

FOREWORD

Equity, Excellence and Empowerment

Speech By John E. Jacobs*

Our annual conference theme is "Equity, Excellence and Empowerment." That theme embodies black aspirations:

FOR EQUITY—the enjoyment of equal opportunity, equal rights, and an equal share in the America we have fought and died for;

FOR EXCELLENCE—the full development of our God-given talents in a society that fosters the flowering of the human spirit; and

FOR EMPOWERMENT—the political and economic power to shape our lives and our futures.

Empowerment is a key issue. In a presidential election year, empowerment means voting. Empowerment means marching to the ballot booths to choose the next president of the United States.

It means black votes that select representatives, such as senators, congressmen, governors, mayors, city councilmen, county commissioners, school board members—all of whose decisions impact on our lives.

The most important thing any black person can do in an election year is vote.

The National Urban League is engaged in a citizenship education drive to get out the black vote.

We know that black voters can make a difference. Blacks are the swing vote in key states. No candidate can win those states without the black vote.

The precious right to vote was bought with the blood and tears of generations of black people who fought and died for it. We, who come after them, cannot dishonor their sacrifices by sitting out crucial elections.

Nor can we abdicate our personal responsibility to decide for ourselves whom to vote for, both nationally and locally. Each of us must make an independent judgment based on our perception of black needs and the national good.

As we involve ourselves in a political process that furthers black empowerment, black voters must use that empowerment to get the freedom train back on the express track. For our freedom train has been stalled for far too long, and has been moving backward in the 1980's.

When the War on Poverty turned into a war on the poor, all of America's disadvantaged suffered. Survival programs for poor people have been torn away. Our society is growing more economically segregated every day. Such conditions call on us to say, with the outrage of the prophet Isaiah: "What

* Mr. Jacobs, president of the National Urban League, delivered this keynote address at the Annual National Urban League Conference, Cleveland Ohio on July 29, 1984. John Jacobs with the help of Daniel S. Davis, special assistant to the president, compiled data used in the keynote address. Due to the expository nature of the speech, the various sources are not footnoted.

mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces and grind the faces of the poor?"¹The body count of people who became poor between 1979 and 1982 comes to well over eight million. That means every day, 5,500 people who were making it, became poor.

Every hour, 230 people fell into poverty.

Every minute, four more people were added to the growing army of the needy.

White and black, urban and rural, old and young, found the social safety net drilled with holes.

They found welfare benefits cut by inflation so that today's welfare family has only two-thirds the purchasing power of a similar family in 1970.

They found their government throwing billions of dollars at farmers not to grow wheat while it took away food stamps worth less than fifty cents a meal from people too poor to buy bread.

They found virtually every program designed to help them out of poverty either stripped or eliminated.

And still they paid taxes even when they could not pay the rent. The average tax burden on poor people went up by 23 percent over the past five years. Today's poor families pay more in taxes than they did twenty years ago.

Meanwhile, the affluent got huge tax cuts and the Pentagon budget mushroomed. While poor kids are kicked off school lunch programs, the air force buys \$7 hammers for \$400 and 12-cent Allen wrenches for \$9,600. And this shameful violation of human needs takes place in the midst of what we are told is an economic boom.

We must remind America that the economic recovery has bypassed poor and black people. We must remind those who boast of our economy as a job creating machine that the machine broke down when it came to black people.

Yes, we have to remind Americans that every seventh person is poor today because our nation refuses to invest in human resources. Human needs are sacrificed to callous indifference and to economic myths. This last recession exemplified this phenomenon. Millions were thrown out of work. The hungry were forced to stand in the cold for surplus cheese; the homeless left to wander the streets.

The majority, with jobs, food and homes accepted it as necessary to control inflation. They bought the myth that you cannot have stable prices and full employment. The cure was worse than the disease—\$300 billion in lost federal taxes and unemployment benefits and one trillion dollars in lost production—a decline in the economic base that can never be recaptured. And there was a terrible human cost, too.

A number of prominent social scientists have found a correlation between unemployment, crime, and illnesses. They found that a one percent rise in unemployment is associated with 36,000 deaths.

So the cost of this last recession has to include the long-term cost of some 100,000 lives. This is double the number of Americans we lost in the Vietnam war. We have got to recognize that unemployment kills. It kills people and it destroys families. This is evident in observing the black family. Twenty-five

1. *Isaiah* 3:15.

years ago, three out of four black men were working and three out of four black families were intact. Today, just a little over half of all black men are working and fewer black families are intact. Anyone concerned about the rise of single-parent families in the black community does not have to look further for the reason. We are ten percent of the labor force and twenty percent of the jobless. Over a third of black workers had two long spells of unemployment last year and another third could not find any work at all.

The terrible unemployment that hits blacks can be solved. The numbers are manageable in an economy that provides 106 million jobs.

It would take just one million new jobs for black workers to bring the black unemployment rate down to equal the white unemployment rate—the effect would be an increase of less than one percent of all of America's jobs.

Jobs are the single, central, burning issue on the black agenda in 1984.

Our call for equity is a call for equal access to jobs. It is a call for the educational and training opportunities that lead to jobs. It is a call for affirmative action programs that replace the historic negative action policy toward blacks. And it is a call for a national full employment policy that guarantees a decent job to everyone willing and able to work.

Some people think we already have full employment, but well over eight million people are still jobless and black unemployment is at depression levels. Millions more are not counted as unemployed because they work in part-time jobs when they want and need full-time work, or because they have given up hunting for jobs that are not available.

There is too much misery in good times and unacceptable levels of misery in bad times. We have had back-to-back recessions, with another one expected in 1985.

Every time working people and the poor lift their heads thinking the storm is over, the winds of recession start howling again. That vicious cycle must be broken by a national full employment policy. Full employment is not an impossible dream. It is achievable. It must be achieved because the most precious human right is the right to work. Without work, human dignity is diminished and civil rights become abstractions.

Full employment is necessary for stable, balanced economic growth shared by all. Achieving that kind of growth will take many actions, including reduction of a budget deficit caused by overspending and undertaxing.

The deficit is an obstacle to passage of a full employment policy. Propose job creation and training programs and you are told "we can't afford it; the deficit is too big."

Because of the deficit, the federal government's interest payments in 1984 will amount to far more than all of the cuts it made in social programs over the past three years. That huge deficit leads to high interest rates and an overhauled dollar that generates a flood of imports which sweep American workers out of their jobs. We practice a neutron-bomb economic policy that preserves physical capital while destroying jobs. American jobs move offshore to countries where workers are lucky to get fifty cents an hour. And then we turn around and say American labor is priced too high! Too high for what? For survival? Do we want an American labor force at Bangladesh wages? And if we do, who will buy the autos and the computers rolling off the production lines?

Part of the solution is macroeconomic policies that lower interest rates and enable the private sector to enjoy steady growth instead of lurching from boom to bust.

This solution is limited unless black workers get their fair share of the private sector's jobs through increased affirmative action hiring and promotion; a new emphasis on training the unskilled, and a serious commitment to hire and train disadvantaged young people. There must be an iron-clad commitment from the private sector to create opportunities for those it has neglected. But, we also know that the private sector has never created enough jobs for all. The private sector needs partners if it is to create enough jobs. One partner is government.

Full employment demands a clear federal commitment to a public-private program that rebuilds the infrastructure of the nation and provides the basis for future growth. Such a program would create jobs for unemployed skilled workers and for the unskilled. A training component would assure that people who lack skills would acquire them. Another role for the government is a public service employment program. There is no excuse for understaffed schools and hospitals, for closed libraries and garbage-strewn parks and streets, while millions of unskilled people remain unemployed.

There is more to a full employment policy. It should include universal training programs for young people, school-to-work transition programs, and urban youth corps, supported work programs, and other targeted efforts. The key however, to a successful full-employment policy is a voluntary sector that is an equal partner with government and the private sector. A tragic aspect of current national policy is the disruption of the cooperative bonds between government and the voluntary sector. Voluntary, community based organizations are an indispensable mediating force between employers with jobs to offer and the unskilled with labor to provide.

Voluntary agencies performed an irreplaceable service as facilitators, running federal projects to train people and to help them toward independence. Those programs generated more tax revenues than they cost.

That reflects the role of government as an investor in its people and as a guarantor of a decent society. Government should be, can be, and must be an enabler, a helper, a force for good and for decency. Federal investment in the disadvantaged is not conservative or liberal. It is simple common sense and sound public policy. As the conservative columnist, George Will, wrote: "It is cheaper to feed the child than jail the man. Persons who do not understand this are not conservatives, just dim."

The proper role of the federal government will be a central issue in the 1984 campaign for the presidency. We must impress upon both parties the necessity to do right by black and poor people.

In the past year we have implemented programs that train the unskilled for the jobs of the future, stimulate minority business, and prepare young people for entry into the mainstream. The Urban League Movement is in the trenches, fighting for policies and providing services that bring help and hope to the poor. Black people must resist the temptations of isolation and work toward equity, excellence and empowerment in *this* society.

For it is *this* America in which we live and in which our children and our children to come will live. It is here that we must find our way and demand

our full rights, rewards and responsibilities. It is in *this* America that we must advance the rights won for us by the Freedom Marchers of the 1960's. It is in *this* America that we must link forces with the white poor whose only badge of difference is their color. Color is not enough to keep them from going to bed as hungry as millions of black people.

It is in *this* America that more whites than blacks are on welfare. More whites than blacks are on food stamps. More whites than blacks are poor, are jobless, and homeless. It's no longer enough just to be white.

What white Americans need to understand is that black people are society's barometer. We feel the pressure first, but eventually it hits white people, too.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote:

The long journey ahead requires that we emphasize the needs of all America's poor, for there is no way merely to find work, or adequate housing, or quality-integrated schools for Negroes alone. We shall eliminate slums for Negroes when we destroy ghettos and build new cities for all. We shall eliminate unemployment for Negroes when we demand full and fair employment for all. We shall produce an educated and skilled Negro mass when we achieve a twentieth century, educational system for all.

To those who ask: "What do black people want?" Our answer is: Decent jobs, homes, health care, and quality education for our kids so they can grow up in peace and dignity. We want an open society in which everybody has a chance to make it. A society in which whiteness and wealth confer no special advantages; a society in which black people and poor people are full partners in democracy.

We want a pluralistic society in which everybody can develop to the limits of their human talents. A society that honors the diversity of the multi-colored fabric of America.

We want an integrated society in which race is no longer a barrier and whites and blacks are fully equal, in practice as in law.

We want an America that nurtures its many peoples with respect for the divine spark that dwells within all of us. An America that moves beyond racism to a new era of progress and reconciliation.

Our America is a country of the mind and idea yet to be fulfilled, a vision for which white and black people have sacrificed their lives from the battleground of Valley Forge to the lynching ground of Philadelphia, Mississippi. It is an America struggling to be born out of the pain of the past and the discord of the present; an America that meets the challenge of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "If you do away with the yoke, the clenched fist, the wicked word, if you give your bread to the hungry and relief to the oppressed, then shall your light arise in the darkness, and your shadows become like noon."²

Let us then go forth to light the lamp of justice in our America; let us send shafts of light and hope into the hidden corners of despair in our America; let us fight our righteous fight for equity, excellence and empowerment in this, our land.

2. *Id.* at 58:9-10.