



It's Time for Sensible Policies. By Dr. Alfred S. Titus, Jr.

The year 2020 has allowed me to look at things through an entirely different lens. I believe most would concur that their view of life on Earth has changed. Life has become more profound for some, while others have embraced a lighter side of life. I'm unsure whether I can determine where my views fit along this spectrum; however, I feel the more profound side is what most would conclude after reading this article.

Politics is an area that I often save the conversations for the home with close family. Many of my friends and colleagues have varying opinions regarding politics, and many are open to express their points of view openly to anyone who will listen. This free expression of ideas often leads to debates and sometimes arguments on social media, where friendships are tried and often lost.

My thoughts are different; at least I think they are. When I think of politics and government, there are so many things that come to my mind.

One unrelenting thought is a question, why can't there be a common middle ground? When discussing policies or programs, the choices are always red or blue, republican or democrat, conservative or liberal. This either-or option is where my thoughts stall because for the life of me, I cannot figure out why it is not common-sense to take a stance in the middle, neither left nor right.

I've heard the propaganda about how each side wants full control or bust! Which is ridiculous but probably true. But why? Is it financial, something to hide, hungry for power? What makes people want things their way or burn the house down and disregard everyone and everything else that may be involved? Disregard the trail of bodies it would leave behind and the countless people

and families that would be homeless as a result. This selfishness and bullying by both sides have to stop! We are destroying our image, our people, ourselves. We are America; we are supposed to be better than that and better than this. The 2020 election plays like a skit from Saturday Night Live; comedic, far-fetched, and ridiculous. Is this who we are? Is this who we've become? The middle is no longer apparent; the middle is no longer an option. Why teach the law and the Constitution in school when common sense does not prevail in enacting it?

Growing up, my Mother would always tell my sister and me to use our common sense. At our young age, we did not know what that meant, and we brought it upon ourselves to understand that it meant something about life and realizing things that should be obvious, the type of things that aren't taught in our schools or that appear in school books. As we grew older, the meaning of the phrase made more sense than ever, as we experienced life, the things our friends did, and the things that we did that made no sense, or should I say no common sense.

As I've grown, raised a family of my own, and passed the midpoint of my life just a few short years ago, the phrase so casually stated and repeated by my Mother, "use common sense," is a phrase I find myself saying more than I ever have or thought I would. In fact, I've used the term in the last year more than I have with my children as they grew up. I was under the opinion that it was a phrase that I would use less frequently as I became older, as I became part of the adult, grown-up world. I thought I'd use the term while talking to or advising a young person I came across, one of the students I teach, or maybe a grandchild I'd have the pleasure of spending the summer with one day. I never thought I'd use the phrase when looking at and trying to understand the seemingly chaotic world we now live in.

Our world is governed by policies that control the operation of things that exist all around us. Many of these policies are so flawed that they should not even exist, but they do exist, and they do because we as a society have either become cold, have purposely turned a blind eye to them, or just aren't able to see them anymore.

I remember when I started working in policing in the early nineties and was assigned to "the Duce," 42nd Street/Times Square for the first time. This wasn't the Disney 42nd Street we see now; this was a different time, when drugs, guns, prostitution, and anything else was openly available. The prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers, and junkies (drug addicts) walked the streets like

the living dead. This was a different 42nd Street. Although my first time on 42nd Street was during one of my adolescent high school class cutting excursions, this was the first time I got to stand around and get a feel for the place, the lay of the land. Yes, it was new and eye-opening to me, but it was a regular day at the office to the usual suspects. They lived there, worked there, and saw nothing unusual about it. They had become blind to the obscurity of it all. That is what has happened to us. Unless a protest or outcry brings light to a situation, it grabs the news's attention, or is trending on social media, we as a society don't see it, and if we do, the concern is short-lived.

These policies are strangling our society; they are creating division and animosity among us all. Policies that can change and should change because common sense should prevail are not and don't. There are so many issues that can be fixed with the stroke of a pen that it's sad to see them still existing. I'm not just referring to the knee-jerkily designed pressure cooker called the NYC Bail Reform. This disappointing and disastrous reform plan endangers every New Yorker and visitor of this great city. No, I'm not just referring to that. I'm referring to simple, life-changing, and life-saving policies, the common sense ones.

Several policy issues immediately come to mind, and many more deserve mention; however, I've chosen a few that seem most pressing. The first one begins with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In mid-February, early March, when COVID-19 first began to be diagnosed in the U.S., masks and gloves were being touted as a necessary protection against this killer disease. I continuously and repeatedly had the conversation that the government would provide masks and gloves for every person or household in America. It seemed obvious; it seemed like common sense. I understand there was a shortage of masks in the early months. In fact, masks were so hard to find that I found and purchased 50 masks from an ad on a neighborhood app. The woman and I exchanged explicit instructions that would enable us both to make the transaction while avoiding contact during the early stages of this dreadful sickness. I drove my vehicle to her home, pulled up in front, opened the rear tailgate of my vehicle, and waited, where I laid a crisp \$50 bill on the tailgate floor before leaving home. She came out of her home, donning rubber gloves and a mask that just about covered her whole face, placed the box of masks in the vehicle, took the money, and hastily ran back into the house. Once in the house, she turned around and looked at me in relief, then smiled and waved like we were old friends. I closed the tailgate and drove off. I

stopped in a parking lot nearby where I put on my rubber gloves, got out of my vehicle, checked the product, and made sure I wasn't being followed. It was like a pandemic drug deal. I drove home, keeping a keen eye out for the police because I felt like I had just been part of a criminal act. I went home, walked into the house, and said, "Mission completed! I got the product!"

I also understand the controversy on whether the masks were effective or not, those who felt the idea violated their rights, and the attempt to limit widespread panic and fear. I get it, but still, as the government, when masks and gloves became available and plentiful, why not send a supply kit out to everyone, as a sign of reassurance that the government is on it, whether you believe it or not, whether you will wear it or not. Even now, 10+ months in, still no masks or gloves in the mail. It's just common sense.

The next thing is home fires and the hundreds of deaths they cause every year. The helpless children and families who perished in these fires because they could not afford a smoke detector or the landlord did not provide a smoke detector. A simple piece of equipment that some cannot afford. Why doesn't the government send every household a smoke detector? How much could it possibly cost to buy 100 million smoke detectors at a bulk-rate? Wouldn't it be worth it? Isn't saving lives worth it? Don't we pay enough in taxes to account for this? Even in sales tax alone, we can cover this. An even better idea would be to teach inmates how to build and assemble the smoke detectors and make them in jails and prisons at an even lower cost, made in the USA. These things are obvious, common sense.

Next is a topic that bothers me to discuss because I understand that many need assistance to get on their feet. There are individuals with large families and hungry mouths to feed, who lack the skill, the education, the wherewithal to provide for themselves and their families. Are they to blame for their situations? Maybe, but that's a conversation for another time. We live in America, where the government assists its citizens. The programs and policies are designed to temporarily assist individuals and families with food, housing, and medical care. The issue I have with the programs used today is the permanent element associated with these programs. In addition to periodic drug testing, why aren't individuals making use of these programs, required to attend career training and educational programs designed to lead to jobs? Employers can receive tax breaks for hiring individuals who have gone through the programs, and participants will be

required to ease their way off government assistance. Is this too difficult of a plan to implement? Don't tax-paying citizens deserve to have a government working on relieving some of the stretches in their tax dollars? Will it mean spending more money now for rewards later? Yes. Will it be worth it in the long run? Yes.

To explain in more detail, individuals obtaining assistance in the form of housing vouchers, where they are responsible for 30% of the rent where they reside with their partner and two children. Career training is provided for each partner in the form of a daily or nightly training program for six weeks, leading to certification in an area where a job awaits through an employer obtaining a pre-determined business tax break for each year he hires through the program. The individual receiving career training gets the job and begins a 6-month to 4-year transition away from government-assisted housing. Additional training will also be available to individuals in the program with incentives to continue their education and make themselves more marketable for higher-paying jobs, also waiting for them upon completion. The goal is to increase the program participant's housing percentage until they cover 100% of their housing costs and are no longer dependent on government assistance. This plan can work with food and health care assistance as well.

The element that makes this plan so essential is the requirement that is associated with it. Individuals currently receiving public assistance will not have this as a choice but as a requirement, which means that every public assistance recipient will be held to a time-limit where their assistance will be reduced and eventually end. This policy puts the onus on each participant to successfully complete the program and gain the aptitude necessary to maintain their employment status. Should they not complete the training or fail to maintain the required grades, they will have to take a lower-paying job with less pay. Either way, their assistance will end at a pre-determined time.

Many will look at this and say that it costs too much. Many will say that the risk is too high. I'm afraid I have to disagree. The current state that we are in has been this way for far too long with no plan to change the direction of things. Without a change, we will continue and increase dependence instead of reducing and removing reliance as a country. It is our responsibility, as the United States of America, to assist citizens where needed. Still, that assistance should

accompany a learning element under the premise "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; if you teach a man how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." The goal is to assist, foster education and training, towards independence, with strict limitations and requirements.

The second area of importance is the reforms taking place around the country regarding jail and prison reform. Let me be clear, I am for reform, and I am for change. I have learned and honestly believe that government laws and the policies it establishes and enforces, should be reviewed and considered for change every few decades, to keep pace with the ever-changing world we live in, under those laws and policies. Reform and change are due in many areas of our lives; however, the reform must make sense. The reform should not be an aggressive shift to appease the outcries, but a well researched and studied reform that considers all sides of an issue, with public safety in the forefront. As a former law enforcement professional and current criminal justice educator, I view reform with a very critical eye. Reform is one of those things where if the noise is loud enough and long enough, the decision can be to turn it off completely to stop the noise, which can often make the situation worse. It can be a troublesome quest, mainly because many of the people involved or speaking out for the change do not know or understand the fundamental elements of the issue and the complexities that are associated with it. We have seen evidence of these reforms in New York City. The intent is noble; however, the process is significantly flawed.

I believe, as with many things that have changed in this country throughout its existence, it is time for a different outlook, driven by different insight, leading to genuinely corrective change, rather than merely punishment.

Let's start with a different outlook and insight because the two go together. Crime will occur; crime will occur more in the poorest, most underserved areas, or communities. Individuals who commit crimes do so for various reasons, desire, circumstance, and also need. These are facts. Individuals released from prison return to these same areas and communities and fall back into the same situation. Opportunities have not gotten better for the released inmate, and if it's his/her first offense, options are even worse. Nothing has changed, except that his/her needs may be more significant because his/her absence has created a more intense financial situation at home. With this insight, it is time to change this dynamic. If we continue down this path, the result will always be the same. No one wants that, except those who profit from crime or criminalization.

What is needed is a new and different direction for eligible inmates that will allow those who have erred to learn from their mistakes, the opportunity to correct their ways, remove the stigma, and truly acclimate back into society. We need productive individuals to re-enter society, not angrier and more vicious criminals being released onto our streets daily.

Mandatory rehabilitation, education, and treatment programs in our prisons, followed by mandatory work programs, leading to an incentivized return of voting rights, student loans, and housing privileges after X # of years of successful post-release program participation and employment would be the goal. In fact, as an additional long-term incentive, a clean record after 8-10 years of compliance. Is this too much? Should offenders who have been arrested and placed in our prison system to reform and acclimate with society forever carry that burden? If so, then why rehabilitate? Why go straight? There should be an incentivized system in place to encourage eligible former inmates to seek and work towards creating and living a different life, a new life, and a better life.

A plan like this would be beneficial to society as a whole. Not only will our prisons house fewer inmates at a lower cost to us all, but crime will begin to decline as released inmates become productive members of society, as the intent of correctional services should have always been. The plan will bolster incentives to stay out of prison, to stay away from crime. The plan will be in place for inmates that fall into the pre-determined eligibility criteria.

The work program will be a continuation of the programs administered while in prison. The inmate will exit prison and begin a job with a company that is receiving a tax incentive for hiring the reformed inmate. The work will be based on the employer's needs, and the starting point determined by the program's guidelines. The tax incentive will be in the form of annual credit based on the number of reformed inmates hired by the employer per year. The employer will have a stake in this as well, receiving increased credit for advocating and ensuring the longevity of the reformed individuals' employment and growth.

The educational system also needs reform. Although I have heard a great deal, I will not get into details about the numerous issues that could use review and reform within the educational system because I am not familiar with every aspect of the educational system outside of New York. Additionally, my youngest child is 24 years old, making me a bit removed from the system's

fundamental academic parts. However, I am familiar with the New York State public school system because there are cases that I've investigated that have lead me there, and many of the students who drop-out or are expelled end up dealing with the police at some point. Both of these reasons are unfortunate but true.

I recall numerous witness interviews and suspect interrogations with young people who had quit school and were involved in some form of criminal activity. As my inquires always explored the possibility of saving the young person and preventing him or her from being the next homicide victim associated with a case number in my office, I would ask, why aren't you in school? The responses were always either, "There is nothing in there for me," or "They don't want people like me in there." These are the wrong answers.

The policies that I feel should be reviewed are the suspension and exclusion policies in our schools. Instead of suspending or expelling a young person and sending the troubled youth home and into the streets, an effective alternative needs to be put in place to correct and redirect the youth. There is a great deal of discussion about the school to prison pipeline, and some of the youth have very different relationships with their parents than many of us had with our parents growing up. This leaves them with a lot of freedom to make their own decisions.

When the schools repeatedly relay to a troubled young person, who already feels as if they do not belong in school and parts of their lives, they cannot come to school, it can lead to the youth deciding not to go back to school entirely. Additionally, the dismissal from the educational environment gives the young person the freedom to spend their time in the streets with other young people who have already given up on education and have made the streets their full-time daytime activity. Unfortunately, the correctional system is where most traveling this detour will end up because we are sending our troubled youth back to their troubled homes and into the troubled streets, where worse issues exist. This is an obvious issue. Schools are supposed to be neutral ground, an escape from life's problems and troubles, and a place where positive futures are developed and secured.

Could we provide better assistance for these young people, maybe with better options? How about a suspension or expulsion policy that leads to a review of the psychological and sociological issues in the student's life? The Life-Review will be done by trained professionals

who will develop and implement a plan to connect advisors, counselors, and medical professionals, who will address the issues and advise the student and family of available resources while also evaluating the effectiveness of the plan. While this process is being expeditiously implemented, the student will be routed to a specialized school with smaller classes that include group discussion sessions, one-on-one counseling, and other formative actions to remedy the situation. It would be best if the alternative school that the student is sent to is not a jail-like option, which would be counter-productive.

Is that far-fetched, unreasonable, or unthinkable in America!?!? I understand that the idea of suspension and expulsion is to remove the child from disrupting class, the school, and to ensure the other students have a safe and secure learning environment. This plan can accomplish a safe and secure school environment. This plan is a starting point and not a finished product; there are issues that will have to be examined before a plan like this could occur. Time, cost, and resource issues would need to be worked out in advance, but most of all, the student must be willing to see this as a positive alternative to suspension, expulsion, and being in the streets. Schools should be a second home for students; reliable, safe, and enriching. If a student is troubled, they should not be turned away; they should be drawn in closer because these are the youth who are at most risk. The current situation can change.

While our country faces many issues and problems that we may have never dreamed would exist, some have been present for decades. The solutions should not always require a particular side to push their agenda, but rather a solution that will address the issue and those affected correctly. By removing color, race, agenda, and political lines from simple decision-making while including proper research, discussion, and development, we can get to a place where obvious 'common sense' solutions are obvious.

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