

*Poverty: The New International Enemy*

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THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

University of California at Berkeley  
April 12, 1994

OSCAR ARIAS, former President of Costa Rica, was educated at the University of Costa Rica and received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Essex, England. A professor of political science at the University of Costa Rica, he served as the Costa Rican Minister of Planning and Economic Policy from 1970 to 1978, won a seat in Congress in 1978, and was elected Secretary General of the National Liberty Party in 1981. In 1986 he was elected President of Costa Rica, an office he held until 1990. In 1987, he drafted the Arias Peace Plan to end both the war in Nicaragua and the regional crisis. His initiative culminated with the Esquipulas II Accords—Procedure to Establish a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America—signed in August 1987. That same year he was awarded both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Martin Luther King Peace Prize. He used the monetary award from his Nobel Peace Prize to establish the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, where he continues his efforts for global peace and human development and understanding.

Friends :

I am honored to have been invited to speak to you today under the auspices of the University of California at Berkeley and the Tanner Foundation. I would like to express my appreciation to these two institutions for awarding me the Tanner Prize and giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts with you. This lecture series is but one of the many ways these institutions are contributing to the formation of a more just and peaceful world.

In the past, if intellectuals or leaders from the Third World had had access to such a distinguished audience as the one now present before me, they would most certainly have availed themselves of the opportunity to reproach the United States of America and the other rich countries of the world. These leaders would likely have launched a string of charges against the persistence of exploitative, interventionist, and unjust global relations. And they would probably have assessed the present and future enmity between the rich world and the poor world.

I would still like to speak to you of injustice and misery. I would still like to discuss matters related to the suffering of millions of human beings whose fates are marked by sadness and despair. However, I will not raise these issues in the context of animosity between the First and the Third World. The challenges and threats we face are far too great and far too common. We need more partners and fewer rivals, more cooperation and less confrontation, more unity and less division.

Some say that efficiency should be the only sign of our times. Some maintain that self-interest and the “invisible hand,” not the collaboration of free and spirited men and women, should be the driving force of our era. But we must not lose sight of the fact that individual advancement means little if it entails collective retro-

gression. The modern economic system, swept up in the frenetic search for greater competitiveness and increased levels of production, ignores the critical importance of human welfare, which must be our greatest concern. The modern political system is oftentimes blinded by the great number of differences that exist among us. Yet we must remember that we have just as many similarities upon which to build a strong foundation for global stability and progress.

I look to the future with hope, convinced that the basis of a New World Order will not be based on rivalry, but on partnership; that it will not be forged in the midst of conflict and competition, but cultivated through consensus and cooperation. In coming together, we will shape a new beginning, in keeping together, we will know progress and accomplishment, and in working together, we will surely find success.

For far too long we have lived under the stifling cloak of suspicion and rivalry. The years of the Cold War seemed to breed within us a strong desire to make foes of friends, and combatants of likely comrades, proving all too well the well-known postulate that human beings have an inherent tendency to seek out enemies. American intellectuals, in particular, asserted that the United States required an external foe in order to consolidate its sense of self; that, as Robert Reich has postulated, America's "national purpose [could] only be clarified in conflict"; and that this phenomenon was typical of many nations and peoples.

I do not disagree with the assertion that self-differentiation vis-à-vis an external adversary might be an important element of national unity and determination, yet I believe that, in this day and age, a perspective such as this one requires further elucidation, lest it be misconstrued. First, as we advance into the twenty-first century, people all over the world must understand that our enemies are not necessarily other individuals, nations, or civilizations, but those phenomena that threaten the welfare and survival of all humanity. Second, and consequently, what matters today is not

our identity as citizens of a particular nation but our consanguinity as members of a common planet and of a unique fellowship called humankind.

Throughout history, many nations and peoples have sought their enemies in other states or civilizations, in an attempt to promote national accord and consensus. The very essence of U.S. nationalism has been sharpened by years of battling the external enemy, whether real or imagined. Indeed, in the annals of U.S. history, many miscreants have been etched. In them, the wily Frenchman, the savage American Indian, and the pompous Brit from colonial times join the threatening Axis powers of the Second World War and the Communist villain of the Cold War. With the end of East-West confrontation, new adversaries have been proposed, from the Asian entrepreneur to the Muslim fundamentalist.

One would think that the American colossus could only take shape through a process of whittling and chiseling away what is un-American or antagonistic to American interests or values. At times this strategy has been effective. At times, it has proved hopelessly unproductive and unjust.

When American colonials fought against the British, they championed self-rule in the face of colonialism, representation against tyranny, and democracy against monarchy. Few would deny the efficacy of this accomplishment. However, the historical treatment of the indigenous cultures of this land is hardly deserving of praise. Today, most Americans regret the cruel treatment of Native-American peoples and the rejection of the values these communities lived and professed.

I hope it does not take any longer before we also reassess the damaging effects of the Cold War confrontation, especially the negative repercussions it had for the Third World. Who can forget this era when the friends and the enemies of one country were identified merely on ideological grounds? On many occasions, the criteria for distinguishing between who was “ally” and who was

“antagonist” were ambiguous and confusing. No matter what side they were on, many less developed societies seemed destined to live in misery, in ignorance, and under the most abhorrent forms of dictatorship.

Ironically, while the great powers of the Cold War vilified one another, it was the people of the developing world who suffered the consequences. It is deplorable that the hegemony competed over who could display the most extravagant military technology, but would use only a fraction of their resources to ease the misery of the people in less developed countries.

And because of this senseless obsession with adversaries, despite the end of the great war between the superpowers, the world continues to suffer as if it were still embroiled in global conflict. Poverty has increased in almost all of the developing nations and in most countries of the former Soviet bloc, as well as in the United States and several European countries. The growing power of the military remains a threat to democratic governance. Democracy continues to be challenged by human frustration and the lack of development, and the Third World has become a veritable stockpile of the weapons pumped into it by the arms-exporting countries, in particular by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. These weapons continue to exacerbate social violence and armed conflict in developing nations.

When a country vilifies another nation, culture, or ideology, there will always be negative consequences, because winning the battle against this enemy entails endangering other human beings and, in all likelihood, compromising human life and welfare. People must never be thought of as pawns to achieve strategic ends and national interests. Instead, those interests and strategies must be defined according to how they contribute to human happiness. The real enemy is anything that threatens the fulfillment of human potential.

For this reason, I have come to tell you that the greatest threat to the United States or any other country of the world is not lo-

cated within another civilization. It cannot be defined by language, history, religion, traditions, or institutions. It is more ubiquitous than all the enemies of the past and is, therefore, more dangerous. The war that follows, the next historic concern that should cause all the people of the world to rise up together as one single entity, should be the struggle against global poverty.

Today more than 1.2 billion human beings live in absolute poverty, a plight manifested in various ways:

- the daily death of 34,000 children from malnutrition;
- the fact that nearly 1.5 billion people have no access to health services, 1.3 billion people lack access to safe drinking water, and 2.3 billion do not have access to proper sanitation;
- the 11 million deaths each year from infectious and parasitic diseases; and
- the 1 billion illiterates in the world, 60 percent of whom are women.

Though we tend to associate poverty with the lack of material wealth, poverty is also linked to a broad expanse of social, political, and environmental problems that threaten not only those who live in impoverished lands but those of us who enjoy the security and stability of living in the developed world. When poverty deprives our fellow human beings of their right to education, health, shelter, work, and land; when it robs them of the fruits of democracy, peace, and liberty, it creates repercussions that ultimately affect wealthier societies, bringing devastation and discord where there was once affluence and harmony. People in the industrialized nations may think themselves immune to the effects of poverty. But poverty is the enemy of all, even those who now enjoy prosperity.

The United States ranks sixth on the human development index of the 1993 Human Development Report. However, if this country were divided into ethnic groups, whites would rank num-

ber 1 on the human development index; African-Americans would rank number 31, at the same level as Trinidad and Tobago; and Hispanic-Americans would rank number 34, with Estonia.

In the most recent U.S. census, the poverty rate had risen to nearly 15 percent of the total population, reaching almost 37 million. This is discouraging in itself. Yet when broken down into ethnic groups, these statistics become even more disheartening. The poverty rate for African-Americans is 33 percent and for Hispanics, 29 percent. This means that approximately one-third of African-Americans and one-third of Hispanic-Americans live in poverty.

Both North and South share the threats and dangers of poverty. They must therefore unite to confront the evil forces of destitution.

Consider the effects that poverty in the underdeveloped South has on the wealthy nations of the North. The extension of poverty in the southern countries creates a situation in which, every day, more men and women are compelled to cultivate drugs that destroy the lives of millions of people, especially the young, in the wealthy countries. As much as the wealthy governments may protest drug-trafficking in the poorer countries, it is not realistic to hope that people subjected to miserable conditions will reject their only possibility for survival simply because it is illegal and immoral.

In this same regard, the straining of resources in overpopulated areas stimulates migration from rural to urban areas and from poorer to wealthier lands. We have already seen how problems arising from urban and international migration have caused great unrest in the United States and have exacerbated nationalism and racism in Europe. These threats increase every day to the degree that Third World cities grow uncontrollably as a consequence of internal migration. As we all know, overpopulation is also linked to poverty. Annual population growth rates are 2.1 percent for the poorer countries versus 0.5 percent for wealthier countries.

With respect to global environmental change, poverty can be linked to the increase in the degradation of the quality of air, land,



and water. Deforestation, desertification, pollution, sewage, and the growth of urban slums can all be traced to a lack of sufficient wealth and resources in both developed and developing countries. The poor in Africa, Asia, and Latin America cannot be blamed for degrading their environments. Lacking sustainable alternatives, these people are compelled to deforest the land and pollute the water in order to survive.

All these effects make the issue of poverty in the less developed world of overwhelming importance to the industrialized world. No country can ignore the fact that the world's poor will, if left out of the world economy, seek alternative means of subsistence that could jeopardize global stability. We already know that economic backwardness is often the cause of political disorder and social conflict. Yet we will continue to suffer the consequences of poverty if we do not address the root causes of destitution in the Third World.

And what are the causes of poverty? In the impoverished regions of the world, poverty is linked to the unequal distribution of income, capital, technology, knowledge, power, and, above all, opportunity. It can be traced to rapid population growth and the persistence of low economic growth or high levels of unemployment. It can also stem from social disruption and marginalization due to political, ethnic, national, and religious conflicts.

To alleviate and reduce poverty in developing countries we will require more than stronger national policies to promote income redistribution and social services. We will need a global strategy to insure sustained economic growth in the poorer countries. We will need to make a firm commitment to increasing levels of development cooperation, and, above all, we will need leaders with the vision and the courage to set and achieve these goals.

In the past decade, development cooperation has deteriorated considerably, in large part because much of the Third World is no longer of geopolitical significance to the great powers. Levels of development aid have tended to stagnate and fall, while tariff and

nontariff barriers have been maintained and, in some cases, increased on some of the products exported by the developing countries. Official development assistance allocated by the wealthy nations is often distributed unjustly. Only one-fourth of this aid is directed to the poorest 75 percent of the world. The rest is distributed predominantly according to military or strategic considerations: moderate to high military spenders receive roughly 70 percent of official development assistance.

The industrialized countries must understand that it is not for reasons of solidarity alone that they must win the war against poverty and promote the construction of prosperous, just, and vigorous economic and political communities. The fact is that it is in the interest of the North, as much as of the South, to put an end to the development crisis and close the gap that divides the two hemispheres of the planet.

While developing countries must themselves remove the obstacles to development such as corruption, the abuse of power, and armed conflict, industrialized nations must facilitate and free resources for development through more generous aid policies, debt relief, improved market access, and technology sharing. They must create favorable conditions for job growth with investments in both physical and human capital, and they must promote complementary strategies for equitable income distribution through broad-based participatory, gender-equitable policies and programs. To defeat poverty, our real enemy, we need a common strategy. To defeat this international menace, we need a global pact.

We need a pact to unite the will of both developed and developing countries to expand the range of choices and opportunities for our citizens and to create a more secure global environment. This pact could consist of the following five-point agenda:

1. We must replace the outdated concept of security that prevailed during the East-West conflict. Today security must mean more than the avoidance of nuclear war; it must also

mean food for the hungry, books for the ignorant, medicine for the sick, freedom for the oppressed, and work for the unemployed. In essence, the search for security begins with the search for human dignity.

2. The United Nations should be equipped with the institutional and financial means not only to respond to crises but to address the root causes of potential conflicts: ethnic and religious tensions, illegal migration, unrestrained population growth, the exploitation of women, the undermining of democratic institutions due to increasing corruption, and poverty. The UN must expand its role in accordance with the fact that human freedom and prosperity are just as important to international security as the absence of armed conflict.
3. The industrialized nations should open up their markets to be consistent with their proclaimed commitment to globalized free trade.
4. Foreign aid should be more justly and equitably allocated to the poorest citizens of the world. Social priority expenditure should take precedence over investments in arms and the military.
5. International leaders should take the initiative to invest the money previously used for human destruction into desperately needed human reconstruction. To break the vicious cycle of growing poverty and increased military spending, we should establish a Global Demilitarization Fund. Created with a portion of the peace dividend, the fund would reward, primarily but not exclusively, the efforts of developing countries to disarm and demobilize their armed forces and to reintegrate them into society through re-training and re-education programs.

Friends:

A little more than twenty-seven years ago, on October 22, 1966, Robert Kennedy spoke on this very campus about the urgency of confronting the problems facing American society. He spoke of the importance of compassion, reason, courage, and above all commitment. Let us recall the truth of his words:

You live in the most privileged nation on earth. You are the most privileged citizens of that privileged nation; for you have been given the opportunity to study and learn, to take your place among the tiny minority of the world's educated men [and women]. By coming to this school you have been lifted onto a tiny, sunlit island while all around you lies an ocean of human misery, injustice, violence, and fear. You can use your enormous privilege and opportunity to seek purely private pleasure and gain. But history will judge you, and, as the years pass, you will ultimately judge yourself, on the extent to which you have used your gifts to lighten and enrich the lives of your fellow man. In your hands . . . is the future of your world and the fulfillment [of] the best qualities of your own spirit.

Because I believe in partnership, I do not believe that this or any other nation has to create for itself a new enemy out of the many nations and cultures existing today. But if, once again, our countries must succumb to the inveterate custom of all nations to define themselves against an external foe, let this enemy be poverty.

In whatever region of the world, the dangers created by poverty are more consequential than those created by different religions, ideologies, or cultures. In poverty we find the seeds of violence, in poverty the roots of intolerance, and in poverty the grains of social misery and conflict.

There is no time to delay. The new enemy is most certainly here. Against the legions of poverty we must form an alliance of global citizens. Our sword will be our determination and will, our shield will be our solidarity. Let us win this struggle against poverty, for if we are not its victors, we will certainly be its victims.

Thank you.