

McCARTHY FOR PRESIDENT
Collegeville
Minnesota

Contact: Philip Murphy
Arthur Herzog
Lynn Abraham
(202-737-7207)

(FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE--July 11th, 1968)

A POSITION PAPER ON HUNGER--SENATOR EUGENE J. McCARTHY

Millions of Americans today are starving. Hunger in America is a national disgrace. We must pledge ourselves, therefore, to the elimination of hunger in the United States. We must immediately commit whatever funds and resources are necessary to do the job.

* * * * *

I.

In the 1960's, we Americans have had to acknowledge poverty in the midst of unprecedented affluence. We have learned that one out of every five American families lives on income below the federally-defined poverty line. As a result, poor people suffer from inferior housing, medical care and education. We now face another truth. Just as we had once overlooked poverty, we are now overlooking hunger in America. Not only is there poverty in the midst of affluence--there is starvation.

A panel of distinguished Americans--the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States--has put together a report on Hunger---USA. Before this report was published, it was commonly thought that those in danger of starving have access to adequate surplus commodities and food stamps. But the report shows that less than one-fifth of the 29 million poor in this country participate in government food programs, and that the majority of those participating are not the poorest of the poor. Before this report was published, it was thought that progress was being made in food distribution to the needy. But the report shows that participation in food programs has dropped by 1.4 million people since 1962, while malnutrition in this richest of all countries has "risen sharply" in the last ten years.

The Citizens' Board found hunger, disease and malnutrition among poor people in cities and on the farm, on Indian reservations and in migrant labor camps. The Board found graphic evidence that the price of hunger is paid even before birth--through injury to the unborn child. During the critical period between one month and one year of age, the death rate for infants from poverty backgrounds is often as high as five times the national average.

The Board found that 30% to 70% of the children in a given poverty area suffer from nutritional anemia, stemming primarily from protein deficiency and iron deficiency. They collected from doctors "increasing evidence" that lack of protein in the diet between the ages of six months and a year and one-half causes "permanent and irreversible brain damage."

The price of hunger is paid in vulnerability to disease, in listlessness, in apathy, in shortened life expectancy, in stunted growth, in blindness, rickets, scurvy and pellagra.

The price of hunger is paid in a loss of morale, even at the earliest ages. Teachers in poverty districts tell us again and again of sullen, withdrawn children. Too often in the past we have assumed that such withdrawal was the result of low motivation or constitutional inferiority, when in fact the children in question were suffering from malnutrition. Hungry children are tired, listless, irritable,

suspicious and apathetic. Hunger seriously retards the child's ability to learn.

A hungry child is likely to become a poorly educated adult. He is also likely to become a mistrustful and bitter person. In his formative years he has been exposed to a society of affluence and abundance --a society of supermarkets, luxury hotels, and laden banquet-tables. He has seen most Americans throw away more food than he has to eat. He has seen them spend billions of dollars on cigarettes, on liquor, and on luxuries beyond his wildest dreams. Yet he has grown up with the pangs of hunger, and he has seen those nearest to him twisted and stunted by starvation.

Hunger in America is therefore one cause of the violent unrest which threatens the stability of our society. In a land where food is plentiful, the existence of hunger is intolerable.

II.

The Commodity Distribution Program and the Food Stamp Program have clearly failed to allay hunger in the United States. The failure cannot be laid merely to lack of money or staff. The responsibility rests with Administration Policy and in particular with the United States Department of Agriculture--with its inadequate administration, its arbitrary decision-making, and its failure to make full use of federal funds or federal power.

The Commodity Distribution Program authorizes the Department of Agriculture to purchase surplus foods and to distribute them to needy families. These foods are called "basic commodities," most of which are low in protein: cornmeal, corn grits, flour, non-fat milk, peanut butter, rice and rolled wheat. At present 3.2 million persons receive commodity foods. But 642 counties in the United States have no food program of any kind.

The Secretary of Agriculture, however, has power to institute commodity programs without an official request by local government. Until recently, the Secretary denied that he had this power or the responsibility that goes along with it. The fact is that our statutes and regulations clearly designate the state as the political unit in charge of requesting federal food distribution. Moreover, the Secretary of Agriculture possesses by law power to initiate programs wherever need is evident.

This Spring, Secretary Freeman finally acted on his lawful initiative to distribute food in several counties in Alabama, following the filing of a lawsuit in the District of Columbia.

The Department of Agriculture food distribution is inadequate both in terms of quantity and nutrition. The distribution for a family of four is worth only \$25 to \$30 a month. The distribution fails to meet the Department of Agriculture's own figures for minimal nutrition from protein foods or from fruits and vegetables.

The shortcomings of the Department's distribution are due in part to its concern with farm product control at the expense of the needs of the poor. Too often the distribution program has been used merely as a device to siphon off the surplus produce of large farm producers. This means that the fluctuations of the commercial market have dictated the foods that are available to the poor. In 1964, for example, the Department of Agriculture distributed "red meat" to relieve a glut of meat on the market. Now that the glut is over, however, families receiving commodities are expected to make do with 30 ounces of canned meat per person per month.

Each year the Department of Agriculture receives special funds to buy and distribute extra food to the hungry. This money was authorized 30 years ago by Section 32 of Public Law 320. These funds come automatically to the Secretary of Agriculture. They are not part of the President's budget, nor does Congress have to appropriate them. In fiscal year 1968, the funds amounted to \$878 million. Of that amount, \$527 million was either returned to the U.S. Treasury or carried forward into the 1969 fiscal year. Approximately \$250 million was spent to distribute food to the hungry. And on June 30, 1968--despite appeals from the Poor Peoples' Campaign, from grass-roots groups across the country, and from distinguished citizens--Secretary Freeman allowed another \$227 million of "Section 32" funds to be returned to the Treasury.

On July 2nd, the Department of Agriculture was allocated \$896 million for fiscal year 1969 in "Section 32" funds. Will they spend the entire amount to fight hunger, or will they--as in the past--spend less than one-third?

The Department of Agriculture's Food Stamp Program was intended to correct the deficiencies in food distribution, but this program too failed to change the basic situation of most of those who are hungry in America.

In theory, the food stamp program enables poor families to increase their buying power through an automatic purchase of extra-value stamps in return for the family's 'normal expenditure' for food. The stamp prices were set by determining average expenditures for families of different sizes and incomes.

The trouble is that families who had literally no income were averaged in with other low-income families and expected to buy stamps with money that did not exist. For poor families with income, the program in effect penalizes incentive. Every time the income of a family of four increases by ten dollars, six of those dollars must go toward food stamps.

The stamp program further penalizes the poor by requiring that participants spend a fixed sum on stamps each month. This requirement disregards the fact that both the food needs and the incomes of poor people vary widely from month to month and season to season. It is inevitable that the fixed sum requirement sooner or later causes the disqualification of a large number of families.

Many countries in poverty areas have simply refused to apply for the food stamp plan, often from motives of economic or racial discrimination. As in the case of commodity distribution, the Secretary of Agriculture has denied that he has the power to distribute stamps in such counties. Yet Section 14-A of the Food Stamp Act seems to give him that power--a power which he could test through action.

Even those who do use food stamps fall short of an adequate diet. The Citizens' Board states that "By the Department of Agriculture's own standards, the money value of stamps falls consistently and deliberately below the amount necessary to secure a minimally adequate diet. Nutritional studies indicate that those buying food stamps are in fact only slightly better off nutritionally than non-participants."

The problem is further aggravated by the practice of grocers who raise their prices on food stamp day, thus transferring a part of the government subsidy to their own profit.

The Citizens' Board found also that, at best, only one-third of the poor children in America participate in the school lunch program. A majority pay the full price or go without. Nor do welfare programs feed them, contrary to belief. The Board found that those on public assistance do not get enough money to maintain a nutritionally adequate diet, that even those who receive the highest welfare payments suffer from malnutrition. And three-quarters of the poor do not even get welfare. They are excluded by a variety of state and local restrictions. Yet the Department of Health, Education and Welfare has consistently declined to re-examine state plans for conformity to federal law, court decisions, or constitutional requirements.

III.

There is no excuse for the existence of hunger in America. Even with present food production levels, we have the resources to insure every American a healthy and adequate diet. This is one of the four new civil rights we have enumerated in this campaign: the right to decent health.

Every American citizen has that right. It amounts to a right to life. If we do not grant health, we cannot expect full performance, or full citizenship, in return.

Beyond that there is the question of moral obligation. To permit our fellow men to starve is contrary to the fundamental ethical and religious traditions of America.

The President of the United States must provide the leadership to begin the fight against hunger.

* The new President should declare a national emergency with respect to hunger. He will have the power to institute emergency programs to bring adequate food to impoverished rural and urban areas, to migrant farm camps, and to Indian reservations.

* The President can direct that the Department of Agriculture and other governmental departments immediately use all available funds to combat hunger. If these funds are not adequate, he can ask Congress for immediate enactment of whatever powers or appropriations are needed.

* The President must provide the leadership to change and expand the nature of our basic food programs.

* The number one federal program against hunger should be the distribution of free food stamps. Eligibility should be keyed to income, dependents, and medical needs.

* School lunches should be available to every impoverished child, whether in public, private or parochial schools, kindergartens, Headstart programs, nursery schools or day care centers. The lunches should conform to federal nutritional standards.

* Hospital and health service facilities must be provided in every impoverished area. Poor families should be assigned a "family doctor" who would provide continuing guidance on medical care and preventive hygiene. Medical, graduate, and nursing schools should give full attention to the diagnosis and treatment of malnutrition, and to an understanding of its causes and effects.

* Public and private health organizations of every type should be directed and encouraged to address themselves to the problem of hunger. Special services and local projects should be initiated and funded, and

their results made available on a systematic basis. The Department of Health, Education and Welfare should serve as a clearing-house for information on local health projects.

* * * * *

There is no better or wiser investment this nation can make than an investment in nutrition and health. Our first concern is the health of each hungry individual. But beyond that, the moral and political health of America is involved.

The elimination of hunger will require maximum participation and commitment from every American.

It is my belief that in 1968 the American people have expressed their will to re-order priorities, and to make it a matter of national purpose to insure every child and every adult his daily bread. No one questions that the job can be done. Let us do it fully, and let us do it now.