Thank You, Mr. President: Finally, a Sensible Approach to Gang Violence

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During the Clinton years, I received a call from the White House one week before a State of the Union address. I was asked if I would be willing to attend and sit next to Hillary, because the president was going to make some remarks on the gang issue. As someone who has worked with gangs for nearly two decades, I guess I landed on their short list.

Arrangements were made and I was scheduled to leave L.A. for D.C. But two days before I was to depart, a call came, with regrets expressed, to tell me that I had been bumped from my seat next to the first lady. A female police officer had won the slot instead.

In the end, I couldn't have been more grateful to have been axed, because when I tuned in to the speech and heard President Clinton's remedy for gang violence, I was very unimpressed. All he wanted was a fist made of stronger iron and tougher sentencing from here to Tuesday. I was very relieved to be sitting in my living room that night. Because tougher laws and longer sentences are not the solution.

Last week I received a similar call, this time from the current White House's faith-based initiative office, asking if I would be "opposed" to attending a White House event focused on gang violence. My only opposition would be if they tried to offer a simple solution to an enormously complex issue.

When I watched the State of the Union speech, I was surprised by what President Bush had to say about the gang dilemma. As a lifelong Democrat, I could fill these pages with the many subjects on which the president and I disagree. But this time, I was impressed. I have never before heard a president speak of gangs and then suggest that despair might well be at the root of the problem. He did. And he suggested offering "hope to harsh places" and said he wants to give "better options than apathy or gangs or jail" to young people in our cities, and especially young men. Not bad.

I believe assigning the first lady to the task of this proposed three-year, $150-million effort gives it heft, not just lip service.
When all is said and done, a president spoke of gangs without once speaking of tougher laws and more suppression. Perhaps nothing will come of it — but a different language was used Wednesday night, and that's progress. At the moment of this writing, I've just left a hospital where a young man, Martin, was pronounced dead, and another, Michael, struggles with serious wounds. Martin was on his way to a job interview and Michael was driving him. Gang gunfire ended one life, and altered the other forever.

I will support anyone who is sensible on the gang violence issue. And good sense presents itself in a multiplicity of approaches, in a reverence for the complexities that cause gang involvement and in efforts that include more stakeholders.

My hope is that this proposal will not limit itself simply to prevention — with a heart full of wanting to steer young people straight. Worthy as that is, it will be only a half measure if we seek to improve the odds for some kids without altering the odds themselves. Bush is right to diagnose the gang problem as a denial of hope and a lethal shortage of alternatives. He could well bridge this effort with his own words from last year's address, which called us all to a moral responsibility to help those who reenter society from prison.

Early prevention, mentoring, massive campaigns to provide jobs, gang-worker counseling, knowledgeable police vigilance — they all need to be done and lack only our will to do them. Whether we are ultimately sensible on this issue is yet to be seen, but new language matters and sometimes even propels us where we need to go.