

Child

*E. J. Dionne Jr.*

## Putting Poor Children Before Politics

It's easy to ignore unpleasant facts, especially when they don't affect you personally. But occasionally, someone comes along with a bit of inconvenient news.

In a speech earlier this month to a group of Democrats in Virginia, Bill Bradley, the presidential candidate and former senator, ticked off a list of problems going unaddressed in the country. One is child poverty.

Among Americans under the age of 18, one in five lives in poverty. Even by factoring in various forms of federal help, says Wendell Primus, director of income security at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 16 percent of kids are still in poverty.

Let's face it: Talking about child poverty is not fashionable. If you do, you might be cast as a bleeding heart liberal, or, God forbid, a "compassionate conservative."

So here is a modest proposal. Because both parties want to show that the impeachment mess has not crippled their capacity to govern, and because both want to show how reasonable, bipartisan and cooperative they can be, they should undertake a joint venture. Congress and

President Clinton should atone for the viciousness of the last year by jointly leading a Campaign Against Child Poverty.

Neither side will get much political benefit out of doing so, which is why both should do it. No one can accuse anyone of political opportunism. There are not a lot of votes or PAC contributions in the issue of child poverty.

And let's can ideological posturing and accept that there has been some "social learning" about curbing poverty, to use a nice phrase of which Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan (D-N.Y.) is fond. There is little argument now that the rise in the number of single-parent families from the 1960s until a few years ago aggravated poverty. Despite heroic efforts by individual parents, single-parent families on the whole are not good for kids. So a campaign against child poverty necessarily involves family policy.

And we also could stipulate that while government alone cannot solve this problem—the role of voluntary organizations, especially religious institutions, is vital—it won't be solved without government's commitment.

If the old arguments are given a rest, some practical measures become possible. One is for states to spend the money that the federal government already is offering them through welfare reform to help poor kids. They might put the money into better child care or after-school programs or into helping the parents of poor kids get better jobs. Primus says that states simply are not using at least \$3 billion a year in federal money that's available to them for the poor, and the number might be as high as \$7 billion. Surely, the states could do some good with that money.

We can ask if some of that big federal surplus might go into academic enrichment programs for poor kids, both before they go to school and after they get there. It's fair to reserve much of the surplus for Social Security and Medicare, two worthy programs. It's not so fair that kids are being left out as the surplus pie is cut.

With Congress likely to ease the "marriage penalty" in the income tax code, it also should ease the penalty as it affects families that benefit from the Earned Income Tax Credit. The EITC lifts the incomes of the working

poor. Under current law, unmarried couples in which both parents receive the EITC benefit can see their joint income go down if they marry. That's anti-family.

An interesting assortment of politicians—Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) and Rep. Richard Neal (D-Mass.)—have ideas on how to fix this. You've got to like the sound of a Gramm-Daschle Pro-Family Child Poverty Act of 1999.

Finally, Primus suggests that it would be good for poor kids if we paid more attention to their fathers. It's not just a question of getting "dead-beat dads" to pay child support. It's also about making support payments possible by helping the poorest dads find and keep jobs. Working fathers are far more likely to marry and care for their kids.

No single step will eradicate child poverty. But after all the talk about how this terrible scandal "affected the children," it would be good if politicians in both parties gave some thought to those children who could most use their help.

Oscar Arias

## ... More Weapons, More Danger

President Clinton has chosen to begin the new year by advocating the largest increase in defense spending since the Reagan era—a proposed addition of \$110 billion over the next six years. For Americans and for members of the international community alike, this decision is truly lamentable. Instead of offering world leadership on arms control, President Clinton's renewed focus on military build-up promises to replicate both flawed security reasoning and outdated spending priorities.

Those who believe that a bigger defense budget is an effective response to post-Cold War security challenges ignore the fact that the United States and its allies already spend more than twice as much as all of their conceivable adversaries combined. Yet this production and distribution of weapons only has made for a more dangerous world.

International terrorism and nuclear proliferation, in particular, are not problems that can be solved simply by a show of American military strength. World leaders must stop viewing militaristic investment as a measure of national well-being. And they must embrace multilateral efforts that recognize the complex and politicized nature of contemporary security questions.

By maintaining a massive military-industrial complex, the United States sends the wrong signal to other countries whose national budgets desperately need to be directed toward human needs. The sad fact is that half of the world's governments decide to invest more in defense than in health programs for their people.

If we channeled just \$40 billion each year away from armies and into anti-poverty programs, in 10 years all of the world's population would enjoy basic social services—education, health care and nutrition, potable water and sanitation. Another \$40 billion each year over 10 years would provide each person on this

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planet with an income level above the poverty line for their country.

The United States has been notoriously hesitant to participate in initiatives to establish a cooperative framework for global security. Congress has yet to ratify major agreements on chemical and biological weapons, on the use of land mines, on nuclear testing and on international courts that could hold war criminals responsible for their actions.

Perhaps most significant, the United States, which is responsible for 43 percent of all arms exports, has been unwilling to strengthen humanitarian restraints on these transfers, and in the past four years, 85 percent of weapons deliveries have gone to nondemocratic governments in the developing world. This proliferation of armaments bolsters the power of militar-

ies, impedes the process of democratization, destroys economic advances, perpetuates ethnic and territorial conflicts, and creates situations in which basic human rights are at risk.

In pursuing true solutions to its security concerns, the United States urgently needs to work with its international partners to limit the availability and spread of deadly weaponry.

An important step in this direction would be to show full support for the International Code of Conduct on Arms Transfers, an initiative sponsored by a commission of 17 Nobel Peace laureates. By insisting that arms-importing nations uphold internationally recognized standards of democracy and humanitarian law, the code would end the practice of selling weapons to dictators and human rights abusers.

Recently, an American Code of Conduct has been held up by the back-room dealings of arms merchants. Nevertheless, promising legislation is set to be reintroduced before Congress in the coming session.

By holding itself to high moral standards on weapons sales, the United States would affirm a key maxim for the post-Cold War world: Security today is not found in unilateral build-up and aggressive posturing. Instead, it must be based on an increased commitment to international cooperation and on a renewed investment in the health, education and well-being of all humanity.

*The writer is the 1987 Nobel Peace Laureate and was president of Costa Rica from 1986 to 1990.*

211  
30 minutes

cc: Tom F.  
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**Child Pornographers.** Legislation to have Secretary of State review treaties to fix the problem of extradition.

**Child Support.** Release of legislation

**Children's Health.** EO putting effect on this as a factor into all rule making (part of WH Council on Brain in June).

**Children's Hospital.** Internet event kick off.

**Clean Air Rule.** Fight will start in mid-March and we can plan events/radio address with kids with asthma for then.

**Cloning.** Possible Executive Order. Pitch to scientific community to suspend any research in human cloning. In addition, response to President's advisory committee on Human Radiation Experiments which tightens protections of human subjects of secret research and recommends compensating Uranium miners.

**CPI Response**

**Drug testing** funding for prisons, Drug testing for Drivers license - two to four state test with grant from discretionary funds.

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**Electoral Voting Reform.** Adding early voting or mail voting to our Finance Proposals.

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**FCC alcohol.** Letter, review of next possible steps.

**Flextime/FLMA**

**First American Heritage Rivers.** Designation.

**Health Care.** Naming of Commission, task of drafting an HMO Bill of Rights.

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**Home Health Care.** Need legislation on criminal background checks. Can be released as an event or radio address.

**IRS Computers.** Need for revised overhaul of IRS computers, ways in which emphasizes convenience to the taxpayer.

**Medicaid/Medicare Fraud.** Introduction of Bill.

**Mexico Decision**

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**National Sex Offenders Registry.** Computerization by Executive Order.

**Pension Reform Legislation.** New legislation on pensions, especially for women.

⑦ **Refrigerators.** Raising efficiency standards for refrigerators.

**Seat Belt Study.** Arrives on March 10 with challenges to states to offer financial incentives to states to tighten laws.

**Smoking Regulations.** Review evasion of regulations and use of Internet to reach young smokers. Consider response to State of Virginia position.

**Speeches.** State Legislature speeches on Education, Welfare Service Summit and pre-events to summit. Don Baer will convene meetings.

**Standards testing.** EO setting up at federal Military Schools.

**Tests.** EO and announcement of advisory panels, setting up program, releasing samples and challenging testmakers to devise tests.

**Trigger Locks study/lives lost to kids,** EO putting trigger locks on all federal guns (add study of promise of gun of future to save lives of police).

**TV - Ratings Review** with industry, urging violence and sex ratings on programs.

**Welfare to Work Transportation Program.** Possible announcement in Michigan.

**Welfare Recipients.** Bruce Reed tracking government plan to hire welfare recipients, with an executive order establishing separate track.