our freedom.

We shall soon be hearing about reparations for the more than 200 years of African American enslavement in this country — reparations for descendants of slaves who worked to lay the early economic foundations of this country. African Americans fought and gave their lives for independence and freedom. The idea of reparations for past wrongs is not new. Reparations are now being paid by the state of Florida to the survivors of Rosewood, a black community that, because of a false rumor, was burned to the ground by a lynch mob, causing hundreds

of African Americans to lose their homes and for some, their lives.

Those of us who really care about having a future must at this time "speak truth to power," to restate an old Quaker phrase. There is no security for our most defenseless citizens right here at home. The widening of the war on terrorism may make some of us feel more secure, but defense budget increases will mean cutbacks and reductions in desperately needed domestic programs. Our country's war on terrorism must include addressing the terror felt by its own citizens. It is a terror that has been rampant for over 300 years. Why do most Americans not see it?

James Varner is the president of the Greater Bangor Area NAACP and graduated from UMaine in 1957.