

# REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT

At the opening plenary session  
of the  
White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health  
Sheraton Park Hotel  
December 2, 1969

Members of the Cabinet, Mr. Mayor, all of the distinguished guests on the platform, and all the distinguished representatives to this Conference:

I very much appreciate the opportunity to be here, and before speaking myself, I want to express my appreciation to those who are arranging the Conference, to Dr. Mayer and others, for the introductions that have been arranged.

I understand that Ezra Ellis, who came from my home town of Whittier, Calif., gave the invocation, and I am most grateful for that, and I am most grateful, too, that the mayor of my city, Washington, D.C., Mayor Washington, is here today. I think he is doing a fine job as mayor of this city.

I am not going to talk about the problems of the District, except indirectly, at this point, but as I speak about the legislative imperatives, three of which I will mention in my address, I want you to know that at the very top of the list of other imperatives are the programs for the District of Columbia.

We have offered a number of programs that are new in this field and some that are old, but we have talked about the District for years. It is time to act about the District of Columbia, and under the mayor's leadership we do plan to act, and with your help we will do something.

As all of you are aware, this is an historic conference. It is particularly an historic conference for me because it is the first White House Conference that I have had the opportunity to address as President of the United States. I have addressed others as Vice President. And it is the first that we have had in this administration.

This meeting marks an historic milestone. What it does is to set the seal of urgency on our national commitment to put an end to hunger and malnutrition due to poverty in America.

At the same time, it marks the beginning of a new, more determined and more concerted drive than ever before, to reduce the malnutrition that derives from ignorance or inadvertence.

I recognize that many of you who are here and who have participated in the panels have been under enormous pressure, because you have had a relatively short time for the vast amount of work that it took to put this conference together and to prepare for it.

However, that pressure reflects the priority of the subject we are here to discuss. It reflects the sense of urgency we all feel.

Until this moment in our history as a nation, the central question has been whether we as a nation would accept the problem of malnourishment as a national responsibility.

That moment is past. On May 6 I asserted to the Congress that "the moment is at hand to put an end to hunger in America itself. For all time."

Speaking for this administration, I not only accept the responsibility—I claim the responsibility.

Malnourishment is a national concern because we are a nation that cares about its people, how they feel, how they live. We care whether they are well and whether they are happy.

First of all there is a moral imperative: Our national conscience requires it. We must because we can. We are the world's richest nation. We are the best educated nation. We have an agricultural abundance that ranks as a miracle of the modern world. This Nation cannot long continue to live with its conscience if millions of its own people are unable to get an adequate diet.

Even in purely practical terms there are compelling considerations requiring this challenge to be met.

A child ill-fed is dulled in curiosity, lower in stamina, distracted from learning. A worker ill-fed is less productive, more often absent from work. The mounting cost of medical care for diet-related illnesses; remedial education required to overcome diet-related slowness in school; institutionalization and loss of full productive potential; all of these place a heavy economic burden on a society as a whole.

And for many of us, and for me, as I know for many of you, this subject also evokes vivid personal memories. I grew up in the Great Depression. I shall never forget the hopelessness that I saw so starkly etched on so many faces—the silent gratitude of others lucky enough to enjoy three square meals a day, or sometimes even one.

I recall in my native State of California in the 1930's, a family that I knew, that I went to school with, subsisted on bread and gravy, bread and milk, beans. And later on in the 1930's, in North Carolina, families who knew nothing much more than black-eyed peas, turnip greens.

We have come a long way since then, but we still have a long way to go.

The question is: What will we do about it?

We begin with the troublesome complex of definitions and causes.

Experts can argue—and they do—and you will—about the magnitude of the problem: About how many are hungry, how many malnourished, and how severely they are malnourished. Precise statistical data remain elusive and often contradictory. However, Dr. Arnold Schaefer, the man in charge of the National Nutrition Survey, recently made this cautious but forceful observation. He said:

We have been alerted by recent studies that our population who are "malnutrition risks" is beyond anticipated findings, and also that in some of our vulnerable population groups—preschool children, the aged, teenagers, and the poor—malnutrition is indeed a serious medical problem.

We don't know just how many Americans are actually hungry and how many suffer from malnutrition, who eat enough and who don't eat the right things. But we do know there are too many Americans in both categories.

We can argue its extent. But hunger exists.

We can argue its severity, but malnutrition exists.

The plain fact is that a great many Americans are not eating well enough to sustain health.

We see, then, that the problem of hunger and malnutrition is, really, two separate problems. One is to ensure that everyone is able to obtain an adequate

diet. The second is to ensure that people actually are properly fed, where they have the ability to obtain the adequate diet.

On the one hand, we are dealing with problems of income distribution. On the other hand, with problems of education, habit, taste, behavior, personal preferences—the whole complex of things that lead people to act the way they do, to make the choices they do.

The answers to many of these questions are difficult to come by. The very fact that the same question evokes so many different, conflicting answers is itself testimony as to how fragile is the basis of our knowledge.

Assuming we can agree on definitions, and the causes of malnourishment, how do we eradicate it?

Now some will answer that the magic ingredient is money, and money certainly is one ingredient, and a very important one. The more than \$5 billion that I have proposed for new or expanded programs for food and family assistance next year would go a long way toward bringing the problem under control.

In this connection, I would urge each of you in this great conference to enlist yourself in an effort to win passage of three landmark pieces of legislation I have already recommended to Congress.

One of these is what many observers consider to be the most important piece of domestic legislation proposed in the past 50 years, the establishment of a floor under the income of every American family.

For the first time—Mr. Moynihan please notice—for the first time, this new family assistance plan would give every American family a basic income, wherever in America that family may live. For the first time, it would put cash into the hands of families because they are poor, rather than because they fit certain categories. When enacted, this measure alone will either supplement the incomes or provide the basis for the incomes of 25 million American men, women, and children.

Our basic policies for improvement of the living conditions of the poor are based on this proposition: That the best judge of each family's priorities is that family itself, that the best way to ameliorate the hardships of poverty is to provide the family with additional income—to be spent as that family sees fit.

Now, some will argue with this proposition. Some argue that the poor cannot be trusted to make their own decisions, and therefore, the Government should dole out food, clothing, and medicines, according to a schedule of what the Government thinks is needed.

Well, I disagree. I believe there are no experts present in this great gathering who know more about the realities of hunger and malnutrition than those among you who are here because you have suffered from it; or than those among you who are here who do suffer from it, from great cities, from wornout farms, from barren reservations, from frozen tundra, and tiny islands half a world away.

The task of Government is not to make decisions for you or for anyone. The task of Government is to enable you to make decisions for yourselves. Not to see the truth of that statement is fundamentally to mistake the genius of democracy. We have made too many mistakes of this type—but no more. Our job is to get resources to people in need and then to let them run their own lives.

And now I would stress that all of you who have been so strong and effective in achieving a breakthrough on national awareness on hunger, will become an equally strong citizen lobby for welfare reform. The needs of the poor range far beyond food, though that is often the most visible and heart-rending aspect

of poverty. More basically, they need money with which they can meet the full range of their needs, from basic shelter, to medicine, to clothes for school, to transportation. And they need these resources in a program framework that builds incentives for self-support and family stability.

Let the reform of the bankrupt welfare system be the next great cause of those who come together here today.

Now the second measure that I would especially urge your support for is one that you will be considering in your deliberations. It is the reform and expansion of the food stamp program. I requested this in my May 8 message on hunger. This has been designed to complement the welfare program. While the welfare proposals may be subject to long debate, I hope and expect the Congress will act quickly on the expanded food stamp plan.

The Nation's food programs have been shot through with inequities—notably, the fact that many counties have not participated, and the fact that because food stamps had to be bought with cash many of the neediest were unable to participate.

We are pressing hard to bring every county into one or other of the food distribution programs, and the new food stamp bill would provide stamps free to those most in need—while expanding the program to a level that would reach \$2.5 billion a year when fully implemented.

In a related matter, we already are greatly expanding our school lunch programs, with the target of reaching every needy school child with a free or reduced-cost lunch by the end of the current fiscal year.

Now, there is a third measure, a third measure which at first will seem unrelated, but which is directly related to this conference. I ask your support for the Commission on Population Growth and the American future which I have proposed to Congress and which has been most favorably received, not only in the Congress, but by church and civic organizations throughout the Nation.

America, I believe, has come to see how necessary it is to be responsibly concerned with this subject. In proposing the Commission, I also declared that it would be the goal of this Administration to provide "adequate family planning services within the next 5 years to all those who want them but cannot afford them." There are some 5 million women in low income families who are in exactly that situation. But I can report that the steps to meet that goal have already been taken within the administration, and the program is underway.

Taken together, these three measures would virtually eliminate the problem of poverty as a cause of malnutrition.

Their dollar cost is high, but their practical benefits to the Nation are immense.

I know that your panels have advanced proposals for massive efforts on many fronts. They demonstrate that the goal cannot be won by government alone.

It is for each to ask how he, individually, can respond to the questions being asked here. For example:

- can foods be better labeled, be made more nutritious and be fortified with available additives?
- can industry, the schools, government, and citizens individually join effectively in a program of public education?
- can school lunch programs feasibly be improved?
- can voluntary programs by citizens and community organizations teach people what to eat, to close the knowledge gap?

The fact that so many groups are represented here today is itself evidence of a new sense of community responsibility, of industry responsibility, of individual responsibility. The fact that so many women are represented here, especially, is evidence of an enormous resource, particularly in the volunteer field, a resource that can do so much to ensure our success.

I, of course, in my official capacity, have already indicated legislative programs that I shall be supporting. But speaking now as one who from time to time can act in a volunteer capacity, I know the power of simply dropping a word as to what a President or a potential President does in certain fields.

I recall in your field, about 18 months ago I was being interviewed on a talk show. I was asked how I kept my weight down—that was my problem rather than the other way around. I answered—I thought rather low-key—that the doctor had told me to eat cottage cheese. The difficulty is that I don't like cottage cheese. I said I took his advice, but I put catsup on it.

You can't imagine how many letters I got. The dairy industry wrote and told me that I should like cottage cheese. The catsup industry wrote and told me to try it on my cereal. And others wrote and said catsup with cottage cheese had to be unhealthy. I pointed to the fact that my grandmother lived to be 92 and she ate it all her life, so that was the answer.

I use this facetious example to only indicate that the power of example, not just from a President, but from those in this room in the whole field of not just how much, but how and what we eat with regard to diet can be tremendous.

Now, I want to turn to—with Dr. Mayer's suggestion and his approval—to a very important procedural point, one I discussed with him when he took the position which he is filling and one I wish to speak directly to you about.

We have not attempted to program those in this room. We have not attempted to program you as to the questions you may ask or the answers and recommendations that you will make.

I expect to read that you had a lively difference of opinion during this conference. As a matter of fact, I have already read about a lively difference of opinion that you have had during this conference and that is as it should be. From an airing of views of all sides, answers and ideas will appear, answers and ideas are what we seek in this process. Obviously, if we knew all the answers we would not have convened the conference in the first place. That is why you are here.

I will say this: I want to speak quite directly. I can imagine in this room are many people who have attended White House conferences before. For 22 years I have been watching White House conferences. I have attended them and I have seen the effort that went into them, an enormous voluntary dedicated effort. I have seen it too often wither away in futility as the reports gathered dust on Government shelves.

Well, beginning with this conference, that is going to change. It will be the policy of this administration to follow up each White House conference, beginning with this conference, with a second meeting 1 year later, bringing together the key participants of the original conference to re-examine its findings and to measure what has been done about implementing them. We believe that is the only proper procedure.

I know that you take your work seriously and we are going to take your report seriously. I expect the results of this conference to be not just words, but action.

This conference marks a coalescing of the national conscience; it marks a triumph of the American system.

I realize that there is a ready disposition whenever we confront an ill that is still uncorrected in America, to cry that "the system" is corrupt, or "the system" has failed.

Our so-called "system" has been under heavy assault, not from one quarter but from many quarters.

But let us remember that that system is what has brought us here together today in this conference. It is a system that embraces compassion and practicality; it has given us the abundance that allows us to consider ending hunger and malnutrition.

Ours is the most productive and the most generous country the world has ever known. Less than 5 percent of our population—according to Secretary Hardin, Secretary of Agriculture—produces enough food to feed all the American people and to supply the needs of millions in other countries as well. In the years since World War II the United States has provided more than \$30 billion in food, in the form of aid, to needy nations and peoples abroad.

I have traveled to most of the nations of the world, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Do you realize that in most of the world today a conference like this would be meaningless because those nations would lack the resources to produce the food to meet the objectives that this conference may decide should be met or lack the resources to purchase the food which they themselves would not be able to produce?

It is precisely because our system has succeeded so well that we are now able to address the goals of this conference and the fact that we are gathered here is an example of one of the greatest strengths of that same system. It has a capacity for self correction, for self-regeneration; its constant reaching out to identify new or additional needs and to meet those needs, the readiness of its citizens to join in that effort, volunteering their time and their talents, as you are volunteering your time and your talents today.

This Nation has the capacity to provide an adequate diet for every American. The calling of this conference demonstrates that we have the will to achieve this goal. What we need is to find the most effective means for doing so consistent with maintaining the vitality of the system that makes it all possible.

And so I will review your recommendations with great care.

And I will ask you to go about drawing up those recommendations with equally great care.

My fellow Americans, as you begin this conference I commit to your concern the lives of millions of Americans, too young, too old, or too hurt by life to do without your help. I commit to your concern the not less serious task of helping to bring the rest of America to understand what we seek and to join us in adding this new dimension to the concept of American democracy. For at this very moment we are gathered at one of those great historical moments when it becomes possible for all of us to act a little better than we are, and in so doing, to leave this great and good Nation a little better because we were there.