

The President's Reading Copy

White House Conference on Food
Nutrition and Health

December 2, 1969

It is a special privilege for me to welcome you to the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health - ^{this is} the first White House Conference I have had the opportunity to address as President -- the first we have held in this Administration.

This meeting marks an historic milestone.

1. It sets the seal of urgency on our national commitment to put an end to hunger and malnutrition due to poverty in America.
2. At the same time, it marks the beginning of a new, more determined and more concerted drive than ever before, to reduce the malnutrition that derives from ignorance or inadvertence.

I recognize that many of you have been under enormous pressure, because you have had a relatively short time for the vast amount of work that it took to put this Conference together and to prepare for it.

1. However, that pressure reflects the priority of the subject we are here to discuss. It reflects the sense of urgency we all feel.

Until this moment in our history the central question has been whether we as a nation would accept the problem of malnourishment as a national responsibility.

1. That moment is past. On May 6, I asserted to the Congress that "the moment is at hand to put an end to hunger in America itself. For all time."

Speaking for this Administration, I not only accept the responsibility -- I claim the responsibility.

1. Malnourishment is a national concern because we are a nation that cares about its people -- how they feel, how they live. We care whether they are well and happy.

(1) First of all there is a moral imperative:

1. Our national conscience requires it.
2. We must because we can.

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We are
3. [^] The world's richest nation, its best
educated, ^{*we have*} boasting an agricultural
abundance that ranks as a miracle of
the modern world, ^{*This nation*} cannot long continue
to live with ^{*its*} its conscience if millions of
^{*it*} its own people are unable to get an adequate
diet.

(2) Even in purely practical terms, there are
compelling considerations requiring this challenge
to be met.

1. A child ill-fed is dulled in curiosity, lower
in stamina, distracted from learning.
2. A worker ill-fed is less productive, more
often absent.
3. The mounting cost of medical care for diet-related
illnesses; remedial education required to overcome
diet-related slowness in school; institutionalization
and loss of full productive potential; all of these
place a heavy economic burden on a society as
a whole.

3. However, Dr. Arnold Schaefer, the man in charge of the National Nutrition Survey, recently made this cautious but forceful observation:

"We have been alerted by recent studies that our population who are 'malnutrition risks' is beyond anticipated findings, and also that in some of our vulnerable population groups pre-school children, the aged, teenagers and the poor malnutrition is indeed a serious medical problem."

We do not know all the facts about hunger and malnutrition in the United States today.

1. That itself is part of the problem.

(1) We do not know just how many Americans are actually hungry.

(2) We do not know how many Americans suffer from malnutrition, who eat enough but do not eat the right things.

(3) But we do know there are too many Americans in both categories.

2. We can argue its extent. But hunger exists.
3. We can argue its severity, but malnutrition exists.

The plain fact is that a great many Americans are not eating well enough to sustain health.

1. We see, then, that the problem of hunger and malnutrition is two separate problems.
 - (1) One is to ensure that everyone is able to obtain an adequate diet.
 - (2) The second is to ensure that people actually are properly fed.
2. On the one hand, we are dealing with problems of income distribution.
3. On the other hand, with problems of education, habit, taste, behavior, personal preferences -- the whole complex of things that lead people to act the way they do, and to make the choices they do.

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The answers to many of these questions are difficult to come by. The very fact that the same question evokes so many different, conflicting answers is itself testimony to how fragile is the basis of our knowledge.

1. Assuming we can agree on definitions, and the causes of malnourishment, how do we eradicate it?

(1) Some would answer that the magic ingredient is money.

~~Some would answer that the magic ingredient is money.~~

1. Money is one ingredient -- and the more than five billion dollars that I have proposed for new or expanded programs for food and family assistance next year would go a long way toward bringing the problem under control.

In this connection, I urge each of you to enlist yourself in the effort to win passage of three landmark pieces of legislation I have already recommended to Congress.

1. One of these is what many observers consider to be the most important piece of domestic legislation proposed in the past fifty years, the establishment of a floor under the income of every American family.

(1) For the first time, this new family assistance plan would give every American family a basic income, wherever in America that family may live.

(2) For the first time, it would put cash into the hands of families because they are poor, rather than because they fit certain categories.

2. When enacted, this measure alone will either supplement the incomes or provide the basis for the incomes of 25 million American men, women and children.

Our basic policies for improvement of the living conditions of the poor are based on this proposition: —

1. That the best judge of each family's priorities is that family itself, and that the best way to ameliorate the hardships of poverty is to provide the family with additional income -- to be spent as that family itself sees fit.

Now (1) Some argue against this. Some argue that the poor cannot be trusted to make their own decisions, and therefore, the government should dole out food, clothing, medicines, according to a schedule of what the government thinks is needed.

1. I disagree. I believe there are no experts present at this great gathering who know more about the realities of hunger and malnutrition than those among you who are here because you have suffered from it, ~~And~~ do suffer from it. ~~From~~ great cities, from worn out farms, from barren reservations, from frozen tundra, and tiny islands half a world away.

The task of government is not to make decisions for you or for anyone. The task of government is to enable you to make decisions for yourselves.

1. ~~Not that~~ not ~~to see the truth of that statement,~~ is fundamentally to mistake the genius of democracy.

(1) We have made too many such mistakes.

But No more.

- (1) Our job is to get resources to people in need, and to then let them run their own lives.

I would especially stress my hope that all of you, who have been so strong and effective in achieving a breakthrough of national awareness on hunger, will become an equally strong citizen lobby for welfare reform.

1. The needs of the poor range far beyond food, though that is often the most visible and heart-rending aspect of poverty.

(1) More basically, they need money with which they can meet the full range of their needs, from basic shelter, to medicine, to clothes for school, to transportation.

1. And they need these resources in a program framework that builds incentives for self support and family stability.

Let the reform of the bankrupt welfare system be the next great cause of those who come together today.

The second measure I would especially urge your support for is the reform and expansion of the food stamp program, which I requested in my May 6 message on hunger.

1. This has been designed to complement the welfare reform.

(1) While the welfare proposals may be subject to long debate, I hope and expect that Congress will act quickly on the expanded food stamp plan.

1. The Nation's food programs have been shot through with inequities -- notably, the fact that many counties have not participated, and the fact that because food stamps had to be bought with cash many of the neediest were unable to participate.

(1) We are pressing hard to bring every county into one or other of the food distribution programs, and the new food stamp bill would provide stamps free to those most in need -- while expanding the program to a level that would reach \$2.5 billion a year when fully implemented.

- (2) In a related matter, we already are greatly expanding our school lunch programs, with the target of reaching every needy school child with a free or reduced-cost lunch by the end of the current fiscal year.

A third measure for which I would ask your support is the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future which I have proposed to Congress, and which has been most ~~officially~~ ^{favorably} received ~~there~~ as well as by church and civic organizations throughout the nation.

1. America, I believe, has come to see how necessary it is to be responsibly concerned with this subject.
2. In proposing the Commission I also declared that it would be the goal of this Administration to provide "adequate family planning services within the next five years to all those who want them but cannot afford them."

- (1) There are some five million women in low income families who are in that situation.

1. But I can report that the steps to meet that goal have already been taken within the Administration, and the program is underway.

Taken together, these three measures should virtually eliminate the problem of poverty as a cause of malnutrition.

1. Their dollar cost is high, but their practical benefits to the nation are immense.

I know that your panels have advanced proposals for massive efforts on many fronts. They demonstrate that the goal cannot be won by government alone.

It is for each to ask how he, individually, can respond to the questions being asked here. For example:

1. -- Can foods be better labelled, be made more nutritious and be fortified with available additives?
2. -- Can industry, the schools, government and citizens individually join effectively in a program of public education?
3. -- Can school lunch programs feasibly be improved?
4. -- Can voluntary programs by citizens and community organizations teach people what to eat, to close the knowledge gap?

The fact that so many groups are represented here today is itself evidence of a new sense of community responsibility, of industry responsibility and of individual responsibility.

*I know what
volunteers can
do for us*

1. The fact that so many women are represented here, especially, is evidence of an enormous resource that can do much to ensure our success.

of women

How the committee & maybe important procedural points
We have not attempted to "program" those attending this conference as to either the questions to be asked here or the recommendations you should make.

1. I expect to read that you have had a lively difference of opinions during this Conference.

(1) That is as it should be.

(2) From an airing of the views of all sides, answers and ideas will appear.

(3) Answers and ideas are what we seek in this process. Obviously, if we knew all the answers we wouldn't have convened this Conference in the first place.

I will say this: For twenty-two years, I have been watching White House conferences, attending them -- and seeing the effort that went into them wither away in futility, as their reports gathered dust on government shelves.

1. Beginning with this Conference, all that is going to change.

(1) It will be the policy of this Administration to follow up each White House conference with a second meeting one year later, bringing together the key participants of the original conference, to re-examine its findings and to measure what has been done about implementing them.

I know you take your work here seriously. And we are going to take your findings seriously.

1. I expect the results of this Conference to be not just words, but action.

This conference marks a coalescing of the national conscience; it marks a triumph of the American system.

I realize there

There is a ready disposition, whenever we confront an ill that is still uncorrected, to cry that "the system" is corrupt, or "the system" has failed.

- 1. Our so-called "system" has been under heavy and sustained assault, not from one quarter but from many quarters.

(1) But that "system" is what has brought us here today. *in this system.*

(2) It is a system that embraces compassion and practicality; it has given us the abundance that allows us to consider ending hunger and malnutrition.

Ours is the most productive and the most generous country the world has ever known.

- 1. Less than five percent of our population produces enough food to feed all the American people, and to supply the needs of millions in other countries as well.

- 2. In the years since World War II, the United States has provided more than thirty billion dollars of food, in the form of aid, to needy nations and peoples abroad.

2. most of the countries of the world such a capian would be encouraged -

been they don't seem to produce or buy the food for export & don't

It is precisely because that system has succeeded so well that we now are able to address the goals of this Conference.

1. And the fact that we are gathered here is an example of one of the greatest strengths of that same system: its capacity for self-correction and self-regeneration; its constant reaching out to identify new or additional needs and to meet those needs; and the readiness of its citizens to join in that effort, volunteering their time and their talents.

This Nation has the capacity to provide an adequate diet for every American.

1. The calling of this Conference demonstrates that we have the will to achieve this goal.

- (1) What we need is to find the most effective means of doing so, consistent with maintaining the vitality of the system that makes it all possible.

I will review your recommendations with great care.

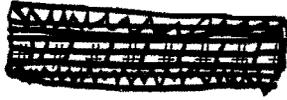
And so I will ask you to go about drawing up those recommendations with equal care.

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1. I commit to your concern the lives of millions of Americans, too young, too old, or too hurt by life to do without your help.

2. And I commit to your concern the not less serious task of helping to bring the rest of America to understand what we seek, and to join us in adding this new dimension to the concept of American democracy.

For we are gathered at one of those ^{great historic} moments when it becomes possible for all of us to act a little better than we are, and in so doing leave this great and good nation a little better because we were there.



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