

FORUM

'Welfare Reforms Must be Based Upon the Reality of the Job Market'

Let's make 1994 the year that we put into place the program needed to eliminate child poverty. In the next year crucial decision about welfare reform will be made, on both the state and national level, impacting dramatically millions of American children and their families. In our society, nearly one in two black children spend their early years in poverty, a rate three times that of white children. For many of these children, state and federally funded public aid programs help to meet their basic survival needs.

hope, compassion, and opportunity. At the same time the welfare reform debate could pose new threats to the health and well-being of poor children, particularly if proposed reforms seek to drop parents receiving federal and state aid from the welfare rolls even when jobs or alternative means of support for their children are not available.

If we are to ensure that our children are not left to suffer after welfare debates are done, we must urge our policy makers to abide by the following guidelines:

- Make the fundamental goal of welfare reform to life poor families with children out of poverty. Benefits should be sufficient for families to meet basic needs and live in dignity. Inflexible time limits that cut off aid for needy families when parents are unable to find a job should not be imposed.
- Acknowledge that prevention will cost money up front, but future rewards and gains can be great. We must be willing to commit the necessary resources to make the reform work. With the economy improving, inflation low, and the federal deficit coming down, now is a good time to spend the necessary money.
- Be realistic. Welfare reforms must be based upon the reality of the job market. There must be jobs for parents who need them. If welfare reform is not about creating jobs, it's not about anything. Job creation can come partly from increased service such as child care, Head Start, child nutrition, and job training.
- Make welfare reform part of a wider anti-poverty strategy. With any

effort to change the welfare system, there must be strategies that create jobs, expand access to child care, improve child support, and increase opportunities for education and training. There must also be incremental hikes in the minimum wage to halt the erosion of its inflation-adjusted value and make it more likely that earning from full-time, year-around work will lift families out of poverty.

• Include supportive service that help parents to find, take, and keep a job. Education and training, child care, universal health coverage and access to good care, job retention programs, housing and transportation are all important.

• Strengthen child support. Children need the support of both parents even in instances where they live apart. They also need the protection of an assured benefit, a guarantee of minimum level of support for parents who have a child support order. Child support assurance is necessary, which often means that the government must help where the parent cannot.

What the new welfare system will be — whether it will be the same old one only in new clothes and rhetoric, whether it will be punitive and restrictive, or whether it will be just and responsive to the needs of the participants, and part of an overall national anti-poverty campaign — depends upon how successfully we keep the focus on the elimination of child poverty in our time. Asking our elected officials on the state and national level to adhere to these principles for welfare reform is a start.

(Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund, a national voice of children, and a leader of the Black Community Crusade for Children.)



CHILD WATCH

By MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

The black community can and must participate in the welfare reform debate to ensure that a safety net of support for families in need is preserved.

Changes in the welfare system have the potential to either help or harm our poorest children. Under the rubric of welfare reform, major new gains could be achieved for poor children, ranging from expanded investments in child care, education, training, and job creation, to stronger child support assurance initiatives. The welfare reform effort also provides an important opportunity to reinforce society's most basic values of work, responsibility,

'The Death Penalty Is A Throwback To The Law of the Jungle'

Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun created quite a stir last month when he wrote an extraordinary dissent in a death penalty case.

"From this day forward, " the Justice wrote, "I no longer shall tinker with the machinery of death." And he said that "the death penalty experiment has failed," and is unconstitutional.

He dropped this bombshell into the midst of a public debate on crime that seems limited to calls for longer and mandatory sentences and broader application of the death penalty.

So he has injected a note of common sense and caution into a debate moving toward the irrational and reckless.

The Justice pointed to the fundamental contradiction behind the Court's maintenance of the death penalty.

The Court has ruled that the death penalty is not an unconstitutional "cruel and unusual punishment." But only if the death penalty is imposed fairly and with reasonable consistency.

At the same time, since the death penalty is so severe and irrevocable, the Court ruled that juries can consider evidence that would influence their choice of a penalty.

The conflict between the fairness and consistency doctrine and jury discretion in imposing the death sentence was exposed in Justice Blackmun's dissent.

He correctly pointed out that statutes or procedures intended to eliminate arbitrariness from the imposition of the death penalty would also limit a jury's ability to tailor a sentence to the circumstances of the offense and the

offender. And statutes and procedures designed to give juries and judges greater discretion in imposing the death penalty would "throw open the back door to arbitrary and irrational sentencing."

That has allowed a clear pattern of racial discrimination in the way the death penalty is administered. Most murder victims in the U.S. are African American, but the death sentence is more likely in cases where the victim was white.

The government's General Accounting Office reports that blacks who kill whites get the death sentence at "nearly 22 times the rate of blacks who kill blacks and more than seven times the rate of white who kill blacks."

This most serious of penalties remains trapped in a web of racial prejudice and irrational arbitrariness, and current trends can only make the problem far worse.

The Supreme Court majority seems determined to restrict the rights of appeal and continues to uphold the death penalty even in cases where evidence of arbitrariness is clear.

And the crime bill now before the Congress would greatly expand the death penalty for federal crimes although most experts agree that the penalty has no impact on public safety and does not deter criminals from committing those crimes.

Further, no matter how fair a trail is, mistakes can happen. Over the past two decades, 48 people have been freed from Death Row because evidence of their innocence was discovered.

Proponents of the death penalty claim that the Constitution does not bar it and even refers to "capital" crimes. But the Constitution is a living document, and what passed for normal state behavior in the 1970s can no longer



TO BE EQUAL

By JOHN E. JACOB

deemed normal in the 1990s.

The death penalty is a throwback to the law of the jungle, and it demeans a civilized state. When the government kills in revenge it lowers itself to the status of the criminal and undermines its moral authority.

Justice Blackmun has moved from supporting the death penalty to opposing it. His colleagues on the Court should now join him.

(John E. Jacob is president of the National Urban League.)

'Lets Hope Farrakhan Gets away from Bashing the Jews and Light the Way'

"You can't stop the rooster from crowing once he's seen the sun," is a comment from the nation's more rural and less complicated times. In that vein, although Louis Farrakhan has "disciplined" Nation of Islam (NOI) National Spokesman Khalid Abdul Muhammad for causing a national furor by calling Jews "the blood-suckers of our communities," like the rooster who's seen the light of day, Muhammad has seen the light of the big cities. He's become a major black campus draw for the big-time clucking he's been doing. Khalid Muhammad has been crowing loudly, but is the message something that we can use to go to the bank?



Louis Farrakhan

The bantam rooster remarks of both Farrakhan and Muhammad have trust the both of them onto the front pages and covers of the nation's magazines and newspapers and NOI bookkeepers are making more entries than they've been making off

speaking income in 30 years. But, many blacks who've been close to the NOI movement over the years are questioning the individual success of Farrakhan and Muhammad, and asking: "What would the Honorable Elijah Muhammad have to say about the events occurring in the National of



BUSINESS EXCHANGE

By WILLIAM REED

Islam" during these days and times?

How would the mentor to Malcolm, who died in 1975, rate the current leadership and accomplishments of the NOI? Elijah Muhammad ran it as a black nationalist empire for over four decades and never back down for anybody. He was the most successful practitioner of black enterprise and self-help since Marcus Garvey. Elijah Muhammad gained acclaim and thousands of followers by labeling whites "devils," and avoiding them, saying to the black masses, "If you want to drive a Cadillac, come follow me." In the days of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam owned farms for its food, planes for transporting the food, boats for fishing and urban stores for selling the fish and food harvested by Black Muslims,

making for a true situation where NOI members could be separate and apart and call white people "devils" whenever they wished, without repercussions.

Though Louis Farrakhan can talk the talk that excites many young African Americans, can he walk the avenues of Chicago the way that Elijah Muhammad walked, hence the question of what would Malcolm's mentor say about today's NOI? Would Elijah Muhammad gasp at what has become the principal source of income for the general male population of the NOI? Although Farrakhan gets \$15,000 to \$25,000 per speech, and Khalid rakes in \$5,000 and up to speak, the bulk of NOI men working for the Nation are hired out as security guards. The NOI's Fruit of Islam guard public housing projects in Chicago, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., helping to clean up, and curb, drug and crime activity for under 10 bucks an hour. With their dedication to clean living, they do a good job for their employers and provide a strong role model image for youth in the projects. They work for companies such as Federal Express and state and local governments, as well. But, for the NOI to be getting the bulk of its "bread" from the government probably would prove to be a contradiction to Elijah Muhammad.

Was it the reliance on public sector contracts that caused Minister Farrakhan to reprimand Khalid? Has Farrakhan lost the lofty level of the NOI of yesterday, and bowed to the level of Congress people who do nothing but year-round "fundraising?" Farrakhan and Khalid Muhammad have both seen the light of day through the works of Elijah Muhammad. Let's hope that they soon get away from bashing the Jews and light the way for taking back from the control of the commerce in our communities.

(William Reed is a national syndicated columnist.)

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