

# **Fat and Hungry: Will Political Leaders Ever Get it Right?**

**Keynote Address by Dr. J. Larry Brown  
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good morning. The usual politeness of a speaker saying he is pleased to join such an august assembly is augmented today by my true respect for your work. Pennsylvania, even our nation, is better off because each morning you get out of bed determined to make the world a better place for high-risk families and children. I also want to take this opportunity to salute Pennsylvania Hunger Action on its amazing 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary! Collectively we have made some good things happen and stopped a number of bad ideas from becoming reality over the years. Now, I know that the program suggests the nature of my remarks, but I want you to know that the title I have given my remarks is “Fat and Hungry: Will Political Leaders Ever Get it Right?”

Now, far be it from me to ever suggest that “fat and hungry” is a term that might characterize many of our hard-working public officials in Congress. Let me explain right away that this title refers to recent allegations that hunger is no longer a problem in America, but that the real problem is growing obesity. This argument is a bit like saying that no politician can be bright because so many of them do dumb things. Or, to stick to the medical arena, it’s like saying that heart disease cannot be a problem because there is so much cancer. But more later on the subject of obesity and hunger.

Today I am going to address the issue of hunger by reminding you that it can have the most tragic of consequences. Those of you who have heard me speak before know that I always bring with me a young boy named Danny Holley. Danny died at the age of twelve in 1984, in the midst of a presidential campaign. He lived on an army base in California with his mother and siblings, while his father served overseas. The Holley family often didn’t have enough to eat, and the children would go to bed hungry despite the mother’s job and their best efforts. Danny often collected cans and bottles to help supplement his mother’s income in order to pay for food, but still it wasn’t enough. One afternoon, Ms. Holley came home from work to find that Danny had hanged himself. Beside his body was a note on the kitchen table that read: “Dear Mom, I love you, and hope that you won’t be angry with me. But I figured that it would help a lot if there was one less mouth to feed.”

This dramatic event was covered by the news media at the time... but neither Ronald Reagan nor Walter Mondale found it worthy of any mention in their presidential race. I vowed never to let Danny's death be forgotten so I mention him whenever I speak about hunger. He is my constant companion. While an unusual event, to be certain, Danny's death and the lack of interest by political leaders somehow reflects a nation that has lost its way. What a poignant statement about what has happened to the wealthiest nation that has ever existed: we allow children and adults to go hungry, even to die from it, and it simply is a fleeting news story. In fact, it is even worse today. So accustomed have we become to the *continuing existence* of hunger in America that it is now part of the national landscape. It no longer is an outrage, it is simply part of the "normal condition" in our wealthy democracy.

In fact, so "normal" has hunger become that our political leaders hardly pay any attention. None of them gets in trouble for ignoring it and, therefore, they have no motivation to do anything about it. Hunger simply "is there," like other social conditions that are known but largely ignored because there is no outcry to fix them.

But hunger is not just any other social problem; it is a threshold issue, one of the most fundamental threats to human existence. Hunger imperils life, health and cognitive function. People die from hunger. Hunger, in short, is both a threshold issue for human existence and a threshold moral issue for any society. It is all the more a moral issue for a nation that has the capacity, quite easily, to see that none of its people go hungry. Yet we do not do so, and our political leaders get off scot-free with ignoring this peril to millions of our families and children.

In America today, some 33 million of our citizens live in families that experience the pangs of hunger and food insecurity. They don't know where their next meal will come from, or have to cut back on the types and amount of food they need because they haven't the resources to buy what their children need to eat. This degree of hunger reflects our willingness to tolerate a large degree of poverty and inequality in the nation. Hunger, in other words, is the stepchild of poverty and lack of opportunity. Hunger and poverty operate in tandem: poverty rises and so does hunger; poverty drops and hunger drops too. But, and this is key, the year-to-year fluctuations in hunger and poverty are but statistical "factoids," because the real story is that the level of hunger in the United States has remained fairly constant for the past two decades. It is now part of who we are, an endemic condition.

Things were not always this way. In the 1960s, public revelations about hunger, widely covered by the news media, prompted a Republican President and a Democratic Congress to take action. The food stamp program was made into a national safety net. The school breakfast and summer food programs were instituted, as were the WIC program and elderly feeding programs. All these policy actions made a difference. Physicians a decade later looked into the same

regions where they had found widespread hunger before, and they reported that while poverty still existed, the poor had food to eat. The programs were working.

All of this changed in the early 1980s. During the very midst of a steep recession, the Reagan Administration proposed, and a Democratic Congress approved, sharp cutbacks in the very food programs that virtually had ended hunger. Some \$12 billion were cut from food stamps and child nutrition programs... and we have never recovered since. We have not recovered because more than funding was lost. A public trust was broken; our leaders walked away from a commitment not to permit hunger to stalk our nation. Hunger became another item of debate in the ideological struggle between Left and Right. It was now alright to be callous toward the hungry, as we saw when the Gingrich Congress, in its infamous "Contract with America," sought to cut child nutrition programs even further and to engage in unspeakable stunts like counting ketchup as a vegetable in the school lunch program as a way to give kids less to eat.

The hunger landscape has changed dramatically in the past twenty-five years. Federal food and nutrition programs have been attacked and cut time and time again, as the bipartisan support that created and protected them for so long eroded in the face of ideologically-motivated attacks. It is now safe for mean-spirited political leaders not only to ignore hunger, but to deride the hungry... and the current hyperbole about obesity is a way for many in Congress to displace attention from their failure. They try to place blame on the poor instead. They say no hunger, we are told, only obesity. The poor eat too much, not too little, they claim.

The failure of political leadership represented by this changed climate has produced two negative outcomes. The first has been the development, between the early 1980s and today, of a huge charitable army of organizations to feed the hungry, because government was no longer doing its job. We have moved from a nation that had come close to ending hunger, to one that today has more than 200 food banks serving all states in the nation. These banks, in turn, house and distribute food industry left-overs to more than 50,000 food pantries and soup kitchens in virtually every community in the nation. Starting out as an "emergency response" to the crisis precipitated by Washington leaders, this incredible network of charitable organizations has never stopped growing. And by definition, it no longer constitutes an emergency response. After twenty years, it has become a part of the hunger landscape. Some of you may think that this isn't such a bad outcome, but I will tell you in a minute why this apparent success represents fundamental failure. But first, let's look at the politics of hunger.

The growth and visibility of this charitable network has given political leaders, already fractured in their consensus about ending hunger, a way out. They now tout private charities as the answer to hunger, thereby taking themselves off the hook for doing so little to end it. The Republicans, many of whom don't like government anyway, see private hunger charities as a way to deny governmental

responsibility for insuring that our people do not go hungry. And some of the charities played into this trend, probably inadvertently, by holding themselves out as the answer to a government that cannot be trusted. And a narrow segment of the charities need the hungry to exist so they could demonstrate their righteousness by feeding them. Feeding the hungry, in other words, has become another way for them to earn their “salvation.”

Many Democrats, on the other hand, also fell into the trap of praising charity, perhaps reflecting their perceived ineptness and lack of courage to do anything better in the policy arena. Bill Clinton, a man certainly aware of hunger and poverty, and one who understood that they can be remedied only through public policy and a strong economy, never spoke about hunger. His closest effort was to discuss with his cabinet members how federal agency left-overs could be distributed to the hungry. Many in his administration routinely praised charitable efforts and spoke of the “public-private partnership” needed to end hunger. Notably, this so-called partnership was characterized by pointing to the limits of what government could do, and the marvelous things private charities might do instead. These officials, and others in Congress, even touted the so-called virtues of things like “gleaning” the fields, the Biblical practice of leaving vegetables in the fields for the poor to pick, not necessarily an easy task if you have no car, have young children, and live in a city.

In short, the broken public trust to work in a bipartisan way to end hunger resulted in the current charitable network, because people have to eat. But the very existence of this charitable outpouring, you see, has become a rationale for government not to do its job. The ultimate responsibility of government – the only certain way to end hunger in a nation – was tossed out the window, and private charity then became the excuse for government’s abdication of responsibility.

Now, some of you may say that you understand what happened, but still ask what is so bad about feeding people through food pantries and soup kitchens? The answer is that in the short-term, nothing is bad about it. People are hungry, government is not doing its job, so these programs and well-meaning people like many of you simply must feed people. People don’t eat in the long-run, they need to eat now, so thank god these programs are there! But when it comes to actually *ending* hunger, it is a different thing. Charitable hand-outs, by definition, do not end hunger. They only feed a hungry family for the moment, and poor people have the peculiar habit of getting hungry again the next day.

My friends, I come today not to criticize the many of you here who work so hard to feed the hungry through your laudable charitable efforts. Indeed, I celebrate your commitment, and acknowledge that you have no choice but to do so – because governmental leaders are ignoring their own responsibilities. I also know the struggles you have had in Pennsylvania over the years getting the balance right between the charitable programs that are needed now, and the policy and advocacy programs that can help to reduce, even end, hunger in the long run.

Good for you for struggling with this tough issue, and good for you for the collaborative response you have adopted together.

But as you do your work, I implore you to be aware that some abuse your good deeds by alleging that charity is the answer to ending hunger. In reality, no wealthy democracy really can protect the nutritional status of its people by relying on charitable hand-outs. The only vehicle we have that is large enough to end and prevent hunger is the federal government. Two decades of charitable efforts don't even begin to come close to the reach of the food stamp program, even in its weakened state, in terms of delivering nutrient content to the plates of parents and children. When the food stamp program was cut during the so-called welfare reform legislation of 1996, so much purchasing power was removed from poor households that if you loaded the food lost by the poor due to those cuts on trucks, in army-convoy style (eight trucks to a mile with 5,000 pounds of food on each truck), the line would stretch to the moon and back. Even if the private sector could have tripled its food collection efforts overnight, it wouldn't even begin to make up for the cutback in this one federal program alone. In short, private charity isn't capable of doing what government can do to address hunger. It isn't even close. To paraphrase William H. Woodside, former chairman of Primerica, it is government's job to address hunger; it cannot be done by the private sector and it should not be done by the private sector.

Woodside's comment raises the next issue, that of appropriateness. Even if we could feed the hungry through soup kitchens and food pantries, it would be inappropriate. People need justice, not charity. They need dignity, not hand-outs. Our vision and our goal should not be a nation where more and more people eat the soup and sandwiches that charities pass out, but one whose people do not need charity.

But as we struggle to get on top of this issue, a new weapon is now being used against the poor. Obesity has been declared an epidemic, which it is, but it has received so much distorted publicity over the past year or so that it threatens to divert public attention from hunger. Indeed, obesity is used by some even to deny the very existence of hunger. Both obesity and hunger (or, more broadly, food insecurity) are serious public health problems, sometimes co-existing in the same families and the same individuals. Their existence sounds contradictory, but those with insufficient resources to purchase adequate food can still be overweight, for reasons that we are now beginning to understand. Policymakers and the public need to better grasp this apparent paradox if our nation is to grapple with these parallel threats to the well-being of many children and adults, and avoid potentially damaging policy prescriptions arising from a mistaken belief that food insecurity and obesity cannot coexist.

Simply stated, obesity results when energy intake exceeds energy expenditure. This explanation, however, provides little insight into the important social causes of higher energy consumption or lower expenditures. These causes include

energy-dense, high-fat foods and larger portion sizes, for example, and lower levels of physical activity (at work, school, and elsewhere).

Overall, the American population is growing more obese. Among the poor, government studies show that low-income people as a group are not more likely to be obese than non-low-income people. Other studies now seem to suggest that this is no longer the case. However such trends may shift, we need to know much more about the degree to which social, cultural, and genetic factors are contributing to the increase in obesity among the entire population. We do know much, though, that can help explain how low-income, food insecure Americans can be overweight.

While most Americans are affected by the social causes of higher energy consumption I have described, many households face the additional burdens of low incomes, which often leave them insufficient money to buy food. The economic constraints that bring food insecurity lead to fear of running out of food, lack choice, and forced changes in nutritious dietary habits. These factors can lead to obesity because families may have too little food (in terms of required variety, vitamins and other nutrients), but too many calories (in terms of overall intake).

The lack of adequate resources for food can result in weight gain in several ways. One factor that contributes to the co-existence of obesity and food insecurity is the need for low-income families to stretch their food money as far as possible. Without adequate resources for food, families must make decisions to maximize the number of calories they can buy so that their members do not suffer from long-term hunger. Low-income families may therefore consume lower-cost foods with relatively higher levels of calories per dollar to stave off hunger, when they lack the money or other resources like food stamps to purchase a healthier balance of more nutritious foods. From a cost-benefit perspective, one of the best choices a low-income family can make to get the most calories for its food dollar is a Big Mac or a Whopper.

This trade-off between food quantity and quality is shown by research on coping strategies among food-insecure households. Along the continuum of typical coping strategies, food quality is generally affected before the quantity of intake decreases. Households reduce food spending by changing the *quality* or *variety* of food consumed before they reduce how much food is eaten. As a result, while families may get enough food to avoid feeling hungry, they also may be poorly nourished because they cannot afford a consistently adequate diet that promotes health and averts obesity. In the short term, the stomach knows only that it is full, not whether the meal was nutritious.

In addition, obesity can be an adaptive response to periods when people are unable to get enough to eat. Chronic ups and downs in food availability can cause people to eat more than they normally would when food is available.

When money or food stamps are not available for food purchases during part of the month, for example, people may overeat during the days when food is available. Over time, this cycle can result in weight gain.

Research among food-insecure families shows that low-income mothers first sacrifice their own nutrition by restricting their food intake during periods of food insufficiency, in order to protect their children from hunger. This phenomenon may result in eating more than is desirable when food is available, thereby contributing to higher obesity rates among poor women. Physiological changes may occur to help the body conserve energy when diets are periodically inadequate. The body can compensate for periodic food shortages by becoming more efficient at storing more calories as fat. This, too, contributes to obesity

With fewer resources to buy food, or to obtain health care or other preventive or remedial interventions, the poor are particularly susceptible to damage from hunger/food insecurity, obesity, or both.

But they have costly direct and indirect consequences. Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, several types of cancer, and other chronic health problems. It also is associated with premature death and disability, increased health care costs, and lost productivity.

Hunger and food insecurity impair health status, making people less likely to resist illness and more likely to become sick or hospitalized. Hunger is widely known to impair cognitive or mental function in children, leading to a reduced ability to learn and lower grades and test scores. Lack of adequate resources for food also negatively affects behavior, especially among children, leading to a greater need for mental health and special education services. By impairing health status and cognitive function, hunger and obesity not only limit the well-being of individuals, but also undermine the nation's investments in education and our need for a more productive and competitive workforce.

Both obesity and hunger require solutions that include regular access to nutritionally adequate food. Federal nutrition programs – food stamps, WIC, and child nutrition programs like school lunch and breakfast – historically have protected the nation's most vulnerable people from severe hunger and malnutrition. Today, federal nutrition programs continue to be vital for health, education, and economic well-being, and are critical lifelines for families struggling at low-wage jobs. Eligibility for these programs needs to be expanded to reach more in need. Claims that food allotments should be reduced, on the grounds that nutrition programs contribute to obesity among the poor, are without scientific merit.

Strengthening federal nutrition programs requires enhancing, not reducing, benefits. Federal nutrition programs can also be improved nutritionally. The poor have a special need for stronger and more generous nutrition programs with

increased access and availability, and more adequate benefits that would allow families to purchase healthier foods. Greater availability and nutritional quality of vital federal food programs such as food stamps, school lunch and breakfast, WIC and child care food can go a long way toward reducing hunger and food insecurity in America. At the same time, our nation can address the more fundamental causes of hunger by focusing on more adequate wages, affordable housing, and health care and child care to reduce poverty and support the efforts of families to be productive and self-sufficient.

My friends, this is a most difficult time for those of us whose vision is an America where no one goes hungry. But we must keep our heads about us even while others are losing theirs. We will not retreat. We will fight... fight for a government whose policies are as good as the decency of the American people. But as you work here today and tomorrow, I urge you to remember how your tremendous work often is misused by others, and how those you serve are frequently blamed for their own hunger. Please join in pressing our nation's leaders, including your own Pennsylvania senators, to address hunger as a primary responsibility of government. Let us all commit to insisting that America join the ranks of other industrial democracies that long ago took steps to protect all of their people from the entirely preventable scourge of hunger.

*(NOTE: The Center on Hunger and Poverty and the Food Research and Action Center are preparing a joint analysis of hunger and obesity, from which much of this information is derived).*