

February 6, 1968

TO THE PRESIDENT, CONGRESS AND SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

We demand our inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We come to Washington to redeem that pledge which was made in the Declaration of Independence and has now been dishonored for almost two hundred years.

Even as the founding fathers asserted the fundamental rights of all men, there were many among them who owned slaves and the black men and women, who had kidnapped to America, were assigned a degraded status by a revolutionary constitution. This monstrous contradiction between the American ideal and reality persists to this moment. After nearly two centuries of oppression and terror and a civil war the nation has only recently begun to guarantee Negroes equality before the law and it still assigns the great mass of black people to second class economic and social citizenship.

In just nine years, this country will mark the second centenary of its Declaration of Independence. Will Negroes be able to celebrate?

What is the right to live of black children who are born to be hungry and whose very minds and spirits are maimed by the savage conditions of their existence? What is it that the young people in the streets have a right to a life of unemployment and low pay when there is work?

In nine years will the right to liberty for the black man mainly mean that he is perfectly free to move from one slum to another and that he can periodically choose from among politicians who will do nothing?

Two hundred years after the Declaration of Independence will the right to the pursuit of happiness mock the majority of Negroes locked up in an economic underworld of poverty, joblessness and unemployment?

The answers to all of these questions are clear. If the present outrageous trends continue, the majority of black men and women in the United States will, in the year 1976, be systematically deprived of really meaningful possession of those inalienable rights of all men which were solemnly proclaimed in 1776.

So we do not come here to ask for charity. We demand justice. It took America nearly two centuries to begin to understand that all men are not created equal so long as Negroes are denied the right to vote, access to public accommodations and fundamental equality before the law. It cannot take two more centuries for it to occur to this country that there is no real right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for people condemned by the accident of their birth to an existence of hereditary economic and social misery. For if this goes on much longer, America will tear itself apart.

I

Therefore we demand an economic and social Bill of Rights.

We speak as black men and women on behalf of black men and women. But the rights which we insist upon do not apply only to our own people. They are, as this nation has proclaimed, but not practiced, the principle for two centuries, the rights of all men.

This Bill of Economic and Social Rights should proclaim:

\*The Right of every employable citizen to a decent job.

According to the official statistics, Negro unemployment is twice that of whites. Yet even these scandalous figures profoundly understate the injustice. According to the "Sub-Employment Index" of the Department of Labor (which takes in poverty employment, part time unemployment, the number of people driven out of the labor market and the vast number of Negroes whose very existence is not reported in the official statistics) there are ghettos in the United States with sub-employment rates ranging between 30% and 50%. We do not, therefore, propose the governmental creation of dead-end jobs but a national responsibility to

provide work for all. As three Presidential Commissions (the Commission on Technology, Automation and Economic Progress in 1966; the white house conference, "To Fulfill These Rights", in 1966; and the National Advisory Commission on Food and Fiber in 1967) and the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare of the United States Senate have all reported, there are literally millions of creative, public service jobs which could be opened up for the poor at a minimal cost and in short order. These are not make-work employments; they are new careers.

\*The right of every citizen to a minimum income.

Almost half of the poor in America, both black and white, are either too young, too old or too handicapped to work. Their needs are supposedly attended to by a patchwork of utterly inadequate and discriminatory programs. In June of 1965, the Council of Economic Advisors has reported 26 million people defined as poor by the Federal standards were not receiving any aid under public assistance. Among them were 11,5 million children. And, the President noted last year, in 18 states a family of 4 is supposed to manage for a month on \$45.00 a person - or less. Moreover, these paltry programs are regularly administered through a maze of humiliating, harmful regulations. The concern of white Americans for the problems of the Negro family would be somewhat more compelling if the welfare laws in many states did not promote separation and divorce by denying children aid so long as there is a male in the house.

However, in urging a guaranteed income we most emphatically do not believe, as some conservative proponents of the idea do, that it will be a substitute for the entire welfare state. The black and white poor are deficient both in personal and in social income as an excuse to forget all these other basic problems. It is one element in an economic and social Bill of Rights and other rights are just as important. Moreover, the level of a guaranteed income should be fixed as to automatically increase along with the cost of living and the rise in the Gross National Product. Only in this way can those who are excluded from the labor market through no fault of their own participate in the benefits of an economic

progress which is achieved more and more through direct societal guidance and intervention and which should, therefore, be shared socially.

\*The right of a decent house and the free choice of neighborhood.

Throughout the post-War period, the subsidies handed out to the predominately white middle class and rich have been much larger, and much more discrete, than those given to the poor, both Black and white. Federally subsidized credit built suburbs and Federally supported roads provided access to it. Tax dollars were lavished on the civic plans of downtown departed stores, office buildings and banks and the poor people, usually Negro, who were displaced in the process were the victims of this discriminatory "progress". Meanwhile, the poor received a highly visible, socially disastrous pittance in the form of housing projects. In 1966, the White House Conference on Civil Rights proclaimed that the nation must produce 500,000 units of low cost housing a year. In 1967, it is doubtful that 10% of that figure were actually constructed.

There must, then, be a specific targeted plan for the elimination of all the slums in the United States within the next 10 years. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman proposed that the Congress allocate 3% of the Gross National Product to the reconstruction of Europe through the Marshall Plan. In 1968, the President should urge a similar commitment for the reconstruction of the United States.

\*The right to an adequate education.

What constitutes an adequate education varies according to time and place. A generation ago, some high school education qualified a young person to compete in the job market when work was available. Today, most experts believe that a student required twelve years of training in order to be prepared to a place in an automating society. At the same time, Negro schools are regularly so inferior that a good portion of the students are not even taught the basic educational skills and therefore become bored, resentful and drop out at the first opportunity. According to the 1967 Manpower Report of the Department of Labor, even those black youth who are determined enough to finish twelve grades have of ten, only received instruction up to an eighth grade level in crucial subjects. Only out-and-out racists believe that this tragedy is a consequence of inherent deficiency

on the part of the child; everyone else, including the President and most of the Congress, have been shown that it is a function of the inherent deficiencies of the school system and the general social and economic indignities imposed upon the ghetto itself. So first of all, there must be a massive effort to upgrade the education available to the black and white poor

But secondly, even the most talented and ambitious poor children are often denied the chance to take advantages of the inadequate educational opportunities offered to them. Their family is not economically able to take the responsibility to allow them to continue their schooling even were that possible. Therefore, there must be a peacetime "GI BILL" for the young men and women of this country. When, in the aftermath of World War II, this society paid veterans to go to school, it made one of the most imaginative, and profitable, social investments in the history of the United States. This precedent should now be put to peacetime use.

\*The right to participate in the decision making process.

At every point at which the society intervenes to improve the life of the citizen-in education, the labor market, income maintenance and the like- the people must not be treated as the objects of decisions made on high. Therefore, it must be a requirement of Federal legislation in each one of these areas that the people affected by a program be granted a statutory right to play a significant role in how it shall be designed and administered. (decision making means political action and voting protection)

\*The right to the full benefits of modern science in health care.

It is an abiding scandal of American society that infant morality and life expectancy vary according to social class- and that the babies of the black and white poor die at birth more often than those of any other group and that those who survive still look forward to a truncated life span. Medicare has proved an enormous benefit to those over 65 years of age.

but the country has yet to extend coverage to millions of others who desperately need it. Every man, woman and child in America should be guaranteed medical care under the social security system.

Without these rights, neither the black and white poor, and even some who are not poor, can really possess the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. With these rights, the United States could, by the two hundredth anniversary of its Declaration of Independence, take giant steps towards redeeming the American dream.

## II

We will be told that there is not enough money to satisfy such far-reaching demands because of the war in Viet Nam.

And we reply that our national priorities are disastrously confused when we spend more than \$30 billion a year upon a tragic, destructive war in Southeast Asia and cut back on the programs which deal with the most basic injustices of America itself. In terms of quantitative calculations, this country is indeed rich enough to fight the wrong war in Viet Nam and the right war in the slums; but in terms of human resources, determination and political mood we have been steadily retreating on the domestic front while the war in Viet Nam escalates.

Therefore, in the name of America's crying needs as well as in the name of world peace, we say: Stop this war!

But even if the government persists in its policy in Viet Nam, that is no reason why the black and white poor should bear the main burden of that tragic conflict. We therefore challenge the President and the Congress to act now and at once on a number of measures which are so modest in scope as to be only the merest beginning of an approach to the massive problems we have defined-but which would at least represent a step in the right direction. If the President and the

Congress and the Presidential candidates of the opposition and the opposition itself refuse these demands, black and white people will know that they do so, not because they have to nor even in the light of their misguided commitment in Viet Nam, but because they are utterly callous to the suffering and misery of tens of millions of Americans, both black and white.

WE DEMAND:

1. Acceptance on principle of the economic and social Bill of Rights.
2. Immediate repeal of the vicious 1967 amendment to the social security law arbitrarily restricting the number of children who can receive federal aid.
3. Passage of an Emergency Employment Act of the type approved by the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in 1967 and appropriations to cover the creation of 250,000 new career jobs in health, public safety, education, recreation, streets, parks and municipal maintenance, housing and neighborhood improvement, conservation and rural development, beautification and other fields of human betterment and public improvement during 1969.
4. Instructions to the Secretary of Labor making the Sub-Employment Index, which gives a much truer picture of the plight of the poor, a regularly monthly statistic published by the government.
5. Expansion of the "turnkey" housing program now being begun in Mississippi to disadvantaged communities throughout the nation and provision that the project be directed to people of incomes less than \$3,000 a year.
6. Provision of planning funds for an immediate beginning of work on a racially and socially integrated model city for 250,000 citizens and a commitment to build such a city, with requisite federal subsidies, as quickly as possible.

These demands are minimal and they can be satisfied even within the present conservative context of the Congress and under conditions of a tragic land war in Asia. They represent only a very first, tentative move toward guaranteeing the poor, both black and white, those inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness which were proclaimed for all men by this nation almost two hundred years ago.

If the United States cannot act, and act now, on such an immediate program, it will be announcing that its own Declaration of Independence is a lie.