

EDITORS

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EMBARGOED

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, PRESIDENT
CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND

HUNTER COLLEGE

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"Democracy is Not a Spectator Sport"

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For info
CONTACT:
R. ELLIOTT
772-4085

Baby C was born prematurely with lung disease. His parents lived in a car. His mother received no prenatal care and inadequate nutrition. The family lived on handouts from neighbors and hospital staff. By the time Baby C died at 7 months of age in a Michigan hospital, the mother was pregnant again with Baby D. Baby D was delivered stillborn in the car five days after Baby C's death. The state of Michigan paid for a double funeral.

These two American children should not have died. Nor should American infants in some Detroit neighborhoods who suffer infant mortality rates comparable to infants in Honduras--the poorest country in Latin America.

You are graduating into a nation and world teetering on the brink of moral and economic bankruptcy. Since 1980, our President and Congress have been turning our national plowshares into swords and been bringing good news to the rich at the expense of the poor. An escalating arms race and nuclear proliferation hold hostage not only the future we adults hold in trust for our children, but also the present that is, for many millions of our young in America and throughout the world, one of relentless poverty and deprivation.

Hunger is the enemy faced daily by hundreds of millions of people throughout the world. Children are the major victims. Our misguided national and world choices are literally killing children daily. UNICEF says that every day last year more than 40,000 young children died from malnutrition and infection. For every one who died, six now live on in hunger and ill-health which will be forever etched upon their lives. A recent study of child deaths by the Maine Department of Human Services says that poor children in America die at a rate three times that of non-poor children, and that poverty is the ultimate cause of death for 11,000 American children each year. This is more child deaths over five years than the whole number of American battle deaths during the Vietnam war.

(The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that) Every minute ten children die as a result of measles, polio, tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough, or tetanus which we know how to prevent. Although vaccines have existed for decades and

the cost is a mere \$3 per child, only 10 percent of the 80 million children born yearly in the developing world are immunized. At home, more than 40 percent of poor black urban children, five to nine years old, are not immunized.

Yet governments throughout the world, led by our own, spend over \$600 billion a year on arms while an estimated one billion of our world's people live in poverty and 600 million are under or unemployed.*

Where is the human commitment and political will to find the relative pittance of money needed to protect children? What kind of world allows 40,000 children to die needlessly every day? UNICEF estimates that for \$6 billion a year we could save 20,000 children a day by 1990 by applying new scientific and technological breakthroughs in oral rehydration therapy, universal child immunization, promotion of breastfeeding, and mass use of child growth charts. At home, where are the strong political voices speaking out for investing in children rather than bombs; mothers rather than missiles?

In 1953 Dwight David Eisenhower warned:

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies... a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

"This world in arms is not spending money alone.

"It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children."

And how blatant the world and national theft from needy children and the solution of pressing human needs is.

In its first year, the Reagan Administration proposed \$11 billion in cuts in preventive children's and lifeline support programs for poor families with no attempt to distinguish between programs that work and don't work. The Congress enacted \$9 billion in cuts.

* All world military and social expenditures are from Ruth Leger Sivard's World Military and Social Expenditures: 1982. UNICEF references are from Jim Grant's State of the World's Children 1982-83. Domestic spending tradeoffs are from CDF's A Children's Defense Budget: An Analysis of the President's FY 1984 Budget and Children (1983).

In its second year, the Reagan Administration proposed \$9 billion in cuts in these same programs; the Congress enacted \$1 billion.

In its third year, the President is proposing \$3.5 billion in new cuts in these same programs just as the effects of the previous cuts are being felt and millions of Americans are beset by joblessness, homelessness, and lost health insurance. Thousands of children face increasing child abuse, foster care placement, illness, and mortality because their families are unable to meet their needs while safety net family support, health and social services programs are being drastically cut back.

It is my strong view that the American people have been sold a set of false choices by our national leaders who tell us we must choose between jobs and peace; between filling potholes in our streets and cavities in our children's teeth; between day care for five million latchkey children and home care for millions of senior citizens living out their lives in the loneliness of a nursing home; between arms control and building the MX! There are other choices--fairer choices--that you and I must insist our political leaders make.

While slashing programs serving the neediest children, the President and Congress found \$750 billion to give untargeted tax cuts mostly to non-needy corporations and individuals. And the Reagan Administration is trying to convince the American people to give the Pentagon \$2 trillion over a seven year period in the largest arms buildup in peacetime history. Do you know how much money \$2 trillion is? If you had spent \$2 million a day every day since Christ was born, you would still have spent less than President Reagan wants the American people to believe the Pentagon can spend efficiently in seven years.

When President Reagan took office, we were spending \$18 million an hour on defense.

This year, we are spending \$24 million an hour.

Next year, President Reagan wants to spend \$28 million an hour. The House Democratic leadership wants to spend "only" \$27 million an hour and they are being labeled "soft" on defense.

By 1988, if the President had his way, we would be spending \$44 million an hour on defense and every American would be spending 63 percent more on defense and 22 percent less on poor children and poor families. Just one hour's worth of President Reagan's proposed defense increase this year in military spending would pay for free school lunches for 19,000 children for a school year. A day's worth of his proposed defense increase would pay for a year's free school lunches for almost a half a million low income students. A week's worth of his proposed defense spending could buy a fully-equipped micro computer for every classroom of low income children of school age in the U.S., assuming 25 children to a classroom.

How do you want to spend scarce national resources?

What choices would you make in the following examples:

- o Would you rather build one less of the planned 226 MX missiles that will cost us \$110 million each, and that we still can't find a place to hide, or eliminate poverty in 101,000 female headed households a year? If we cancel the whole MX program we could eliminate poverty for all 12 million poor children and have enough left over to pay college costs for 300,000 potential engineers, mathematicians, and scientists who may not be able to afford college. Which investment do you think will foster longer term national security? President Reagan has cut safety net programs for poor families. He's building the MX missiles.
- o Would you rather spend \$100 million a year on 100 military bands or put that money into teaching 200,000 educationally deprived children to read and write as well as their more advantaged peers? American high school bands would be delighted to volunteer to provide music for patriotic events, I'll bet. President Reagan has cut compensatory education. He's not touched military bands.
- o Would you rather keep or sell the luxury hotel the Department of Defense owns at Fort Dean Russey on Waikiki Beach which has a fair market value of \$100 million, or provide Medicaid coverage for all poor pregnant women, some of whom are being turned away from hospital emergency rooms in labor? President Reagan has cut Medicaid. No one has seriously suggested curbing military luxuries like this hotel.
- o We plan to build 100 B-1 bombers at a cost of \$250 million each. If we build 91--nine fewer--we could finance Medicaid for all poor pregnant women and children living below the poverty level. Do you think this will threaten our national security?

- o Whose hunger would you rather quench? Secretary Weinberger's or a poor child in child care? Every time Secretary Weinberger and his elite colleagues sit down in his private Pentagon dining room staffed by 19, they pay \$2.87 a meal and we taxpayers pay \$12.06. This \$12.06 could provide 40 mid-morning milk and juice and cracker snacks President Reagan has forced poor children of working mothers in child care centers to give up. I think we should urge Secretary Weinberger to eat in one of the four other Pentagon executive dining rooms and give one million food supplements back to poor children instead.

Just as I believe we ought to weigh military nonessentials against civilian essentials--and apply the same standards of national purpose, efficiency and effectiveness to military programs as we do to domestic ones--I also believe that the non-needy should bear a fair portion of the burden of economic recovery. They have not.

CDF is seeking enactment this year of a Children's Survival Bill (H.R. 1603 and S. 572) to restore carefully selected children's programs unfairly cut in order to restore some semblance of fairness and alleviate some of the child suffering we and others have documented. All of it could be paid for by taking away the politically sacrosanct three-martini business lunch whose deductibility costs American taxpayers \$3.2 billion in lost revenue each year. A few less martinis might contribute to executive health and productivity! Every day of delay of the third year of the individual tax cut scheduled to begin July 1, 1983 is worth \$100 million in federal revenues. A 60 day delay could buy the health care and other services poor families and children desperately need.

Each American must confront and let your Senators and Representatives know what choices you want him or her to make for you and for America this year. This year's decisions on military, tax, and social program spending will dictate the nation's choices, indeed shape the national character, for decades to come. They are far too important to leave to the politicians or the experts.

As you leave Hunter College, I hope you will care deeply-- as citizens and as parents--about the choices those who represent you make; about the needs of those who lack a voice in our society; and about our national mission in a world plagued by hunger, joblessness, and militarism. Often our preoccupation with the "bottom line" and GNP clouds our deeper vision of what is really important.

Speaking of GNP, Robert Kennedy reminded us that, while important:

"It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It allows neither for the justice in our courts, nor for the justness of our dealings with each other.

"The Gross National Product measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

As you go out into the world, try to keep your eye on the human bottom line, I also hope you will understand and be tough about what is needed to solve problems, change attitudes, and bring about needed changes in our society. Democracy is not a spectator sport. I worry about those who take the easy road of opting out of often discouraging political, bureaucratic, and community processes or who refuse to vote or to write letters to their Representatives, or take one needed step because the entire stairway is not revealed, or because of the complexity and controversy surrounding often critical life and death issues. I deeply respect and applaud the struggle and moral leadership of the Catholic

Bishops on the nuclear arms issue, for "... the world," Albert Einstein said, "is in greater peril from those who tolerate evil than from those who commit it."

Caring is the first step to effective action for peace or against poverty.

But caring is not enough. Other steps are essential to bringing about change. The first step is to break down big problems into smaller, manageable pieces for action and to go step by systematic step. It is so easy to be overwhelmed and discouraged by all that needs to be done, or to tell yourself it's okay to bow out because you can't make a difference anyway, or it's too big for an individual, or a few people or groups to tackle.

Pick a problem you care about or a piece of the problem that you can help solve while trying to see how your piece fits into the broader social change puzzle. Tailor your remedies to the specific needs identified and that you can do something about, and build from there over time.

Step two is recognizing that getting change is no guarantee of keeping change. A nuclear freeze is only a first step toward achieving responsible arms limitation agreements. It will take never ending citizen monitoring to protect our children against nuclear disaster. Individuals and groups who care about the poor must fight constantly to translate laws and rights and policies into the daily lives of the children, families, the poor, elderly, and homeless. There have been too many Santa Clauses and not enough elves to put the pieces together to make policies and services actively work for citizens in communities throughout the country.

The third step is understanding that there are no short cuts to curing most of our social and economic problems. Thorough homework--good facts coupled with good analysis--is essential if good remedies are to follow and if an effective case is to be made for a particular cause. Too

many good intentions and causes are wrecked, and victims are left unhelped on the shoals of sloppy investigation, hipshooting rhetoric, political grandstanding, fiery sermons, and simplistic "quick fix" remedies that sometimes create more problems than they solve.

Step four in the change process is follow-up. Most institutions, public or private, are seldom self-policing. Competing interest groups seeking their ear coupled with natural inertia almost assures that a one-shot effort to correct a problem will be agreeably ignored. Being a change agent for the disenfranchised or for responsible arms control means being a good pest; wearing down those you want to do something. And you always have a better chance of getting something done if you are specific; address one problem at a time; outline what the person responsible can and should do; have thought through why it is in their self-interest to do it; don't mind doing the work for them; and make sure they can take credit for getting it done.

My last two lessons for all of us who would stand up for social justice and peace are: Do not give up or ever cease believing that each of us--as individuals--can make a critical difference if we simply care enough, and bring to that caring skill, targeted action, and persistence. I hope you will leave this college not content to be bystander critics but citizens who will recognize that the real world is always a place of imperfect choices and who will work with what you have to bring the world closer to what you seek and desire over time even when you doubt that you can. I hope that you will know that good intentions are not enough; that knowing is not enough, that talking and dabbling in good causes or engaging in a one-shot protest are not enough. I hope you will ferret out and respond to the pressing human needs that our society still neglects; will examine carefully the options and strategies for meeting these needs; the probable consequences of those options and then fight to make them real in small ways that can add up with others to big ways. In short, I hope you will be the leaders

of the next generation who are not afraid to lose for things that matter; who will understand that nonparticipation in the outside world or total devotion to one's job or children is in the long run not in one's own or the nation's self-interest.

Sojourner Truth, my role model, was a slave woman who could neither read nor write, but never gave up talking or fighting against slavery or second class treatment of women.

Once a heckler told Sojourner that he care no more for her 'anti-slavery talk "than for a fleabite." Maybe not," was her answer. "but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching." The Lord willing today, we should keep those who would turn their backs on the social "outcasts" of our society and who threatens world survival scratching. Enough fleas, biting strategically, can make even the biggest dog--biggest community institutions or government--mighty uncomfortable. If they flick some of us off and others of us keep coming back, we will begin to get the needs of children and the poor heard and attended to and oil the creaks of our institutions that many say no longer work. It is you and I who must make them work.