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**A.I.G. Bonuses: Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game
Unapologetically Young, Black and Female**

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I watched this week as the nation's furor turned towards employees of insurance giant American International Group (A.I.G.) and the \$200 million-plus in retention bonus payments recently doled out to executives. Executives, who, as we already know are largely to blame for their role in A.I.G.'s financial crisis that led to the country's economic meltdown in the first place because of its dealings in bad mortgage-backed securities. This is also the same company that was given a loan in the form of a bailout, using taxpayer money to the tune of \$122.8 billion. And even though Congressional members can't seem to pass a universal healthcare bill, raise the Federal Minimum Wage, or adequately fund our public schools, in record time, U.S. lawmakers managed to create a piece of legislation that would tax the bonuses for employees at firms receiving federal funds in an attempt to show the public "they care too." Mind you, these are the same people who never return you, the taxpayer's and voter's phone call, but all of a sudden, "they've got your back." Now whether this bill passes it or not is a whole other story. I'm more concerned with what I like to call "selective outrage" as demonstrated by voters and usually triggered by the media and almost always used as a distraction to keep our focus from the real issues.

Rewarding incompetence with taxpayer money is nothing new for American voters, and I don't recall there ever being a national outcry of "off with their heads."

Congress has raised its own pay more than two dozen times, according to the Congressional Research Service before finally just passing a law providing for automatic annual cost-of-living adjustments unless they vote otherwise. Most recently, they voted to forego next year's pay increase because of the recession but accepted this year's

increase of \$4,700 bringing congressional salaries to \$174,000. That's \$174,000 in taxpayer money...and that's just the money we *know* about. While it may seem like Congressional members are making off like fat rats, let me remind you that we do the same for State and local elected officials across the country.

Corporate executives may have private jets, but our elected officials have Lincoln Town Cars, the choice of many representatives who lease their vehicles at taxpayers' expense.

According to an article published last year in the Los Angeles Times, twenty-one of California's 53 House members lease vehicles, among them Reps. Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles) and Laura Richardson (D- Long Beach). In the article, Watson grew testy when asked recently about her taxpayer-funded vehicle.

"You guys ask me such idiotic questions," Watson snapped. Her spokeswoman, Dorinda White, explained that Watson chose the Lincoln because she is "over 6 feet tall in shoes" and spends a lot of time driving around her district.

Watson, whose district includes numerous schools in the beleaguered Los Angeles Unified School District, including Dorsey High School, where a recent district report shows a graduation rate of 36%, an entire student body that is less than 1% proficient in math, and only 21% students meeting the requirement to attend a 2-year or 4-year university.

California Democrat Congresswoman, Laura Richardson, who was voted one of the "2008 Most Embarrassing Re-elected Member of Congress" by the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), choose to allow the taxpayers to foot the bill for her 2007 Lincoln Town Car at \$1,300 a month. It was the most expensive car in the House of Representatives. Richardson's district includes Compton, where the jobless rate is up to 18.4%.

And even though pink slips have been handed out to teachers in California, due to the State's budget crisis, in the neighborhood of an \$8 billion estimated decline in revenue, the average lawmaker still makes \$113,000 a year plus a \$173 living expense for each day they have to work in Sacramento, which tends to average out to \$30,000 annually. Their living expense allowance *alone*, which is taxpayer funded, is more than some teachers bring home in a year.

Yes, taxpayers reward incompetence with every paycheck issued to elected officials who continue to represent districts filled with unemployed workers, families living at or below the poverty line, and school districts in crisis. But it's not breaking news every time our money is automatically deducted from our paycheck and electronically wired into their bank accounts on the 1st of month. It's only when we show up at our local County, State of Federal building asking for it back in the form of unemployment benefits, welfare, or General Relief that it is.

So why is it that American taxpayer's are all bent out of shape over the bonuses paid to unknown incompetent executives, who, bonus or no bonus, are wealthier than most of us will ever be? The reality is that the day to day actions of these executives, as wrong as they are for accepting a bonus in any amount, don't affect the majority of us in comparison to the actions of the people we elected and in most case repeatedly

re-elected into public office to represent our best interests. Sign me up for that crusade. Sign me up for that crusade. Sign me up to stand outside of the airport on Thursdays when lawmakers fly back into their districts, to meet them with signs of protest for the continued social injustice faced by their constituents. Sign me up to lead the recall of lawmakers who aren't doing their jobs. That's how you reward incompetence.

The flap surrounding A.I.G.'s bonuses is just another distraction in a laundry list of distractions designed to keep the taxpayer from focusing on the real issues.

Ask yourself how much taxpayer money went into funding last week's Capitol Hill A.I.G. hearing that resulted in Congressional members giving "Mad Men," "30 Rock," and Alec Baldwin a run for their money for consideration in next year's Emmy Award nominations for the categories of Outstanding Drama Series, Outstanding Comedy Series, and Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy or Drama? After all the theatrics were over, those same A.I.G. executives climbed back aboard their private jets and Congressional members hopped into their taxpayer funded vehicles headed to their daily evening fundraiser. The media got their sound bytes that they will then dutifully repeat every hour on the hour making you think something really happened in that hearing. And you, the taxpayer, believe it or not, got screwed again.

"Don't hate the player, hate the game." - rapper Ice T.

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
BlackCommentator.com Columnist, *Jasmyne Cannick*, is a critic and commentator based in Los Angeles who writes about the worlds of pop culture, race, class, and politics as it relates to the African-American community. A regular contributor to NPR's 'News and Notes,' she was chosen as one *Essence Magazine's 25 Women Shaping the World*. Click [here](#) to contact Ms. Cannick.

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