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‘America Can Do Better’

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COMMENTARY

'America Can Do Better'16 **By Charles B. Rangel**

I am impressed sometimes with listening to parents constantly reminding their children of how much more difficult life has been for them and how they, the children, are able to walk that easier road that has been made more level because of their parents' endeavors. I've heard it from my mother. I heard my grandfather tell her how much easier her life was; I've heard his father tell him how much easier his life was.

And somehow in this great republic, generation after generation has been able to say that life has been better, has been made better, no matter how far we have to go to improve upon it.

And yet I wonder whether in this generation that we are fortunate enough to live in whether or not that chain of progress has not been broken or will be broken. I just wonder whether we as parents can say that we are leaving a better world and a better life to our children than the ones that our parents have left to us.

I just wonder how many of us had to plow through drug addicts and drug dealers to get into school only to find the dealing inside just as bad as outside.

I just wonder how many of us had to look at the number of jobless people, homeless people sleeping and living in the shadows of the mayor's office, our state mansions, indeed, the White House, addicted, infested, without jobs, without hope . . . people that America has just dropped out of the system.

How many of us really know kids that we were raised with that have lived in the squalor of battered wives' homes, that have been forced to be raised in welfare slum hotels that strip you of every dignity, of every bit of pride that you've had?

How many have seen our brothers and our sisters and our friends, our

daughters and young mothers selling their bodies in the streets of every major city, and, indeed, our young men doing the same thing?

How insecure were our lives with all of the lynching and the mob rule that we survived, when kids today just violently shoot each other, and walking the streets is just as dangerous as being in the war zones in which I served?

How many of us really have known the personal tragedies that these kids are going through today as their friends overdose, commit suicide?



And will it be truly our legacy to say that in every major jail and penitentiary throughout these United States, that in our efforts to control the social ills that beset us, that we have sought not to invest in young people and building communities, but we are prepared to say that we will continue to build more jails in every community and swell them with our young Black kids and Latino kids as our contribution to making society safe?

Wasn't it Jesse Jackson who reminded us how futile it was to be willing to spend \$160,000 to give someone a four-year scholarship to a state penitentiary and yet be unwilling to spend \$28,000 for a four-year scholarship to a state university?

How can we feel proud of ourselves when for the first time we can walk into any municipal hospital and leave as a part of our legacy to the children that follow babies born screaming and pain-addicted to drugs as they go through withdrawal—some with AIDS who won't even survive for more than a year or two—costing society not only the pain of

seeing that happen to human life but costing \$500, \$700, \$1,000 a day just to remain at that hospital, abandoned by their teen-age addicted parents who feel no sense of moral responsibility? Is this the legacy that we leave?

And then we are asked what we as a people are going to do, how are we going to respond to this? Is it just a political problem that we have to resolve or is it a moral issue that every person should be able at least to extend themselves, their love and their affection and their family?

How many of us were raised knowing that it wasn't enough not to get caught by our parents doing the wrong thing? We had to avoid being caught by friends of our families, by people in the community, because they all felt, even though we resented it, that they had something to do with what we made of our lives.

Those of us who serve in public office—and I do hope that you will take note of the work that's being done in the name of that late heroine, Secretary Patricia Harris, who has left a part of her legacy in a program of public affairs [at Howard University] which I am privileged to serve as a committee member—I do hope that you consider a part of your mandate not just to improve your status with the degrees to become educators and teachers and lawyers, God bless you for that, and you cannot get a better education than here at Howard University. But please consider just giving a little bit of that back to our brothers and sisters who are on the streets without jobs, without skills, without homes, without hope.

Investment in Weapons

The last eight years in this country's history will be recalled as being one of the saddest eras that we have gone through. No longer as a nation have we been able to say that we felt it a part of our mandate to take some of the wealth of this country and invest in those who are disadvantaged so that they too would have the opportunity to enjoy the great riches and wealth that we possess. We have sought as a nation in the last eight years not to do that. We have selected a strategy to reduce the receipts of this country in eight years by close to one trillion dollars.

Eight hundred and fifty billion dollars of tax cuts the richest of this country have enjoyed. And instead of thinking of how to make America strong, and how to make America better in terms of its people, the administration has decided to invest in weapons to arm the heavens, to guard us against the intrusion of the Communists. This America has decided that no matter what drug kingpins from no matter what country, if they decide to wheel and deal in narcotic drugs and at the same time say that they're against Communists, they have a license to do this.

This nation has made that foreign policy decision notwithstanding the fact that not one of us has lost a child to Communism on our streets. Communism didn't take away our homes, our jobs, our hopes and our dreams to become a part of this great country. It was denial of opportunity.

People say you have to change the attitudes, that it's not enough to exercise pressures on drug-producing countries, it's not enough just to protect your borders and arrest the people. You have to reduce demand. That is what's essential, that you have to really allow people to believe that there's hope that dreams can be achieved. Walk with me on Lenox Avenue, walk with me on S Street, walk with me with those rejected people who served their country in Korea, in Vietnam. No place to go, no home, and we tell them just to say no. What arrogance we have!

In the last eight years we have borrowed more money than all of the presidents from George Washington through Jimmy Carter. The third largest expenditure that we have in our national budget, the third largest, is not spent to improve education and housing and to get on with the war against drugs; it's to pay the interest on the money that we borrowed.

How it hurts us individually as a family to see our indebtedness, to see our creditors after us, and no matter how much we pay we find we can't reduce the principal because of the service charges and the interest. And a part of our legacy is to leave to our children and our children's children this indebtedness without being able to claim that we have invested in them to give them the skills and the opportunity to produce better.

It is so frustrating that some of our most outstanding people are saying, "Why don't we just legalize drugs, why don't we just make it available so that kids won't be killing kids in order for them to get what they need?"

I look at them with bewilderment.

Legalize drugs for whom? I'm encouraging our kids to go to Howard not to the hospitals. Take the profits out of drugs? You mean take the profits out of the bums in the streets. Some giant multinational pharmaceutical companies are going to make drugs for a profit.

Our job is to make certain that we take the best we have and do the most with it to improve the quality of lives not only for ourselves but for others . . .

They're merely going to transfer the profit.

· Give the drugs to whom? To *their* children? In what neighborhood would you be dispensing? In *my* neighborhood? Is that the substitute for scholarships? Is that what dreams are made of? How much will you give my child? And if you don't give it to my children, will they not go to the illicit market? Must you be an adult? Must you be an addict? How much do you get? Enough to feel good? Enough to get high? Enough to overdose? And if you stop them, would they not know where to go to get the rest of it? Where will it be? At my local drugstore? Must I go to the doctor? Will the doctor receive samples that he can encourage people to have?

Or perhaps you didn't mean *my* constituents. All this is for the affluent, those that can afford a doctor. But are the poor going to be left out? Must it come under Medicaid or senior citizens' Medicare? Do we give drug stamps? Is this going to be a part of labor grievances that as you get your health coverage drugs should be included with a prescription,

as much as you need? Would AIDS coverage be included?

This is our country. Don't let them sell us out at a time that we're making the demands to get some of the returns of the investment that we've made from the cottonfields to the battlefields. Drugs for me? Not on your life!

The direction that we've taken for the last eight years has not made us stronger than the Soviets in terms of guns. We have not been able to out-manufacture the Japanese. The Indians and the Chinese and the people of color will always predominate in terms of numbers of population.

Our job is to make certain that we take the best that we have and do the most with it to improve the quality of lives not only for ourselves but for others, not to hide behind the skirts of Gramm-Rudman and say that we can't help our brothers and sisters who are dying in Africa from famine and lack of food and medicine. We should never have a Gramm-Rudman to tell us in regard to our brothers and sisters who have lost their homes and their dreams in Jamaica that we have a ceiling on morality and on what we can do for them.

No child should be able to say that they can't receive an education because Gramm-Rudman prevented them from getting an education. Our sick should not die because the hospital says that Gramm-Rudman didn't give them access to health care. And no Gramm-Rudman should allow Americans to have to sleep in the streets of our nation's capital.

America deserves better. America can do better. America will do better.

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The above was excerpted from Rep. Charles Rangel's (D-N. Y.) address at Howard University's Opening Convocation in September.