

JAC NEWSbreak

VITAL NEWS & RESEARCH INFORMATION FOR JAC LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

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On my mind this month...



Gail Yamner

President Obama's citizenship and religion have again dominated the airwaves. Donald Trump is brand marketing himself with the birther

issue. The right wing press is criticizing President Obama over his lack of a strong Easter message which proves he is a Muslim. At what point do we acknowledge the thinly veiled racism behind these accusations?

Donald Trump discovered the ugly underbelly of politics with the birther issue and has used it and his celebrity to advance his own presidential aspirations. No matter how many copies of the live birth certificate the state of Hawaii issues, he presses on. Underlying the birther issue is the hatred and fear of those who appear different.

The issue of the President's religion is chilling. The Constitution does not require that one have a certain religion nor does it require that a President openly celebrate his religion. And yet, President Obama has been subject to lies and distortions since he became a nationally prominent candidate. The fact that he hosted his third Seder does not make him a Jew but if he had attended a feast for a Muslim holiday he would have been excoriated by the right wingers. The disbelievers refuse him his belief.

At what point do we expect our Presidential hopefuls to consider policy profiles not racial profiles? Martin Luther King said he hoped that one day all people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. That day has not yet arrived, but showing people like Trump the door will hasten its arrival.

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Israel

Egypt is planning to open the blockaded border with Gaza and normalize relations with Hamas and Iran. Egyptian officials say they are moving toward policies that more accurately reflect public opinion. As they chart this new course in foreign policy they are seeking to reestablish the influence over the region they once had before the 1979 peace treaty with Israel. On April 27th Egypt brokered a deal to reconcile the Fatah party with its rival Hamas. "We are opening a new page," said Ambassador Menha Bakhoum, spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry. "Egypt is resuming its role that was once abdicated." (*NY Times*, 4/28/11).

Resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks any time soon seems unlikely. Polls show that a majority of Egyptians want to annul the Israel-Egypt peace deal; Israelis expect a major Palestinian demonstration in Jerusalem on May 15th which threatens violence; another flotilla is heading toward Gaza. (Pew Research 4/11).

In the meantime, the two sides have been cooperating militarily and financially in the West Bank. The West Bank is doing well financially and the police are taking care of the day-to-day issues. Recently several dozen Israeli intellectuals and politicians have signed a declaration endorsing the immediate establishment of an independent Palestinian state covering the territories Israel occupied in the 1967 Six Day War. (*National Interest*, 4/25/11)

Britain, France and Germany tried to restart the stalled talks by proposing the outlines of a final settlement, but the US blocked this from going forward. Among the many threats is the Palestinian move to have the UN vote in September to unilaterally declare a Palestinian state. They are hoping that a near-unanimous UN vote would grant statehood, without the Palestinians having to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, compromise

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United States

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

This month the House of Representatives voted to deny all federal funding to Planned Parenthood. The Senate then voted on the same bill, but they rejected this attempt to deny funding for women's access to critical health services. Planned Parenthood is vital to the health of women in this country and many recognize this attack on Planned Parenthood as an attack against women. These clinics provide nearly 1 million cervical cancer screenings, 830,000 breast exams, affordable birth control for nearly 2.5 million patients, and nearly four million tests and treatments for sexually transmitted infections, as well as abortion services. Rabbi David Saperstein of the RAC says that the attempts to undermine women's access to critical health care services, including abortion violate the US constitution and core principles of Jewish tradition, which affirms society's obligations to ensure access to health care and the rights of women to make moral decisions about their own bodies and reproductive health. (RAC news 4/15/11) These clinics serve the most vulnerable in our country and cuts hurt poor families disproportionately.

The war on abortion access was stressed in a report recently issued by the Guttmacher Institute titled, "State Legislative Trends: Hostility to Abortion Rights Increases". Throughout the country, legislators introduced 916 measures related to reproductive health and rights. Across the country, anti choice legislation is mandating longer waiting periods, costly ultrasounds, mandatory counseling sessions and shorter viability times.

Laws against insurance coverage and tax breaks are also being passed. Contraception and sex education programs are especially being targeted. Right wingers are limiting funding for family planning programs, limiting access to contraception, and at the same time calling for less government in people's lives.

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Research & Races

SENATE UPDATE

Florida -- Senator Bill Nelson (D) is running for his third term in a state that now has a Tea Party-affiliated Republican Governor, Rick Scott, and a new conservative GOP Senator, Marco Rubio. Republicans took over several House seats in 2010. Nelson won with 60% in 2006, but 2012 is going to be his toughest race. Currently there are three contenders for the GOP nomination: former Sen. George LeMieux (who did not run in 2010 after he was appointed to fill out Mel Martinez's seat when Martinez resigned), state Senate president Mike Haridopolos and former state Rep. Adam Hasner. Nelson will not have a primary opponent and could be helped by the GOP primary battle. JAC continues to support Nelson.

Nevada -- Long time JAC member Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-NV-1) has

announced that she will run for the seat currently held by GOP Senator John Ensign. Until last week, this was an open seat; Ensign was not seeking reelection. Ensign, burdened by ethics questions (an affair with the wife of his chief of staff), has decided (most likely under pressure) to resign as of May 1 and allow the GOP Governor of Nevada to appoint someone to fill out the remainder of his term. That someone will probably be Rep. Dean Heller (R-NV-2), who already declared he would run for this seat. The race becomes more difficult for Berkley, JAC's candidate. Heller will now be the sitting senator, with the advantages of incumbency: greater name ID and visibility. If you would like to contribute to the Berkley campaign, please do it through JAC either by sending your check (Shelley Berkley for Senate) to the office or donating to her online at www.jacpac.org/candcontrib.php.

New Mexico -- Former Rep. Heather Wilson (R) continues to have the GOP nomination to herself. In the Democratic primary it looks as if Rep. Martin Heinrich will be challenged by New Mexico Auditor Hector Balderas. This seat has been held by Democrat Jeff Bingaman for almost 30 years, but Wilson is a top recruit and puts the race into the "toss-up" column, especially if the Democratic primary becomes costly and divisive.

Virginia -- Former Governor Tim Kaine left his position as head of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to run against George Allen for the open seat once held by Allen. Neither of these top-tier candidates should have a primary, but some Tea Party members have questioned Allen's conservative credentials and could put up a challenger. This will be a "toss-up" race to the finish.

Separation of Religion and State

As state governments around the country are grappling with deficits, pensions, medicaid, unemployment and other issues, they are working overtime to bring religion into the classrooms. In the first three months of 2011, at least 8 states have introduced creationism related bills to their state legislatures. Some of these bills have passed through committees and some have died in committee. Whatever the outcome, these bills are increasing in scope and volume.

Bills have been introduced in a number of states. Texas would ban discrimination against creationists, Kentucky would allow teachers to present passages of the Bible for instruction on the theory of creation, Florida wants to amend its laws regarding evolution, Oklahoma, New Mexico

and Missouri consider evolution a controversial subject; teachers would be allowed to present relevant information about biology and critique the weaknesses of the theory of evolution. Tennessee would shield teachers from disciplinary action if they question the theory of evolution during class. These bills would allow state lawmakers to turn the Bible into a textbook. (*Mother Jones*, 3/11)

Alan Leshner, the chief executive officer of American Association for the Advancement of Science, argued against this trend in bringing religion into the classroom. "There is virtually no scientific controversy among the overwhelming majority of researchers on the core facts of global warming and evolution, and asserting that there are controversies only confuses

students. (*TPM*, 4/11)

The Continuing Resolution that funds the government for the remainder of FY 2011 carries two riders specific to the District of Columbia. The first bans DC from using local funds to pay for abortions for low income women. The second, introduced by GOP Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) and Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT), allocates \$20 million annually in voucher assistance for religious and other private schools. This would continue a program started and funded under President George W. Bush. The program was set to expire. DC Mayor Vincent Gray was arrested when he protested these rules, which he considered an infringement on D.C. citizens to have jurisdiction over their own tax dollars. (*LA Times*, 4/21/11)

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on refugees or borders, or discuss the issue of Jerusalem. In order to preempt this action, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked for a meeting

before the US Congress to discuss his own peace plan, the uprisings among Arabs, as well to remind the US about the Iranian threat. The aim is to capture

as much US support as possible before the vote at the UN and maybe add other countries to vote against Palestinian statehood. (*Newsweek*, 4/11/11).

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Washington DC Mayor Vincent Gray was arrested as he protested the cutting of funding for abortions for low income women who live in DC. (*LA Times*, 4/21/11) Gray said "DC residents are being treated as guinea pigs

for the favorite social experiments of important congressional leaders. We ought to be able to make the choice in terms of how our dollars are spent." Some pro-choice senators voted to pass the CR, suggesting that Congress

could overturn the DC abortion restrictions sometime down the road. (*The Hill*, 4/14/11), but many have doubts that once these laws are on the books they will be able to be overturned.