



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community Action

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

What our budget priorities say about our values as a society

The youngest among us deserve better

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Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children....This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

- President Dwight D. Eisenhower

The failure of political leaders to help uplift the poor will be judged a moral failure.

- Jim Wallis

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In recent weeks we have witnessed a palpable level of anxiety throughout America in response to the current administrations proposed budget for 2018. A majority of federal departments including State, Education, Labor, Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency would incur significant cuts in favor of increases to Defense and Homeland Security. An additional nineteen

programs would either have their funds reduced or eliminated such as the Corporation for National and Community Service, Appalachian Regional Commission, United States African Development Foundation, Center for Public Broadcasting, United States Institute of Peace, and the National Endowments for both the Arts and the Humanities.

It is without question that we live in a violent and exceedingly volatile world in which a strong national defense is vital. Yet as Military1 – an online resource for veterans, military personal and their families – notes, the United States currently spends nearly as much on defense as the rest of the world combined. So the question that must be asked is “Are we striking the right ethical and protective balance when it comes to serving our citizens?”

As I have cited on numerous occasions throughout the life of this column, “a budget is a moral document.” Attributed primarily to Dr. King, this quote has been repeated by many others during the last half-century and it has never ringed more true than it does today. That said, I would like to shift for a moment from our nation’s proposed budget to the actual biennial budget of Minnesota that will take effect in a couple of weeks.

Although the debate over allocations for the state’s Department of Military Affairs and Minnesota National Guard proved controversial during this past legislative session, this issue is generally not emphasized in the same manner that similar discussions take place at the national level. So there is not a comparable state issue of cutting

social programs and services in favor of additional military funding.

Yet, in a June 12 editorial titled “No raise for Minnesota’s poorest families – again,” the *Star Tribune* identified a startling parallel to our current national budget recommendations. The paper’s Editorial Board expressed disappointment that there will be no change in the average monthly MFIP (Minnesota Family Investment Program) payment to Minnesota’s poorest families. Although an additional \$13 per month seemed likely – a modest 3.7% boost – the agreed upon increase was ultimately left out of the final bill, which means that there hasn’t been a bump in MFIP awards in more than three decades.

The Star Tribune points out that families receiving MFIP often receive other benefits, but adds that “there are some things that children need that only cash can buy – and those things cost a lot more money that they did in 1986.”

Furthermore, a troubling report from the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) indicates that the overwhelming majority of MFIP recipients are children, “half of them age five or younger.” The CDF study also reveals that more than half of Minnesota children living in poverty are not even supported by MFIP. Why do we continue to fail Minnesota’s youngest citizens?

I am reminded of the “seven social sins” that were published by Mahatma Gandhi nearly a century ago. These moral turpitudes are:

- Wealth without work.
- Pleasure without conscience.
- Knowledge without character.
- Commerce without morality.
- Science without humanity.
- Religion without sacrifice.
- Politics without principle.

I believe that Minnesota’s legislative houses are made up of men and women of conscience, character, principle and other essential virtues. Why is then that we can’t seem to mesh our compassion and benevolence with our body of laws.

We must do better by our children. They deserve no less.

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