A CORPORATE RESPONSE TO HUNGER IN AMERICA

PRESENTED AT THE

SYMPOSIUM ON POVERTY AND WORLD HUNGER

JANUARY 18, 1986

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. CENTER FOR NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE, INC.

REMARKS BY

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CHAIRMAN AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

AMERICAN CAN COMPANY

I DEEPLY APPRECIATE YOUR INVITATION TO ADDRESSES
THIS SECOND NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON POVERTY AND
WORLD HUNGER. IT IS MOST APPROPRIATE THAT
THIS SYMPOSIUM BE HELD AS PART OF KING WEEK -FOR THE SOCIAL JUSTICE THAT DR. KING FOUGHT
FOR DOES MEAN AN END TO THE DEBILITATION OF
POVERTY AND HUNGER.

WORLD HUNGER HAS RECEIVED A LOT OF ATTENTION

THIS YEAR IN THE AMERICAN PRESS AND ON RADIO

AND TELEVISION. AND TODAY, YOU HAVE ADDED TO

THE EFFORT TO ALLEVIATE THESE PROBLEMS.

BUT, I AM AFRAID WE AMERICANS WHO RESPOND TO

THE DEVASTATION OVERSEAS STILL DO NOT PAY

ENOUGH ATTENTION TO THE HUNGER THAT EXISTS IN

OUR OWN COUNTRY.

WE SEEM TO ASSUME THAT BECAUSE WE ARE THE RICHEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD, HUNGER EITHER DOES NOT EXIST OR THAT IT EXISTS ONLY AS AN OCCASIONAL AND SHORT-LIVED PHENOMENA.

THAT IS NOT THE CASE.

HUNGER NOT ONLY EXISTS IN THIS COUNTRY. IT INCREASES EVERY DAY. THE U.S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS REPORTS CASELOADS HAVE INCREASED 300 TO 400 PERCENT IN THE FOOD PANTRIES AND SOUP KITCHENS OF THEIR CITIES. SIMILAR RESULTS ARE REPORTED BY THE FOOD RESEARCH AND ACTION CENTER, SECOND HARVEST AND THE PHYSICIANS TASK FORCE ON HUNGER.

BUT YOU CAN'T REALLY UNDERSTAND HUNGER IN

AMERICA UNTIL YOU LOOK BEHIND THOSE NUMBERS

AND THOSE REPORTS. THEN YOU FIND A WOMAN

WHOSE DIET CONSISTS PRIMARILY OF COFFEE AND

CRACKERS TWICE A DAY, SO HER CHILDREN CAN HAVE

THE SMALL AMOUNT OF NOURISHING FOOD THAT IS

AVAILABLE TO THE FAMILY.

YOU FIND A FAMILY THAT TRIES NOT TO SPEND ANY MONEY ON FOOD ONE WEEK A MONTH SO THE CHILDREN CAN HAVE SHOES AND CLOTHING AND THE FAMILY CAN STAY OUT OF DEBT.

YOU FIND AN ELDERLY WOMAN WHO EATS A CUP OF
BEANS AND A SMALL SQUARE OF FRIED BREAD EACH
DAY -- AND NOTHING ELSE -- BECAUSE SHE IS TOO
EMBARRASSED TO ASK FOR HELP.

You FIND A ONE YEAR OLD BABY WHO WEIGHS ONLY
15 POUNDS AND CAN BARELY SIT UP.

YOU FIND PEOPLE WHO, DESPITE THERE DEPRIVATION

AND CONSTANT STRUCT

NOT SUFFERING FROM HUNGER.

THESE PEOPLE ARE YOUNG, MIDDLE-AGED AND ELDERLY. THEY ARE WHITE, BLACK, HISPANIC, ASIAN AND NATIVE AMERICAN. THEY LIVE IN CITIES, SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL AREAS. THEY ARE FOUND IN EVERY SECTION OF THIS NATION. THEY INCLUDE THE CHRONICALLY POOR AND THE WORKING POOR. FOR SOME, THE STRUGGLE FOR FOOD IS A FAMILIAR STORY. FOR OTHERS, IT IS A NEW EXPERIENCE.

BUT THOUGH THEIR SITUATIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

ARE DIFFERENT, THEY ALL SHARE A COMMON BOND:

THEY ARE HUNGRY OR MALNOURISHED.

I MENTION ALL THE _ PEOPLE BELIEVE THE HUNGER ISSUE ... OVERSTATED OR OVER-DRAMATIZED IN THE U.S. THE SKEPTICS SAY THE FAMILY THAT MISSES FOUR MEALS A MONTH HAS A DIFFERENT LEVEL OF NEED THAN THE FAMILY THAT MISSES TEN MEALS A MONTH. THEY SAY ONE SHOULD NOT COMPARE THE FAMILY THAT HAS BEEN UNABLE TO PROVIDE ENOUGH FOOD FOR THEIR CHILDREN FOR A YEAR WITH THE FAMILY THAT HAS ONLY BEEN IN THAT SITUATION FOR A FEW WEEKS. THEY SAY DO NOT PLACE THE PERSON WHO DOES NOT REGARD HIMSELF OR HERSELF AS A VICTIM OF HUNGER IN THE SAME CATEGORY AS A PERSON WHO DOES.

IN A NARROW SENSE, THESE CRITICS ARE RIGHT.

THE MILLIONS OF HUNGRY OR MALNOURISHED AMERICANS

ARE NOT ALL IN THE SAME CIRCUMSTANCES. THEIR

LEVELS OF NEED DO VARY. THEIR VIEWS OF

THEMSELVES VARY. THEIR HOPES, EXPECTATIONS

AND EXPERIENCES ALL VARY. SO DO THE BUREAUCRATIC

OBSTACLES THEY M. VERCOME IN ORDER TO

OBTAIN FOOD FROM GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS.

BUT HUNGER IS NOT A COMPETITION TO DETERMINE

WHO IS THE MOST HUNGRY, THE MOST NEEDY, THE

MOST DESERVING. IT IS NOT A CONTEST IN WHICH

THE GOAL IS TO DEVISE A SCALE OF NEED AND THEN

RIGOROUSLY DOLE OUT OUR COMPASSION AND ASSISTANCE

TO THOSE WHO MEET THE APPROPRIATE CRITERIA.

DO WE WANT A STANDARD OF NEED THAT SAYS ONLY

THE DESPERATE SHOULD APPLY? DO WE HONESTLY

BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE WHO HAVE MAINTAINED THEIR

PRIDE AND DIGNITY DO NOT FEEL THE PANGS OF

HUNGER OR THE PAIN OF BEING UNABLE TO ADEQUATELY

CARE FOR THEIR FAMILIES? OF COURSE NOT.

THE ISSUES WE NEED TO ADDRESS ARE NOT WHETHER

FAMILY A IS HUNGRIER THAN FAMILY B; MR. X MORE

CAPABLE OF PROVIDING FOR HIS CHILDREN THAN MR.

Z; OR THE RATIO BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE

WHO ARE CHRONICALLY HUNGRY AND THE NUMBER WHO

ARE EPISODICALLY HUNGRY. THAT DEBATE HELPS

NOBODY, THE ISSUES WE NEED TO ADDRESS ARE:

FIRST, OUR INADEQUATE RESPONSE TO THE HUNGER THAT EXISTS IN THIS COUNTRY TODAY.

SECOND, THE POVERTY THAT IS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF HUNGER.

THIRD, THE VERY REAL POSSIBILITY THAT WE ARE BECOMING A TWO-TIERED SOCIETY - A SOCIETY DIVIDED BY INCOME, LIVING STANDARD, EDUCATION, HEALTH AND OPPORTUNITY; A SOCIETY THAT IS PERHAPS TOO COMPLACENT ABOUT POVERTY AND HUNGER.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

HAVE BEEN AMPLY DOCUMENTED BY MANY DIFFERENT

SOURCES. SOME \$12 BILLION HAS BEEN CUT FROM

THESE PROGRAMS IN THE PAST THREE YEARS -
\$7 BILLION FROM THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM AND

\$5 BILLION FROM THE SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS.

THE FEDERAL FOOD STAMP PROGRAM NO LONGER IS A PROGRAM BASED ON HOW MUCH IT ACTUALLY COSTS PEOPLE TO EAT. IT'S A PROGRAM DESIGNED TO KEEP FEDERAL SPETT MUM. THE "THRIFTY FOOD PLAN MARICH THE PROGRAM IS BASED IS THE CHEAPEST FOOD PLAN EVER DEVISED BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE. "THE THRIFTY FOOD PLAN," AS ONE TASK FORCE NOTED, "IS AN EXAMPLE OF BUREAUCRACY GONE AWRY. A FEDERAL EXPENDITURE LEVEL WAS SET, AND A COMPUTER WAS PROGRAMMED TO DESIGN A FOOD PLAN EQUAL TO THAT LEVEL -- IRRESPECTIVE OF HUMAN NEEDS,"

THE SECOND ISSUE WE HAVE TO ADDRESS IS WHY

PEOPLE ARE HUNGRY OR MALNOURISHED. MANY

REASONS CAN BE CITED: UNEMPLOYMENT, REDUCED

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE, BUDGET CUTS IN FEDERAL

AND STATE "SAFETY NET" PROGRAMS, THE INCREASED

TAX BURDEN PLACED ON THE WORKING POOR, INCREASED

LIVING COSTS WHILE INCOME REMAINS STABLE OR

DECLINES, AND INADEQUATE NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION.

BUT THE BASIC REASON MOST PEOPLE GO HUNGRY

IS THAT THEY ARE POOR. THEY JUST DON'T HAVE

ENOUGH MONEY TO BUY THE FOOD THEY AND THEIR

FAMILIES NEED.

REPORTED THAT POVERTY HAD DECLINED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SEVERAL YEARS, DROPPING FROM THE 15.2 PERCENT STOURF OF 1983 TO 14.4

PERCENT IN 1984 -- ONE OF THE MOST SUBSTANTIAL DECLINES IN THE PAST 17 YEARS. SINCE THE POVERTY RATE TRADITIONALLY MOVES IN CLOSE TANDEM WITH THE ECONOMY, THIS DATA PROVIDED GROUNDS FOR SOME OPTIMISM.

EXCEPT THAT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT NEW DATA TO

EMERGE FROM THE NEW CENSUS REPORT WERE NOT THE

NUMBERS SHOWING A DECLINE IN POVERTY BETWEEN

THIS YEAR AND LAST YEAR. THEY WERE THE NUMBERS

SHOWING HIGH RATES OF POVERTY CONTINUING TO

PERSIST OVER TIME IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT

UNEMPLOYMENT HAS BEEN STEADILY DECLINING.

THE IMPLICATIONS ARE STUNNING, BECAUSE THE

DATA SUGGESTS THAT DESPITE YEAR-TO-YEAR SHIFTS

IN POVERTY RATES, A DRAMATIC INCREASE HAS

OCCURRED IN THE BASIC BEDROCK OF POVERTY. IN

OTHER WORDS, A SUBSTANTIALLY LARGER GROUP OF

PEOPLE IS RELATIVELY UNAFFECTED BY IMPROVEMENTS

IN OVERALL ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE. WE HAVE, IT

SEEMS, REACHED A NEW PLATEAU OF POVERTY. AND

IT'S A HIGHER PLATEAU, NOT A LOWER ONE.

THIS BRINGS ME TO MY THIRD POINT.

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, WE HAVE WITNESSED THE

FULL DEBILITATING EFFECT OF POVERTY -- OF

HOMELESSNESS, HUNGER, UNEMPLOYMENT, ILLITERACY,

ISOLATION, LACK OF OPPORTUNITY; NOT NECESSARILY

ALL AT ONCE, BUT FREQUENTLY ENOUGH AND IN

COMBINATIONS THAT MAKE IT ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE

FOR LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE TO ESCAPE FROM

THIS TRAP INTO WHICH THEY HAVE FALLEN,

Now, However, I FEAR WE MAY BE WITNESSING

SOMETHING ELSE: A NATION ON THE WAY TO

BECOMING A TWO-TIERED SOCIETY: ONE AFFLUENT,

WELL-HOUSED, WELL-EDUCATED, WELL-FED, IN GOOD

HEALTH AND FULLY EMPLOYED; THE OTHER POOR,

INADEQUATELY HOUSED, INADEQUATELY FED,

UNEMPLOYED OR UNDEREMPLOYED, AND IN POOR

HEALTH.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES TOOK NOTE OF THIS TREND

IN A FRONT PAGE ARTICLE ON POVERTY AND YOUTH

ON OCTOBER 20. "COMPLEX SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND

POLITICAL FACTORS ARE CREATING A VAST NEW

CLASS OF POOR AMERICANS WHO ARE MUCH YOUNGER,

LESS EDUCATED AND LIKELY TO GIVE BIRTH SOONER

THAN RECENT GENERATIONS OF THE POOR," THE

TIMES NOTED.

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THE ARTICLE POINTED OUT THAT 32 PERCENT OF

ALL CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY WERE BLACK

EVEN THOUGH BLACKS COMPRISED ONLY 15 PERCENT

OF THE POPULATION; MORE THAN HALF OF ALL POOR

CHILDREN LIVED WITH THEIR MOTHERS IN A

SINGLE-PARENT HOME; AND THAT POVERTY RATES

NOW WERE INCREASING AMONG TWO-PARENT

HOUSEHOLDS AS WELL.

THE REASONS FOR AND IMPLICATIONS ABOUT THE

DATA WERE NOT FULLY CLEAR. BUT THE TRENDS

WERE FRIGHTENING ENOUGH TO DRAW THE FOLLOWING

COMMENT FROM SENATOR DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN:

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"THE U.S. TODAY MAY BE THE FIRST SOCIETY IN

HISTORY WHERE CHILDREN "" MUCH WORSE OFF

THAN ADULTS. IT WE REALIZED WE HAVE

A PROBLEM OF SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL CHANGE UNLIKE

ANYTHING WE HAVE EXPERIENCED IN THE PAST.

AND WE ARE COMPLETELY IGNORING IT."

So how do we avoid this chain of events?

WE START WITH A CHANGE OF ATTITUDES.

AMERICA IN 1985 IS A COUNTRY THAT, ON THE WHOLE, IS PRETTY SATISFIED WITH ITSELF. MOST OF US ARE IN GOOD FINANCIAL SHAPE. WE CERTAINLY HAVE MORE LUXURIES AND LEISURE TIME THAN WE EVER EXPECTED TO HAVE. AND WE WANT TO PROTECT AND MAINTAIN ALL THAT WE HAVE ACCUMULATED.

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THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT. BUT I

WONDER IF TOO MANY OF US ARE STARTING TO FEEL

THAT THE ONLY WAY TO KEEP WHAT WE HAVE IS TO

MAKE SURE NOBODY ELSE GETS ANY. I WONDER IF

THE EMOTIONAL GENEROSITY THAT ONCE WAS THE

HALLMARK OF THIS COUNTRY IS BEGINNING TO GIVE

WAY TO A MEAN-SPIRITEDNESS; A SENSE OF

I'VE-GOT-MINE-AND-THAT'S-ALL-THAT-COUNTS";

A FEELING THAT IF YOU'RE POOR, IT'S YOUR OWN

FAULT; IF YOU'RE HANDICAPPED, IT'S BECAUSE YOU

DON'T HAVE THE WILL TO CHANGE,

WE USE WORDS LIKE "FAMILY," "COMMUNITY,"

"SHARING," AND "UNDERSTANDING," BUT THOSE

WORDS WILL HAVE LITTLE MEANING IF OUR PEOPLE

AND OUR INSTITUTIONS BECOME INCREASINGLY

DISCONNECTED AND ISOLATED FROM EACH OTHER.

ALL OF US WANT TO SURSELVES WE ARE DOING

MORE FOR OTHERS, SOT WE NEED TO BE CAREFUL

THAT WHEN WE TALK THE LANGUAGE OF SACRIFICE,

WE DO NOT PRACTICE THE POLITICS OF SELFISHNESS.

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PERHAPS OUR AWARENESS THAT THE ECONOMIC PIE, ONCE CONSIDERED INFINITE, ACTUALLY HAS SOME LIMITS IS THE REASON FOR THIS APPARENT SHIFT IN NATIONAL ATTITUDES. WHATEVER THE REASON, THE TASK BEFORE US REMAINS THE SAME. THIS NATION NEEDS TO REDISCOVER THE SOCIAL VISION IT HAS HAD IN YEARS PAST: A SOCIAL VISION BASED ON SOMETHING MORE MEANINGFUL AND MORE ENDURING THAN A DESIRE TO PROTECT THE PERSONAL POSSESSIONS WE HAVE ACCUMULATED AND THE STATUS WE HAVE ATTAINED IN OUR PRIVATE LIVES. WE NEED TO DEVELOP A CONSENSUS BASED ON COMPASSION FOR OTHERS, THAT LOOKS AT HUNGER, POVERTY AND LACK OF OPPORTUNITY NOT AS ECONOMIC, MEDICAL OR EVEN POLITICAL ISSUES; BUT AS HUMAN ISSUES.

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I BELIEVE WE CAN REAWAKEN THAT SENSE OF CARING AND COMPASSION.

MANY PROPOSALS HAVE BEEN ADVANCED THAT WOULD

ALLOW THIS NATION TO COMBAT HUNGER, REDUCE

POVERTY AND STOP OUR APPARENT DRIFT TOWARD A

TWO-TIERED SOCIE A FEW THAT MERIT SPECIAL

ATTENTION INCLUDE:

- O AN UNEQUIVOCAL PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO

 PROVIDE PEOPLE IN NEED WITH ACCESS TO A

 DIET THAT IS BOTH NUTRITIOUS AND

 AFFORDABLE.
- O JOB CREATION STRATEGIES THAT ENABLE

 LOW-INCOME PERSONS TO COMPETE MORE

 EFFECTIVELY IN THE JOB MARKET.

- O USING OUR TAX SYSTEM AS A MEANS OF KEEPING PEOPLE OUT OF POVERTY.
- NATIONAL MINIMUM BENEFIT LEVELS TIED TO
 INFLATION FOR THOSE WHO WILL CONTINUE TO
 NEED PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS SUCH AS
 AID TO FAMILIES WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN.
- PARTNERSHIPS THAT INVOLVE ALL SECTORS IN
 THE EFFORT TO STIMULATE OUR ELECTED
 REPRESENTATIVES TO SET APPROPRIATE
 PRIORITIES AND ACT ON THEM.

WHEN THE CHAIRMAN OF A MAJOR AMERICAN

CORPORATION PROPOSES INCREASED FEDERAL

SPENDING FOR PROGRAMS DEALING WITH HUNGER AND

POVERTY, SOMEONE: - WHAT ABOUT

THE ROLE OF THE PRIVALE SECTOR? CLEARLY, THERE

IS A ROLE FOR VOLUNTARISM AND PRIVATE SECTOR

PROGRAMS AIMED AT COMBATING HUNGER AND POVERTY.

PRIVATE OR VOLUNTARY EFFORTS ARE FREQUENTLY

MORE RESPONSIVE TO INDIVIDUALS THAN LARGE

BUREAUCRACIES, AND THERE ARE ASPECTS TO THESE

PROBLEMS THAT DO NOT LEND THEMSELVES TO

POLITICAL OR PUBLIC POLICY SOLUTIONS.

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I AM A BUSINESSMAN WHO WAS TRAINED AS AN ECONOMIST. I KNOW THE DANGERS OF DEFICIT SPENDING, AND I STRONGLY FAVOR A PROGRAM THAT REDUCES THE DEFICIT. I KNOW WE NEED TO SUSTAIN LONG-TERM, NON-INFLATIONARY ECONOMIC GROWTH. I KNOW WE TO REDRESS OUR STAGGERING TRADE. GE.

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BASICALLY, THOUGH, THE TASKS BEFORE US ARE

ONES IN WHICH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MUST TAKE

THE MAJOR LEADERSHIP ROLE. THE PRIVATE SECTOR

CAN HELP, BUT THE BASIC LEADERSHIP, COMMITMENT

AND FUNDING MUST COME FROM GOVERNMENT. THERE

SIMPLY IS NO OTHER WAY. WE HAVE SEEN HISTORY

REPEAT ITSELF IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS WITH THE

INCREASE IN HUNGER AND WE HAVE THE MODELS FOR

AN EFFECTIVE SOLUTION.

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WE CANNOT BE DETERRED BY THOSE WHO SAY THE FEDERAL DEFICIT IS OUR FIRST PRIORITY.

BUT I AM UNWILLING TO PUT OFF RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT TO THE POOR AND THE HUNGRY UNTIL WE PUT OUR ECONOMIC HOUSE IN ORDER. I AM UNWILLING BECAUSE WE ARE SEEING MORE AND MORE EVIDENCE THAT THE GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE POOR CAN WIDEN EVEN WHEN THERE IS ECONOMIC GROWTH. I AM UNWILLING BECAUSE I THINK PROGRAMS TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY AND HUNGER SHOULD BE DETERMINED BY NATIONAL NEED, NOT THE OFTEN ABSTRACT AND UNATTAINABLE CONCEPT OF "DOLLAR AVAILABILITY." I AM UNWILLING BECAUSE THE POOR AND THE HUNGRY HAVE BEEN ASKED TO SHOULDER TOO MANY BUDGET CUTS ALREADY.

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CUTS IN SOCIAL PROGRAMS DEALING WITH POVERTY AND HUNGER ONLY INCREASE SUFFERING WHILE MAKING A TOKEN IMPACT ON THE DEFICIT. IF WE REALLY WANT TO MAKE A DENT IN THE DEFICIT, THERE IS MORE THAN ENOUGH FAT IN THE DEFENSE BUDGET TO SUPPORT DEFICIT REDUCTION AND INCREASED SPENDING FOR THE HUNGER AND POVERTY PROGRAMS I HAVE DESCRIBED. WE ARE CONTINUALLY TOLD WE MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN GUNS AND BUTTER. BUT THIS COUNTRY DOESN'T NEED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN GUNS AND BUTTER. THIS COUNTRY NEEDS TO STOP USING THE BUTTER MONEY TO BUY GUNS. THIS IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT AS WE GRAPPLE WITH BALANCED BUDGET LEGISLATION. WE CAN NOT ALLOW FURTHER CUTS IN HUNGER AND POVERTY PROGRAMS.

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JUST A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY; WE ARE ALSO AN INTERDEPENDENT SOCIETY. AND NO SOCIETY, NO MATTER HOW STRONG OR SECURE IT FEELS AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT, CAN SURVIVE IF ITS PEOPLE LOSE SIGHT OF EACH Of the transfer o

THAT IS THE DANGER BEFORE US AND WHY, IN MY

JUDGEMENT, WE SHOULD PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION

TO WHAT FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT TOLD US

MORE THAN 50 YEARS AGO. "THE TEST OF AMERICAN

DEMOCRACY, ROOSEVELT SAID, IS NOT HOW WELL WE

TAKE CARE OF OUR AFFLUENT. IT IS HOW WELL WE

TAKE CARE OF OUR POOR."

THANK YOU.

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