

II. United States Elections

Jose Vega: ‘Elect Yourself’ To Make Peace in the World

Jose Vega is a LaRouche independent candidate for Congress from New York District 15 in the South Bronx, New York City. He speaks about how apparently ordinary people had “elected themselves” to be peacemakers and truth tellers in the past 50 years’ history of his city borough. This is an edited transcript of his presentation to the Feb. 18, 2024 conference, “America’s Next 50 Years,” organized by LaRouche independent Senate candidate Diane Sare.

Vega’s presentation was also inspired by a discussion with a South Bronx resident about the drawings and etchings, called Los Caprichos, of 18th-century Spanish artist Francisco Goya. These and other slides that Vega showed are only indicated here.

A video of the entire conference is available [here](#).

All right... People may know this image. People have seen this image. This is The Bronx in the 1970s. This is at a time when there was something called “The Bronx is Burning.” This might be a very famous line that people associate with The Bronx to this day. And thankfully, it’s not like that anymore. As you can see in the next slide ...

Oh, sorry, I forgot I put this one in. This is the gang called the Savage Skulls. It also dominated The Bronx in the ’70s. The Savage Skulls, on top of other gangs like the Ghetto Brothers and others, were notorious in The Bronx in the ’70s. I mean, these were violent gangs, okay? There was no such thing as law in The Bronx in the ’70s.

I’m friends with some of these people who ran in these gangs, who are reformed today. One of them



Jose Vega

EIRNS/Yuriy Zah

owns a boxing gym in The Bronx, El Maestro. Anyway, thankfully, today it’s not like the ’70s. So we can go to the next slide....

Oh, well, yeah, except this, I guess. [A six-story apartment building, with one side collapsed from the top to the ground.] You know, this happened in December of 2023, only a couple of months ago, where a building completely collapsed. Just out of nowhere, because it has not been maintained. Did anybody bother to look into whether or not this building was suitable for people

to live in? It just fell apart.

Next slide. What we see here happened not even a week ago, at the Mount Eden Avenue train station. I used to live near this train station. Seven people were shot, between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. Children, just shot at a subway station.



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A burned-out building on Charlotte Street in the South Bronx, New York.

‘Planned Shrinkage’ or Survival

I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know about The Bronx. We know The Bronx is a messed-up place. I’m running in New York’s 15th; this is the South Bronx, of course. But there’s something about The Bronx that people do not know, that they actually have to know about.

In the 1970s, there was a city planner named Roger Starr, and the idea that he had—his brilliant idea—was, there’s a lot of minorities in neighborhoods, in poor neighborhoods like the South Bronx, and Brownsville, Brooklyn, parts of Queens, Harlem—seeing as they were already killing each other: Why do we need to waste city resources on keeping them alive? How about we just cut two-thirds of the police force in these areas? And we shut down a lot of their fire departments or fire stations, and maybe we defund teachers there, too. Let’s just accelerate it, and we’ll call it “planned shrinkage.”

This is the early 1970s, right? This was the official New York City policy. And it still *is* the official New York City policy. And this is an offshoot of something that President Nixon—at the time, he coined this term, he called it “benign neglect.” Or as Helga Zepp-LaRouche calls it today, “depraved indifference.” Just do this [covers his eyes], basically, to the problem, and it’ll sort itself out. Kind of how some people are dealing with the Israel-Gaza situation today, where they just do this, and say, “Well, maybe it’ll fix itself.”

Now, can we go to the next slide? I want to tell you a story about something in this time in The Bronx. So, people don’t know—may not, but should know, who this is. This is Cornell “Black Benjie” Benjamin of the Ghetto Brothers. This is the gang that he was a part of. The Ghetto Brothers, on top of other gangs, were a set of violent gangs in the 1970s that were basically started as a way for people to survive.

And I found this out recently, actually, that not only the Ghetto Brothers, but the Savage Skulls in The Bronx—things were so messed up and so bad that they said, “Well, things are so messed up, we’re just going to start cleaning the streets.” And they did. They started sweeping streets. They went into apartment buildings. They were helping people with their groceries; and they even dealt with drug dealers. Well, maybe—the methods they dealt with the drug dealers aren’t [inaudible], you know. But the point is, they said, “Something needs to happen”; because the entire system failed them.

And so, the Ghetto Brothers, right? This is Cornell “Black Benjie.” The Ghetto Brothers, inspired in part

by the Black Panthers’ success in pressuring U.S. political leaders to start feeding children before school, began its own free breakfast program, along with organizing clothing drives, cleaning apartment buildings, and advocating for youth employment and better health care. This is a violent gang, all right? They did kidnappings, murders, and they changed that.

Why? In the worst era of New York City, when the government is trying to kill them and stamp them out, the violent gangs themselves decided they were going to rebel against that. Who elected them to do that? Benjie decided, “You know what? Why are we killing each other?” Have people seen the movie, *The Warriors*? People know this movie, right? Okay, so there’s a famous scene in the very beginning. This is what sets off the plot, right? Where Cyrus—he recruits all the gangs to meet at Van Cortlandt Park at the tippy top of The Bronx? And where he says, “You know what? There’s more of us than there are police. Maybe we should all unite and stop killing each other and actually help our community.” And then what happens? He gets shot. And that’s what sets off the plot. That’s actually based off a true story. It’s based off Benjie here.

The Peace Counselor

Black Benjie was very honest about who he was. He’s only 25 years old, my age right now. And he said, “You know, I’m an ex-drug addict. I’m not going to lie about it. I was still using drugs when I came to the Ghetto Brothers. I’ve been using drugs off and on since 1967.” And then they recruited this man to be, as they say, their peace counselor, the Ghetto Brothers’ peace counselor.

Is that an elected position? Who voted him into that role? Nobody voted him into that role. He elected himself to say, “I got to bring peace to The Bronx.” Notice, I haven’t said anything about a City Council member, an Assembly member, a State Senator, a Congressman, or a Senator. This was a former drug addict, who said, “There needs to be peace in The Bronx. I’m not going to rely on other people to do it; I’m going to elect myself to do it.”

So, here’s what happened. Black Benjie is mediating peace between these different gangs. He’s going to different representatives. He’s saying, “Listen, we need to figure out some kind of truce between our gangs.” And—I think it was in 1973—he was shot. Mediating peace between two gangs. He’s trying to bring peace and he’s shot. And after Black Benjie’s killing, this is what the former “first lady” of the Savage Skulls says:

“I knew we were going to war.”

And indeed, the Ghetto Brothers started assembling an army. They kidnapped five members of rival gangs, of other gangs, including a member named Julio, who they viciously beat, on the belief that he was one of their friend’s killers. But that was before the gang’s leaders visited Gwendolyn Benjamin. That’s Black Benjie’s mother, who told them, “I don’t want war. I want peace. My son died for peace.”

So, the founder of the Ghetto Brothers, Karate Charlie, reached out to Felipe Mercado, president of the Savage Skulls, one of The Bronx’s biggest gangs. And after lining up his support, they got the leaders and warlords of 40 gangs to meet in neutral territory at the Hoe Avenue Boys Club of America. Cops and reporters waited outside as more than 150 gang members, almost all of them Black or Puerto Rican, gathered to discuss the killing and a plan for peace. And at the end of the meeting, gang leaders shook hands in the middle of the Boys and Girls Club gymnasium, and every member in attendance signed the Hoe Avenue Peace Treaty.

Okay. Their response to one of their own getting shot and killed, is peace. That doesn’t sound like The Bronx, does it? And yet this happened in one of the worst eras of New York City—of which, like I say again, every elected official wants them dead. They don’t want there to be a Bronx.

‘The Benjie Way’

Who elected Benjie to do that? Who voted him in? Think about The Bronx today, and then about what happened, what this man was able to do. And then the Ghetto Brothers went on to make music. I’m not kidding. They went on to become a hip-hop group. And that’s actually the story of how hip-hop was created, in The Bronx. It was because people had more free time; instead of shooting each other, they decided to produce music. That’s a whole other discussion. I’m not going to go there.

But like I said, there was no mention of a Council member or anything. Can we go to the next slide? It’s been almost 50 years since that happened, and they re-named a street [corner] after him, on 165th Street, and



Facebook/Office of Councilman Rafael Salanca, Jr.

South Bronx family and friends of “Black Benjie” gather to celebrate the street corner re-naming to Cornell “Black Benjie” Benjamin Way, to honor the 25-year-old former vice president of the Ghetto Brothers, June 2, 2023.

I forget the intersection [Rogers Place]. And they call it, you know, the Black Benjie Way. And people were wearing shirts that day that said, “I live the Black Benjie way. I live the Benjie way.”

Now I’m a Federal candidate. That means that any decisions I would potentially be making, affect the entire nation. But today, I’m not here asking you to support me. I’m not here asking you, “Oh, please help me get elected.” What are you prepared to do? Are you prepared to be the Black Benjie of your community? Of your country? Of the world?

‘Truth Has Died. Will She Be Revived?’

Can we go to the next slide? [One of the famed *Caprichos* drawings of Francisco Goya.] This next part of my presentation, I had to throw in here, because this was made by somebody who lives in Hunts Point [district in The Bronx—ed.]. I had no idea he was this talented.... But this next person who I’m going to talk about, he lives in Hunts Point, which is where the Ghetto Brothers were founded. I had no idea he was an artist, and he was telling me about Goya. I didn’t prompt him to tell me anything about Goya. He just told me—it just started, in The Bronx; *in The Bronx*. Never talked to him before. He just started talking to me about Goya, because he saw one of my interventions.

He told me about this [*Capricho*]. You know, I already knew about this image, but he showed me this. Now, people may know this *Capricho*. What you see is, you see a lady, dead, and people around her, looking



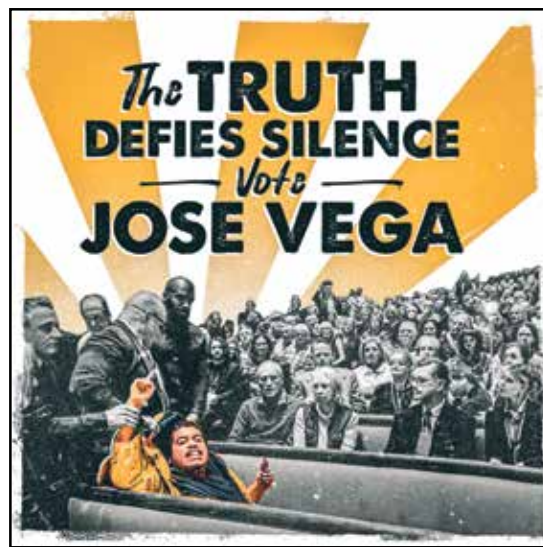
Murió la Verdad (*Truth Has Died*), 1814–1815, from Francisco de Goya's "*The Disasters of War*" (plate 79).

at her body. And the caption underneath, is in Spanish: It says, *Murió la verdad*. Translation: "Truth has died." Truth has died and people are looking around and around her.

Can we go to the next one. And then again, Truth. And the caption underneath is *Se resucitará?* "Will she be revived?" It's not a perfect translation, but you get the idea. "Will she be resurrected?"

Now, I show you these two images because this is what my friend showed me—because some of you may have seen my palm cards outside. Can we go to the next image? [The palm card—ed.] He made this image, inspired by those two images. This is what he told me, and I was blown away. He studied Goya in school. And he's lived in Hunts Point his whole life. I had no idea that there were people in the South Bronx that understood Goya. And he made this image.

And so now I want to pass off the challenge to all of you. Can we go to the next slide?



Jose Vega for Congress

A Jose Vega for Congress campaign palm card.

This is—I think this is Code Pink, where they held up bloody hands as Tony Blinken was testifying about what's going on in Gaza.

Can we go to the next image? This is the Chicago high school kids who walked out of school to pressure the Mayor and the City Council to pass a ceasefire resolution, which they did pass.

Can we go to the next slide? This should be the New York City high school kids [who] recently, last week, all walked out. I think it was on Friday, actually. All these high school kids walked out of school.

'People Are Good—They Want To Do Something'

These kids are not of voting age. These kids can't run for any kind of public office. Yet, why is it, that this is more potent than anything any-

one's doing right now? Who elected them to do this? They elected themselves!

So, the point of the story I told you about Black Benjie—and what we see going on today with the Israel-Gaza question—is that when people are presented with a great injustice, something inside them that's greater will be moved to act. I struggle with this sometimes—I'm just being transparent with you—with believing that people are *good*. But I know, like all of

you—people *are* good. People are inherently good, and beautiful, and capable of love, because when they see something ugly, they want to make it beautiful, no matter where in the world they are. They want to do something.

People have been telling me, "Jose, you need a slogan, you need a Congressional slogan, something that people think of when they think of you." And I've been throwing a couple around. And so, my official—subject to change!—official campaign slogan is: "Vote Vega, Elect Yourself!"