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Budgets are the Rosetta Stones of Political Doublespeak

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E. T. York, Chancellor Emeritus of the State University System recently stated in the *Sun* (8 Dec.) that Florida can and must do better in public funding of education. In support of this statement, he points to three facts about Florida's spending priorities. These result in Florida holding, on the national level, 5th place in spending on police protection; 40th place in spending for K-12 education; and 50th place in spending for higher education.

What he has overlooked is the fact that these spending priorities perfectly reflect the goals of Florida's political establishment. Budgets are the Rosetta Stones of political doublespeak. Florida politicians talk about education; they fund incarceration.

This is plantation politics. It has been operative in Florida since it entered the Union as a slave state. Plantations morphed over the years into their modern counterparts: jails and prisons. The link between plantations and prisons is the use of political disenfranchisement. Disenfranchisement as a political weapon has taken some traumatic and dramatic turns since 1838 but remains the bedrock of Florida politics.

The first and most dramatic was the Civil War. Florida fought for "states rights". This was simply doublespeak for preserving slavery and a plantation economy.

Following the civil war was a period of legal and illegal measures to minimize potential political opposition and subjugate a rural labor force. Tools of this subjugation included felon disenfranchisement and "Jim Crow" laws. The Supreme Court and the U.S. Congress dealt these measures severe blows in the 1960s.

In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court struck a major blow in the *Gideon v. Wainwright* decision. Until then, Florida law limited court appointed defense counsel to capital cases. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled that state courts are required by the 6th and 14th Amendments to provide lawyers in all criminal cases for defendants unable to afford their own attorneys.

The civil rights legislation of 1964 was aimed at the enfranchisement of large parts of the population. Originally conceived to protect the rights of racial minorities, the bill was amended to protect the civil rights of everyone.

Note that these acts were forced upon Florida by a higher authority. They were not the evolutionary products of legislative democracy. As dramatic as these two blows were, they provided only a temporary respite from the politics of intimidation in Florida.

In the 1970s, national political structures came under siege from a number of fronts on a number of issues. The one thread that appeared to bind the opposition was the use of illegal drugs.

The perceived threat from the drug culture marked a major shift in power politics. As a result, government shifted its focus from race to the drug culture. The war on drugs was an attempt to maintain the status quo.

The strategy was nothing less than Machiavellian. A divide and conquer policy evolved that separated the drug culture into supply and demand sides and then afforded them unequal treatment in state and federal courts.

The supply side is characterized by uneducated and expendable foot soldiers that connect the user to the assorted drug cartels. Once these foot soldiers become compromised, they are relegated to the jails and prisons of the state. In Florida, these are some 89,000 men, women and children.

Next was to subvert the demand side that was characterized by the educated professionals who used illegal drugs. Their capitulation to the power structure came at the price of benign neglect on the part of law enforcement and trivializing penalties in the court.

The subservience of the educated professionals is guaranteed by the threat of loss of professional license, civil liberties and security clearances, not to mention potential incarceration for a felony conviction.

The passage of civil forfeiture legislation complemented the divide and conquer strategy by allowing law enforcement agencies to profit from the war on drugs. It is indeed a small step from enforcing the law to legal cultivation and harvesting of the profits of illegal activities. The end result is law enforcement now has a vested interest in the trade in illegal drugs.

The consequence of the war on drugs has been a collapse of law and order within our state. There are many ways to look at that collapse. However, three points are indisputable.

First, violent crime ratios per 100,000 in Florida and the US have never returned to those of the 1960s. That was the turbulent decade of the civil rights movement prior to the declaration of the war on drugs.

Second, since 1960 the violent crime ratio in Florida has consistently matched or exceeded that of the US as a whole.

Third, Florida had an incarceration ratio in 2005 that was higher than that of any country on this planet. As amazing as it seems with so many people in our jails and prison, homicides statewide were up by 27% for the first six months of 2006, compared with the same period in 2005.

Mr. York, there are more than 600,000 disenfranchised citizens of Florida. There are almost 150,000 men, women and children in the jails and prisons of the state. The criminal justice community has become the power base of Florida politics.

Witness many of the leading candidates in the last election and their ties to the criminal justice and prison community. As long as the politics of intimidation and incarceration remain the state's priority, education will continue to be under funded.