

Chapin: "Time to get serious about hunger"

By Harry Chapin

- Nothing we do makes a difference!
- Little of the money or food we send actually gets to the people who need it!
- Foreign aid is just taxpayer money sent to the upper class in other countries so they will be beholden to special interests here!

These statements express a range of sophistication of Americans about the issues surrounding hunger. A certain amount of healthy skepticism and questioning has become necessary for a well-adjusted existence in the Twentieth Century. We live in a world where appearance far too often has only a distant relationship to reality. But if one chooses to be an effective, acting participant in our times rather than just a cynical observer, understanding the context of this questioning becomes all important.

- As I have said so often over the past five years - knowledge is the first step toward affirmative action. A bleeding-heart attitude without a grasp of reality is at best a stab in the dark. Far too often the good intentions of generous people have been virtually hijacked into actions that have completely different and sometimes even opposite effects from those intended. What is needed is a marriage of two impulses, a coupling of the urge to do something positive with the willingness to constantly re-evaluate how effectively our actions lead to our goal - that of ending world hunger.

So, in a sense, the three skeptical statements that lead off this article are legitimate as far as they go. There is a real question as to whether we are serious in our attempt to end world hunger. What we are doing could be described as trying to deal with a factory that manufactures dirty linen. We buy the already

dirty linen and keep sending it to a laundry whereupon it comes out dirty again. We never really look at why it is dirty in the first place; why it is that the factory keeps producing this dirty linen.

At present we are dealing mostly with symptoms rather than with causes, we keep trying to launder the dirty linen. The relief money we send overseas does feed people sometimes. But feeding people is just treating a symptom of a process that also makes people politically and economically powerless. What I



am saying is that the processes and the forces that create powerlessness are also the causes of hunger. Very little is truly being done to deal with these causes. Feeding people is important, but its long-term value can only be that it buys time to change the conditions that create hunger.

Over the past fifteen years a large part of United States aid money has been used for international and domestic political ends, not humanitarian purposes. There were years when over fifty percent of our capital invested in the PL-480 "Food For Peace" Program was sent to South Vietnam and Cambodia as indirect military aid. Last year we sent 45.5 million dollars of tobacco overseas under our Food for Peace program.

During the same fifteen-year period, we find the same situation domestically. Senator Pat Moynihan, who has held high political office in both the Democratic and Republican administrations has claimed that the Great Society programs

were the most over-publicized and under-funded programs in American history. There is a real question as to whether they were meant to succeed at all.

It is true that there has been a substantial financial response to the domestic hunger situation. The problem is that there has not been an equally dramatic decrease in domestic hunger. There are still almost 25 million Americans who go to bed hungry every night. What the food dollars have done is an effective job in suppressing the visible symptoms of hunger in America.

This brings us back to the original question: Are we serious about ending something so awesomely pervasive as world hunger? I think we can be if we have the right kind of attitude. Other seemingly insurmountable problems have been ended.

First, let us imagine . . . It is 1800 and you are standing in front of a table surrounded by pseudo-sophisticates, cynics, historians and assorted politicians. You swallow hard and then make the following statement: It is time to end slavery! You can imagine the reaction - the laughter, unbridled hilarity, the sarcastic lines about your naivete and simplemindedness. Someone might be kind enough to explain to you as if you were a child that there has always been slavery. They might explain the economic reasons for slavery. Indeed, together they might

all be so persuasive as to dissuade you from acting upon your statement. But, wonderfully, it would not have mattered. There were people who were serious about ending slavery and they acted. And indeed within 100 years, slavery - one human being literally owning another - had virtually ended.

A second major point. It is January, 1961. John Fitzgerald Kennedy makes his memorable inaugural address. He says there are two great goals for Americans:

one, to put a man on the moon by 1970; two, to end hunger in our lifetime. Let us look at the seriousness with which we have approached each of the two goals. You can imagine the amount of energy, ingenuity, creativeness and resources that went into reaching the moon. You can understand the different alternatives that were suggested, the different trails that were followed, the false leads that had to be discarded. But the goal was important. Finally a trajectory was selected that worked; an engine was created that was powerful enough and the best possible astronauts were chosen. We were serious. We got to the moon. As to our second goal, ending world hunger, our resources and commitments bottomed out early.

We see today that hunger is getting worse, that we failed to couple our impulse to do something positive with a willingness to constantly reevaluate how effective our actions have been in leading to a goal. It is obvious that we weren't serious.

We can be, of course. In this participatory democracy of ours, it is our choice to make. It is very clear in the basic documents of our country that if the business of government is left to our leaders alone they, and we, are always going to mess up. We are supposed to be responsible for the follow-through. We are supposed to be armchair experts on the important subjects. We are supposed to be in touch with what touches our lives. We are supposed to be knowledgeable enough to ask not only the first question, but also the second, third and fifteenth questions about what is going on; and we are supposed to be concerned enough to insist upon trying alternative actions that would make sure we effect change.

Only then could we say we are acting to end world hunger. Only then could we say we are serious. □

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