

PRESENTATION AT URBAN AFFAIRS ASSOCIATION MEETING
Vancouver, Canada
April 19, 1991

I would like to begin by recounting a comment made by a colleague, Dr. Badi Foster, President of the Aetna Institute of the Aetna Insurance Companies. In reply to my query as to the purpose of Dr. Foster's organization, he responded that the future of his company was less dependent on its products and services than the quality of its human capital, and that the Aetna Institute was the vehicle by which the Aetna Insurance Companies invested in its human capital. I would like you to reflect on that very powerful notion, for I will return to it later.

My remarks this morning are informed by two events. The theme of New Jersey Governor Florio's inaugural address "New Ideas for Old Ideals," and the public broadcasting series "Eyes on the Prize."

Let me give you some social vital signs you should know about. In 1986 the dropout rate in the Philadelphia public schools was reported at 38%. In Boston that same year it was 43%. In 1984 less than half of Chicago's public high school students graduated. Of those who did, only one-third could read at the 12th grade level. Three years ago in the Cleveland public schools not one student qualified in the semi-finals of the National Merit Scholarship Program. Boston and Detroit each had only one high school with semi-finalists. In 1970, 16% of the children in this country lived in poverty. Twenty years later, 24% of the children in this country live in poverty. That's a 50% increase, and every day 40 teenage girls give birth to their third child.

There are certain old ideals that are central to the character of this nation's collective social, economic, and political fabric - notions about opportunity, achievement, personal initiative, and individual accountability. These elementary socio-politic values have been shared by various racial, ethnic, and religious groups since the beginning of the American experiment. If one looks over the cultural quilt that is this country, the commitment to freedom of opportunity is the only value that such broad and diverse people had in common around which to build a nation.

What I would like to suggest to you this morning is that for the first time in the history of our country there is the emergence of two Americas. Let me quickly add that the notion of social bifurcation is not new. Indeed some 20 years ago the Kerner Commission warned of an America divided along racial lines - one white and affluent; the other black and impoverished. I am persuaded, however, that were the Kerner Commission to replicate its work today, it would describe a schism not based on the historic fences of race, religion, culture, or language, but rather a division counterpointed on the fundamental assumptions on which our social order is based.

I would like to acquaint you with Canton, Mississippi, a small town 20 miles north of Jackson on Interstate 55. Some of you may recall a series of articles written about Canton in the Atlantic Monthly several years ago describing the character of the emerging American underclass. I had the opportunity to be a participant observer of this small community, for tho' I grew up in Chicago, I was born in Canton, Mississippi, and whenever school was not in session, my brother, cousins, and I spent many long weeks sweltering in the heat of this sleepy little town.

Canton, for many years, had an effective and thriving African-American community, although burdened by the pervasive cloud of fear and racism that has characterized Mississippi until the rather recent past. Black Cantonians had families, they worked, they worshiped, they went to school, they struggled to feed and educate their families, and they aspired to a time when people of color could participate in the opportunity promised in the American experience. And lo and behold, through strife and sweat and, yes even bloodshed, a time came when many of the shackles were removed, and opportunity began to avail itself to the citizens of this small Mississippi community. And guess what. They took advantage of it! Cantonians sought opportunity for education and economic advancement, they left town, and they didn't come back. Over a period of years Canton, Mississippi completely lost its black middle class.

It is important that you understand that class definition of African-American communities in the period before 1970 was never a function of personal wealth. Economic opportunity was sufficiently limited that there were few vehicles for black people, regardless of talent, to accumulate wealth. But while the middle class didn't keep the treasure of the community, they were, as in all communities, the guardians of the values of the community. And when the middle class left town, so also did those fundamental community values. The hopeful left to test their dreams and talent, while the hopeless were left behind to flounder in their despair.

Today, Canton has a significant portion of its community in which the traditional social fabric has completely and utterly disintegrated. The family unit as commonly understood has not existed for decades --- generations of children who have never known anything but welfare, poverty, drugs, violence, and despair --- a caldron spawning every kind of social pathology confronting our culture.

The people I grieve for in Canton are black, as are they in Newark, in Camden, in Detroit, in Chicago, and Boston. But there are also places like Canton throughout the southeast, in Tennessee, in Georgia, in West Virginia, and Alabama, where the populations are white --- and in Texas, and Oklahoma, and New Mexico, and Arizona where the colors are brown and red.

I mentioned earlier the wonderful public broadcast series "Eye on the Prize." As I watched an episode recounting the last year of Martin Luther King's life, I was struck by the fact that Dr. King recognized earlier than most of us that while the civil rights struggle was important, it was a means to an end, not an end to itself. Indeed the civil rights movement in this country has been and continues to be successful. Yet, at the same time, much of the social environment which will ultimately determine the quality of our experiences has rapidly deteriorated and is getting worse.

Governor Florio was right. We need new ideas for old ideals. While the ideals are old, the problems are new. You and I must be challenged to create new solutions and new approaches.

The problem definition provided by our leadership has been locked in a 20 year time warp. The test before us now is not so much the pursuit of civil rights as it is social participation and personal empowerment.

Martin Luther King did not go to Memphis in April of 1968 in furtherance of a civil rights initiative; for you see, he had come to understand that rights and opportunities are entitlements only for those sufficiently empowered to exploit them. The Memphis garbage workers understood this too, for it was on their behalf that Martin Luther King was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel on April 4, 1968.

Our psychologists have given us a useful model in understanding the problem and suggesting strategies for the solution. It is in the dynamic called "internal versus external locus of control." Individuals with an internal locus of control have a view that they are fundamentally responsible for those aspects of their conduct that will determine the kind of lives they will lead. They view that they have an opportunity to create a destiny that they fundamentally control -- people who take responsibility for and accountability for the lives they lead, for the things they do, and the consequences thereunto appertaining.

It is this fundamental assumption about personal and collective self-determination that our nation's founders and wave upon wave of immigrants brought to this nation. It was an important selecting factor in the behavior of immigrants everywhere. It was as true for the Irish who fled the potato famine as it was the blacks who fled the south, and colonized the urban north.

On the other side of the beam you have those individuals who fundamentally view the locus of control external to themselves -- people who believe that what happens to them is more a function of their circumstances and external factors than personal action or behavior. People with an external locus of control are characterized by a general sense of futility, helplessness, and, most importantly, lack of control and sense of consequence for personal action.

We must understand that people who view themselves as in control of their future behave fundamentally differently than people who don't.

Several years ago I saw a campaign ad during a mayoralty race in a major urban community. The commercial showed a woman who had 8 children and no place to stay. She was expressing her gratitude to the mayor who had found, through a city housing program, a place for this woman and her 8 children to live. She indicated her gratitude and said that she didn't know what she would have done were it not for the mayor and the city housing program. I saw a woman who clearly understood that she was miserable. She just as clearly conveyed that she had no understanding as to how she got to be miserable nor saw any connection between decisions in her life and the consequences that resulted in her current condition. Nor did she have any idea whatsoever as to what to do to improve her circumstances. She was like a twig floating in a river, waiting for some current to direct her life and that of her children.

The people caught in this condition, more white than black, more white than brown or red, but held together in a common bond of despair have found themselves as objects of a public policy debate for the last 20 years where both sides have been wrong because it has been a debate over the wrong question.

One group would write these people off as expendable. The policy these people would advocate is to dismantle welfare, dismantle social services. In short, they would blame them for being victims -- not a new idea.

The other side in the argument has constructed a huge social service bureaucracy and a booming poverty industry whose principle effect has been to promote and sustain the poverty industry. This has been done with insidious effect, for the consequences of much of our social policy has been to reinforce the impotence of the individual and dependency on the system.

You may recall several years ago hearing about an irate student who took a pistol into the financial aid office of a college in New York and began shooting people - not a recommended form of conflict resolution I might add. In the news reports that followed there was a television interview with a woman who escaped shaken but unharmed from the ordeal. The television reporter identified this young woman as a work-study student who was in the financial aid office at the time. Several days later it was reported that this woman was receiving public assistance, and her case worker had seen the interview on television. The story went on to say that the case worker was instituting disciplinary action against this woman because, by attending college, she was violating the conditions of her public assistance.

It seems that welfare recipients are not allowed to attend college because the assumption is that if you are on welfare you should be available for employment and, therefore, you're not allowed to go to school.

There was no suggestion that this woman had in any way falsified her information given to the college or that she was in any other way not entitled to the financial aid she was receiving. So what you have is a single parent mother attending a technical college to acquire skills to enter the work force, to get off welfare, to support her child, caught in a system that instead of encouraging her attempts at self-sufficiency, used her public assistance to pummel her into submission and dependency.

That is not a system designed to empower its clients; it is a system designed to enslave its clients. It is fundamentally corrupt in its basic premise, and needs to be radically overhauled. These people cannot and should not be written off, nor should they be held in hostage to a social services apparatus so obviously self-serving at the expense of the very people they are supposed to assist. The strategy for the '90's must go beyond rights and opportunity; we must somehow develop participation and empowerment, if we fail, we do so at our peril.

I have taken great pains to reinforce the notion that this is not necessarily a racial problem, but I wish to quickly add that African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and native Americans are grossly overrepresented within the American underclass, and unless we develop effective strategies for rebonding this nation, Abraham Lincoln's declaration that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" will take on an urgent and contemporary context.

In 1988 the Commission on Minority Preparation in Education and American Life published a report entitled "One-Third of a Nation." The basic premise of this report is that we live in an America that is one-third minority and where many of our communities are majority minority and that we must understand both the importance and consequences of this fact. I commend it for your reading.

In New Jersey we are experiencing a labor shortage and increasing unemployment at the same time. The quality of our life at home and the security of our nation in a world community is no longer dependent on our national resources or military might. Certainly these things are important, but the future strength of the American community will rest on the quality of its human capital. We cannot survive as a society if one-third of our population is left on the sidelines -- nonproductive and noncontributing. Aside from economic and geo-political considerations, the social dislocation created by such a phenomena portends consequences that are dreadful to contemplate.

We can no longer move away from this problem or keep it encapsulated in our inner-cities. We should address this issue because we are a caring people committed to social justice. We must address this problem if for no other reason than that it is in our own self-interest to do so.

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President

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EDUCATION STATISTICS
(FOR FOOTNOTES, SEE PAGE 5)

- * In some city high schools, at least 4 of 10 students are absent on any given day.¹
- * Almost half of the Mexican-American and Puerto Rican students who enroll in public schools drop out before they earn diplomas.¹
- * In Philadelphia, the dropout rate is 38%. And in Boston, it's 43%.¹
- * In 1984, less than half of Chicago's public high school students graduated. Of those who did, only a third could read at the 12th grade level.¹
- * Last year in the Cleveland Public Schools, not one student qualified as a semifinalist in the National Merit Scholarship competition. Boston and Detroit each had only one high school with semifinalists.¹
- * Latch key children represent 10% of today's children.¹
- * In 1983, 53% of upper- and middle-income families enrolled their preschool children in special programs, while only 29% of at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in similar programs.¹
- * The dropout rate for all youth is showing signs of increasing again. In many other urban areas the rate exceeded 50% nationally in 1982; only 51.8% of Black students graduated by age 19; for Hispanics, only 40.3% graduated by age 19.²
- * The percentage of poor children has grown from 16% to 22% since 1970.²
- ** More than one million teens become pregnant each year. Most of these teenagers do not marry.
- * Each day, 40 teenage girls give birth to their third child.²
- ** The birth rate of unmarried teenagers increased by 29% between 1970 and 1982.
- ** Last year unwed teens gave birth to 650,000 babies.

- * In most households, both parents work and are away from home. Nearly one in five families is now headed by the mother. Two-thirds of these women work. About half the children now attending 1st grade will have lived in one-parent homes by the time they graduate from high school.¹
- * Since 1960, delinquency rates of youngsters, ages 10 to 17, increased by 130%.²
- * Nearly 60% of children born in 1983 will live with only one parent before age 18; 90% of these children will live in female-headed families, and a majority will be families with incomes under \$10,000.²
- ** The proportion of single-parent families has just about doubled since 1970, rising from 13% to 26%. Most Black children do not live in two-parent homes: 49% live with one parent and 8% live with neither parent. A third of Hispanic children live with one parent.
- * Black household income, though somewhat improved, is still only 75% of White household income.²
- * In low-income minority communities, infant mortality is increasing and outstripping the rate of some Third World nations.²
- ** Death by suicide among teenagers increased for all groups. The suicide rate for Whites rose 177% between 1950 and 1978, while the rate among non-Whites rose 162%. A teenager commits suicide every 90 minutes.
- * Suicide among males, ages 15 to 19, was 29% higher in 1980 than in 1973. In 1984, murder was the leading cause of death for Black males, ages 15 to 24.²
- * The teen population fell by 13% between 1979 and 1985, but the number of employed teens fell by more than 20%. In 1986, 50% of White teenagers were employed but only 25% of Blacks and 30% of Hispanic teenagers had jobs. This nation has the highest rate of teenage drug use of any industrialized nation. More than 61% of all high school seniors have used drugs.²
- * 40% of American poor are children, and 24% of children live in poverty.³

- * American teenagers are twice as likely to give birth as those from other Western nations.³
- * Children come to school speaking more than 100 languages and dialects.³
- * Nearly 40% of all public school students are minorities.³
- * Delinquency rates have increased 130% since 1960.³
- * About 61% of high school students have used drugs, the highest rate of teenage drug use of any industrialized nation.³
- ** The entry-level labor pool, then, contains more and more of the kinds of teenagers employers have been able to overlook in the past: poorly motivated, lacking fundamental literacy skills, and unacquainted with the responsibilities and demands of the work world.
- ** In 1978, young adults constituted 23% of the U.S. population. By 1995, they will only constitute 16%, shrinking by one-quarter the size of the entry-level labor pool.
- ** Alienated and disadvantaged/alienated students constitute approximately 10-15% of the 16- to 19-year-old age group, nationally. In major cities, it is not unreasonable to estimate that half the high school population is at risk. We are talking about, by conservative estimate, 1,250,000 White, 750,000 Black and 375,000 Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds at risk.
- ** About 700,000 students dropped out of school last year and another 300,000 were chronic truants. In cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, the dropout rate is over 40%.
- ** Rates are much higher for minorities and the poor. Students in the bottom third of the socioeconomic ladder have three to four times the dropout rate of those from affluent families. Black and Hispanic rates are 1 1/2 to 2 times higher than White students.
- ** Two-thirds of the students we are concerned about drop out because they have given up on the school as a vehicle for success.

- ** Teenagers in general have an unemployment rate three times the adult rate. More than three million 16- to 24-year-olds are looking for work and another 391,000 are classified as "discouraged" -- i.e., they have given up.
- ** Unemployment rate for Black teens (40%) is almost three times the rate for Whites (15%).
- ** Arrests of people under 18 for drug abuse increased 60-fold between 1960 and 1980.
- ** Arrests for drunkenness among high school seniors rose by 300% between 1960 and 1980.
- ** Young people under age 21 account for more than half of all arrests for serious crimes. In 1960, 18- to 24-year-olds accounted for only 18% of all arrests; by 1980, they accounted for 34%.
- ** The homicide rate for non-White teens increased 16% between 1950 and 1978, while the rate for Whites increased an astounding 232%.
- ** Students who drop out and lack skills for employment represent \$20 billion-a-year-loss.
- * By the year 2000, America will be a nation in which one of every three pupils in the public schools will be a minority.¹
- * What the educational system faces is a group of children who will be poorer, more ethnically and linguistically diverse, and have more handicaps that surely will affect their schooling.¹

FOOTNOTES

Statistics taken from the following articles:

- * - State Education Leader published quarterly by the Education Commission of the States, Vol. 5, Number 4 - December, 1986.

Article titles:

- ¹Improve urban schools or face educational Third World,
Boyer warns by Dr. Ernest L. Boyer
- ²Meeting the needs of at-risk children and youth: a
national imperative by David W. Hornbeck, Maryland
- ³Greater policy commitment urged to deal with "at risk"
students

- ** - Reconnecting Youth - The Next Stage of Reform, a report from the Business Advisory Commission of the Education Commission of the States - October 1985