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National and State Safety Nets Fail

The Children's Defense Fund has launched a new series of stories on our web site featuring children and their parents who have fallen on very hard times. They are the real faces and fears behind our disgraceful national child poverty statistics—16.4 million poor children living in the richest nation on earth. In 2010, over a million more children fell into poverty, over half a million more into extreme poverty. Forty-three states saw increases in poverty for children under six, the most critical years for brain development. Extreme poverty, defined as an annual income of less than half the poverty level, means less than \$30 a day for a family of four. Forty-one states saw an increase in extreme child poverty in 2010.

Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Julia Cass traveled to Michigan for the Children's Defense Fund to meet families with children our national and safety nets had failed to catch. One of the families she met was the McKees—and as she noted, “Shoes tell the story of the McKee family's descent into poverty.”

The shoes belonging to Skyler, 10, and Zachery, 12, are falling apart. Their sister, Jordan, 14, wears the varsity coach's shoes when she plays on her school's volleyball team. Less visible is hunger. The children and their parents, Tonya and Ed McKee, of Dowagiac, Mich., sometimes went without food this summer when Ed's unemployment insurance ran out and the family was not yet receiving food stamps.



CHILD WATCH
Marian Wright Edelman

Skyler says he gave the birthday money he got at church to his mom for groceries, “and I told her she didn't have to pay me

job.” Factory work? “They closed most of them around here. There's a tool and dye plant that makes parts for Ford and Chevy that closed and just opened back up, but you have to be on their call list to get hired. It's frustrating to walk into a place and they say they're not hiring or they say they are hiring and you put in an application and never hear from them.”

Meanwhile, Tonya baked cakes in their home to supplement their income; their son Zachery is a special needs child who didn't speak

in 41 states and the nation's capital, and over one in four Hispanic children were poor in 43 states. In many states, the news was even worse for the youngest children: 40 percent or more of Black newborns to kindergartners were poor in 30 states and the nation's capital, including 15 states where half were poor, and 40 percent or more of Hispanic newborns to kindergartners were poor in 14 states.

Is this the best America can do? Is this the reflection of our values as a nation? These child poverty statistics are morally and economically indefensible. The toxic cocktail of poverty, family joblessness and stress, food insecurity, lost homes, and growing hopelessness are a national human disaster requiring the most urgent response from our political and business leaders in every party and place. Children deserve more than intransigent political grandstanding. They need shoes to protect exposed toes from the cold and food to soothe their growling stomachs. Shame on those who seek to rip out more threads from our rich nation's tattered safety net while protecting tax cuts for millionaires. Skyler, Zachery, and Jordan McKee and the millions of children like them deserve more from our country.

Marian Wright Edelman is a lifelong advocate for disadvantaged Americans and is the President of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF). Under her leadership, CDF has become the nation's strongest voice for children and families.

Is this the best America can do? Is this the reflection of our values as a nation?

back.” Skyler confided that sometimes his stomach has growled. “It's hard, not easy like it was before where we had money and could do stuff. Now we don't go anywhere... Sometimes we don't have food and we just don't eat.”

McKee comes from a farming family, and was working as a breeding manager at a large hog farm when he was laid off in July 2009. Ed says “to save money,” the company replaced him and several other employees with new workers earning a lower wage. “There are other farms around here but they just aren't hiring,” he said. “If they are, you better be the first to know. There's a lot of people waiting in line to get that

until a few years ago, and Tonya hadn't worked at a job since he was born. This summer, everything got even worse: Ed's unemployment insurance ended in May, and there was a month and a half gap before the McKees began receiving food stamps. Their only income was the monthly Social Security disability check for Zachery. “Ed and I went hungry some nights so we could feed the kids,” Tonya said.

The McKee children are three of the new faces of child poverty in America. But as families like the McKees know, poverty hits children of all colors, all ages, and in all states. Children of color are disproportionately poor. Over one in four Black children were poor

Obama's at CBC: Much Ado About Nuttin'

In the wake of President Obama's address to the Congressional Black Caucus, there are those who are making much ado about nothing, including the accusation that, by dropping his “g's” the President was talking down to African Americans. Can this President kindly get a break! He is accused of distancing himself from the African American community, so he shows up at the Congressional Black Caucus Annual Legislative Conference Saturday dinner. He stays around to shake hands. The cynical would, predictably, say he is campaigning. Others appreciate the gesture for what it is, attempted outreach.

Yes, he tells folks to stop whining and to put on their marching shoes. Whining may have been a poor choice of words. Still, his focus when he was at the CBC was simple, “pass the jobs bill.” He has challenged Republicans to respond to the greatest need in our nation right now, the need to create jobs, and he was absolutely firm in his focus. What is there to fuss about?

Still, the President's speech has been fodder for critics, both on the left and on the right. Those accused of “whining” are annoyed by the perceived condescension on the part of the President. Those who think he should never acknowledge an African American constituency is also peeved. And



BENNETT COLLEGE
Julianne Malveaux

so the legions of lowlifes, also known as conservative talk show hosts, are having fun with the President's speech. Few have dealt with the substance.

There is a jobs bill in play and it

that strangles progress? Why is anybody involved in a picayune debt that parses every word, and every inflection, without dealing with the substance of those words?

President Obama has been stuck someplace between a rock and a hard place since his election. He inherited a broken economy and had few tools with which to fix it. He also has a conciliatory demeanor, which makes him a poor negotiator when his effort is to find consensus with those who have openly promised to oppose him. Had he been firmer in his first two years, he might have had

be room for principled criticism. On the other hand, our President's challenges should not earn him this micro-inspection of his every word, his every nuance. I think that when President Barack Obama was at the CBC he was “home” and he expressed himself as if he were home – candid, fiery, frustrated, and focused.

I applaud the President for his words, and for his presence at the CBC. At the same time, I stand with those like Maxine Waters (D-CA) who want more, faster, and targeted. Seasoned politicians understand the space in which our President operates, and seasoned politicians understand that while the Tea Party is pushing hard to the right, there are those who must push to the left.

And still, there is a bottom line. Support this President for all of what he stands for. Offer principled criticism for ways he can do better. The criticism shouldn't be about dropping his “g's” or scolding Black folk. The criticism ought to be about ideas, proposals, effort and outcomes.

The flap about President Obama's speech is much ado about nuttin' (g's deliberately dropped). What will we do to help the jobs bill pass? Right now that's the bottom line!

Julianne Malveaux is President of Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, North Carolina.

He has challenged Republicans to respond to the greatest need in our nation right now, the need to create jobs, and he was absolutely firm in his focus. What is there to fuss about?

will cost us nearly \$450 billion. It will put teachers, construction workers, and others back to work. It's a viable plan that doesn't offer everything, but it is a step in the right direction. Can we focus on the substance, not the rhetoric? President Obama must be frustrated, because I surely am. With Black unemployment inching toward a third, how can we continue to afford the political stalemate

a different legislative demographic to deal with in these last two years of his first term. Now, he faces a hostile House of Representatives, some who say their goal is to deny him a second term, even to the peril of our nation.

Our President's difficulties do not earn him carte blanche from those who answer to their constituencies – jobless, foreclosed on, insecure. There must always