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Hunger Report: What a Scandal

By John Jacob  
President of the National Urban League

The scandal of hunger in the land of plenty led to the appointment of a presidential commission to investigate hunger. Its report is itself a scandal—papering over a serious national problem and recommending steps that can only make the problem worse.

The commission essentially dealt with three questions: Is there widespread hunger in the United States, why, and what should we do about it. It answered none of them satisfactorily.

On the question of whether there is hunger, the commission pussyfooted around the issue, getting bogged down in definitions. Sure, some people are hungry, it said, but not all that many and while we can't really place an accurate number on the hungry, there's no widespread national problem here.

That won't wash. There's plenty of evidence of hunger, and it can't just be dismissed as "anecdotal." For those "anecdotes" are factual case histories of real people who don't have enough to eat.

Acknowledging that there is some hunger, the commission goes on to doubt that malnutrition is a "major health problem" in the U.S., as if there's a level of malnutrition a decent society can tolerate. While there's no national epidemic of malnutrition, there is so much hunger and even malnutrition in poverty areas and among the poor that failure to address the situation amounts to a retreat from decency.

Why is there hunger? The commission's report makes it seem as though the only reason lies in bureaucratic practices that allow some people to fall through the cracks between the various federal food programs.

That may be a small part of the reason, but by far the greater part lies in cuts that deprive pregnant women and their infants, school children, and many of the poor of participation in nutrition and food stamp programs.

The commission points out that the program cuts tried to preserve benefits for the "truly needy." But that meant that people whose incomes were just above the poverty line were dropped from aid programs.

In fact, such people are poor, and the poverty line is meaningless since it is based on an outdated formula that measures extreme deprivation, not poverty.

And to recommend, as the commission does, that the poverty line definition include the value of various federal subsidies to individuals is a bad joke. It would make the line even more unrealistic by defining some people out of poverty by virtue of benefits they get precisely because they are poor.

Some of its recommendations do make sense, such as making sure that the value of food stamps be raised to the full cost of the Department of Agriculture's "thrifty" food budget.

But the commission's single most important recommendation is the most ludicrous suggestion yet made by a prestigious commission on a major national issue.

Faced with the clear need for expanding food assistance to help growing numbers of the poor and the hungry, the commission suggests a new block grant program. It wants to give the states the option of taking federal food and nutrition funds in a lump sum and then running their own food programs.

Not only is this idea totally irrelevant to the problem the commission was supposed to be considering, it represents a formula for increasing hunger. It would make the system even less flexible and less effective.

The record of existing block grant programs contains nothing that would inspire confidence in the states' ability to meet national social needs through state-run block grants. Instead of federal standards and oversight control, there could be 50 food programs run by the 50 states, all with different eligibility requirements and all with different payment formulas. And you can bet that in many states aid will never reach the hungry.

The states don't even want the responsibility. Even before the commission's report was publicized, the National Governors Association opposed the block grant plan on the grounds that it would destroy national aid standards and that the grants wouldn't keep up with the need.

The commission flunked its assignment and the nation still needs a hunger policy. ■



In Perspective

By Albertina Smith

Communication—it is an essential element in the life of man the social being. In our own time, the needs to communicate has taken form in the use of such media as radio, publications, and television. Indeed, television is probably the most effective means of transferring ideas because it influences both the senses of sight and sound.

The messages that writers, directors, and producers project are reinforced in the minds of the general viewing public. Often, the ideals and themes that are portrayed correlate with the attitudes and lifestyles of the majority population—the white population. Many times the attitudes and lifestyles of the black minority are inaccurately portrayed. Thus, the average black citizen finds it difficult to identify with the distorted images of the black experience that are presented to him. It is in this light that I assert that unrepresentative media cause a race identity crisis among black Americans.

Many people, influenced by the power of media persuasion, perceive themselves through the images projected to them. In the world of television where characters such as "Mr. T" are depicted as over-grown gorillas who think that everyone is a "fool," it is evident that these images will be damaging to the black self-view.

It is fair to assert that inadequate or inaccurate portrayals of black achievements will inspire children to formulate ideas of race inferiority and underachievement. At an early age children absorb messages from their environment which convey facts about themselves and their place in society. When in a position to enhance or to degrade their self-understanding, responsible persons must opt to do the former. After all, what contribution can people give to their society if they cannot understand themselves.

Television seems to suggest that the majority of society does not accept the black race on equal terms as productive citizens. Blacks are seen

as objects of ridicule. Their achievements and sense of responsibility are rarely recognized or accepted. These stereotypes of the black character and personality prevail in black family shows such as "Good Times" and "Sanford and Son."

However, programs such as "Harris and Company" and "The Lazarus Syndrome," that attempt to portray black life, struggles and achievements in a serious tone, are cancelled before the end of their premier seasons.

Thus, for the black person, television can be considered a smooth and glassy pond upon which the black person can see a reflection of himself that the white man poses. Yet, the reflection in no way suggests narcissistic idealism. Inversely, the image induces emotions of degradation, pain, and humiliation for the black person.

Not only does unrepresentative TV affect the way blacks view themselves, it affects the way whites view them also. Many whites who watch black programs may not have any cultural contact with blacks at all. Their perception of the black experience may derive from their television viewing. Because misconceptions exist on both sides of the racial borders, blacks and whites suffer from the lack of efficient and objective programming.

Ever since the first showing of "Amos 'n' Andy" television has had a reputation of perpetuating prejudices which are an ignominious aspect of American society. This tradition has been carried out at the expense of black dignity and pride.

Admittedly, the broadcasting industry has increased the amount of time that it has devoted to black depiction. All of these improvements have come in response to black protest and various studies that have revealed unfair practices. Yet, the quantity of black programming is not as important as its quality. It is our responsibility to voice our concerns to the major networks and their sponsors. ■

BLACK INK

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