

Booker should have been in this picture with Trump, supporting the bipartisan criminal justice reform bill

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Weiner and Schwartz: U.S. Sen. Cory Booker can both work with President Trump and lead criticism at the same time. He should have been standing next to Trump in the White House on Nov. 14, touting the "First Step Act" -- a bill which would reform America's prison system. (Andrew Harnik | Associated Press)

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By Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

By Robert Weiner and Jared Schwartz

Finally, after years of wrangling over reasonable criminal justice reform.



...many, after years of managing over reasonable criminal justice reform,
Congress is about to pass serious legislation on prison and justice reform.

Yet Senate Democrats including 2020 Presidential contender Cory Booker did not go to the White House when Trump held a White House event Nov. 14 to announce support.

Without Democrats, Trump managed to make the First Step Act into a bipartisan personal accomplishment. No one was there to say how much farther there is to go.

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

I am grateful to be here today w/ Members of the House & Senate who have poured their time, heart and energy into the crucial issue of Prison Reform. Working together w/ my Admin over the last two years, these members have reached a bipartisan agreement...pscp.tv/w/bryTnzFvTIFs...

71.1K 5:10 PM - Nov 14, 2018

The White House @WhiteHouse
President Trump Makes an Announcement Regarding H.R. 5682, the "First Step Act"
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Booker, D-NJ, who has made a huge issue about justice reform, should have gone to the White House and showed bipartisanship, and then he should have gone to the stakeout area as VIP's do after White House meetings, and praised the "Second Chance" in the bill, but criticized the effort for missing what is in Booker's own legislation, correcting disproportionate minority sentencing, imprisonment, and executions.

Here's how to do it: When Congressman Charles Rangel, D-NY, criticized the White House for voluntary but no federal assistance for drug treatment, at the stakeout area, he said George H.W. Bush was offering "a thousand points of light but no batteries." That's what dominated the news cycle.

Democrats can engage with the White House and show independence at the same time. Without engagement, Democratic priorities like health care, immigration, and infrastructure will have no chance of getting done.

Regardless, Booker, 2020 contenders, and other senators should be commended for supporting bipartisan criminal justice reform. But as Booker has offered earlier, the American people deserve more than just the First Step Act. Booker's 2020 ambitions are well-known, but if he wants to win he has to show that he can work with the President and push the envelope at the same time.

The Record Expungement Designed to Enhance Employment Act -- or REDEEM -- which he proposed with Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., and Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., seemed like a good place to start. It would allow kids who enter the criminal justice system to get their records expunged. They would grow up and become contributing members of society. The bill would also permit people convicted of non-violent crimes to have their records sealed, and thus get a good job in the future.

We should not be surprised that America's recidivism rate is absurdly high-- two thirds return for drug crimes -- especially after holding minor criminals in federal prison for years. According to a study by Devah Pager, professor of

Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, a felony record cuts in half white

men's chances of getting a job once they leave, and cuts black men's chances by almost two-thirds. This manages to produce higher recidivism rates and entrenches racism at the same time.

Bipartisan legislation about drugs and crime is possible. Just last month, the Senate passed a bipartisan opioid crisis bill by a margin of 98-1, and a more moderate version of the First Step Act passed the House 360-59. A moderate, bipartisan bill like the REDEEM Act could likewise obtain the needed 60 votes on the Senate floor, as long as Democrats can keep up the pressure for action.

Booker is a leader on a very sticky issue. Booker has signed on to numerous other bipartisan criminal justice bills. Booker is trying to shrink the largest prison population on Earth, reduce crime in the future, and lessen inhumane conditions. These bills are tailored to curb America's expensive addiction to incarceration.

If Booker has a shot at being president, he has to establish a record of achievement across the aisle, and that doesn't mean giving up opportunities for cooperation with the White House he has regardless of whether he likes it.

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