



Blessing the Peacemakers

By Franklin A. Thomas
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Franklin A. Thomas is president of the Ford Foundation. The following remarks were delivered at the Anti-Defamation League's Civic Commitment Award Dinner in New York City on October 7, 1980.

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WALTER WRISTON, the guest of honor tonight, once remarked that the world's fastest growth industry is the money supply. At the time it seemed to me that if you looked at the usual indices, he probably was right. I now have doubts about that, because what I think we all are observing is that the world's fastest growth aggregate is the quantity of conflicts. Conflicts among and within groups and nations, reflecting a stockpile of racial, religious, and ethnic animosity. Some of these are on the global level, some on the regional level, some are within nation-states, and finally those that I want to pay particular attention to here, the conflicts on the neighborhood level. Here I cite the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in too many neighborhoods across America and such events of recent years as the conflicts in Forest Hills, Skokie, and Boston's South End.

Someone else once praised the peacemakers of the world as persons who risked the criticism of their own constituents, of their friends, even families on occasion, to stand up for what's right, to make the effort to understand the points of view of others, and to find ways of accommodating both, in order to create reasonable stability and harmony within communities. None of us has to be told that the world cannot survive perpetual, uncompromising cleavages between blacks, whites, browns, yellows, Christians, Moslems, Jews. Year after year, more sophisticated armaments are made accessible to more and more governments whose rulers have the

power to put all of us at risk. We witness, too, the proliferation of organized terrorist groups who believe the shortest distance between any two points is violence. These trends warn us that no matter how sanely the big powers act, pervasive and persistent inter-group conflicts will have destructive outcomes. That likelihood is increased in a world where fair-minded people often seem to embrace the very leaders whose philosophies will lead to destruction, and the instinct for peacemaking that resides in each of us is repressed.

The *will* toward peace—that special quality of the human spirit that finds its rewards in reducing rather than escalating inter-group strife—is critical for all of our survival. The peacemaker's skills and the peacemaker's tools are precious resources. And there is no one model, no single exemplar, of the world's peacemakers. We find them in all walks of life—in buildings, in neighborhoods, part of a block association, part of a school board, part of a group, working alone, in all forms of human activity. This form of leadership is too seldom recognized and adequately rewarded in our society.

Not so many years ago, in 1976, three of the principals at tonight's gathering took part in an unusual exercise of the peacemaker's art—a joint effort by the Anti-Defamation League and the Business Roundtable to resolve a conflict generated by Arab efforts to pressure U.S. corporations to honor the Arab economic boycott of Israel. Walter Wriston of Citicorp, Irving Shapiro of DuPont, and Benjamin Epstein of the League, along with other representatives of the League and the Roundtable, worked out a solution to the boycott issue that resulted in legislation acceptable to Congress and the President as well as to the leaders of industry and those of the Jewish

community. Just as it is my privilege this evening to join in honoring Citicorp for its civic work, it is also my privilege to honor the Anti-Defamation League's leadership and the leadership of American business for an unprecedented display of the peacemaker's talents.

The League's Civic Commitment Award is conferred on institutions "whose leaders have established and whose employees help to carry out community service projects and programs that benefit broad sectors of our society." This year's award goes to Citicorp for a wide range of activities; among them is the rehabilitation of housing and the revitalization of many neighborhoods. In other words, Citicorp—through its main financial intermediary, Citibank—has been and is heavily engaged in community development.

Community development happens to be an activity close to my heart, having learned it both directly as a manager for ten years of the Bedford-Stuyvesant effort and more recently in my work with the Ford Foundation. The Foundation is heavily involved in supporting community development, having funded projects in many cities and rural areas of America and even in a few selected places abroad.

The community development movement is proving to be an effective means for bringing new life back to stranded neighborhoods and disadvantaged people. The best practitioners of community development, whether in Brooklyn or Boston or the Mississippi Delta, have learned to carry out local tasks—from housing maintenance to job training—more effectively than is usually the case when those tasks are attempted by government agencies. They have also become skilled in ways to leverage private and public capital, thereby multiplying the power of each. The mobilization of indigenous energies and

combined public-private resources are aspects of a philosophy to which Walt Wriston is deeply committed. It's no surprise that Citicorp's financial presence is evident in so many of New York's revitalizing areas, from Flatbush to Times Square and beyond.

Community development yields by-products that cannot be measured solely by the indices normally used—the number of dwelling units produced or jobs created or the increase in retail sales. There are results from this process that elude the formal indices. They include restored confidence on the part of local residents, a new sense of hope, and, perhaps most significant of all, the lessening of ethnic and racial frictions. Experience is teaching us in a gratifying number of instances that inter-group tensions can be abated by the common and practical pursuit of shared and specific goals.

Consider, for example, Boro Park in Brooklyn. That neighborhood, long a center of Orthodox Jewry, has in more recent years become a preferred location for many Hasidic Jews. They were attracted there by Boro Park's impressive endowment of religious institutions and its equally impressive inventory of large and solidly built houses. At the same time, Boro Park has been attracting large numbers of Hispanics. League members need no instruction about the dangers that lurk whenever two quite different cultural and economic groups find themselves in apparent competition for the same territory. Recent experience in two other sections of Brooklyn, Crown Heights and Williamsburg, give us all the instruction we need. But unlike incidents in those areas, Boro Park has not, thus far, experienced any serious outbreak of inter-ethnic conflict. Part of the reason seems clear. Citizen leadership among Jews and Hispanics jointly decided to

channel their energies and resources into mutually beneficial community improvements. The scenario contains the following: The rebuilding of the housing stock for the benefit of owners and renters; the promotion of a larger flow of mortgage money for homeowners; strong and organized efforts to obtain better police protection, sanitation, and other services. Indeed, Boro Park's Jewish-Hispanic coalition seems to be extending its jurisdiction to the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of Sunset Park, just to the west, where peace was threatened and further violence might have erupted but for the rapid appearance of skilled peacemakers whose effectiveness and credibility were reinforced through the formulation of a concrete community development plan.

Community development and conflict settlement tends to go hand-in-hand. Consider another part of Brooklyn, where the Flatbush Development Corporation, to which Citicorp has contributed, has formed a coalition of blacks and whites that is working hard to turn parts of that neighborhood around. Or the North Ward of Newark, where a few years ago the reports were of a war between Italians and blacks, there is now evidence of an Italian-black-Hispanic coalition that has turned to building houses and improving public services.

I don't mean to overstate the case. Hatred and discrimination, whether the basis is race, religion, ethnicity, or gender have deep, common roots, and they resist quick cures—whether summit meetings, the Nobel Committee, or community development. Those who step up as the peacemakers of the world may be blessed, but they possess no magic. They can do no more than make sensible use of that which opportunity and circumstance permit.

Yet I cannot help believing that if a conflagration is to be avoided in the current hot spots around the globe—the Middle East, South Africa, and others—the techniques of community development will prove to be a major element in the solution. The dream of peaceful coexistence in those regions doesn't rest on the belief that the people there must merge their cultures or love each other. Rather, it stems from the pragmatic belief that coexistence emerges as the product of shared interests, out of the need for the joint application of human energy and other resources to reclaim the land, erect houses, and build industries. It rests, in short, on the ethos of community development expanded to a national scale. We must hope—and pray—that that end will come from such a beginning. But first, of course, there must be the *will* for peace. The peacemaker's tools stand ready to be used by people who know how to use them.

I am reminded of Nathan Belth's concluding remarks in his ADL-sponsored study of Anti-Semitism in America:*

The nation is a better place today than it was at the turn of the century, before the First World War or the Second; a better place than in the 1930s or 1950s. For all its faults, it is a kinder, more decent society for all its citizens today than yesterday. Will it be so tomorrow? The evidence of 200 years of history would seem to dictate a hopeful answer.

I am also reminded of the words carved on the newly erected Peace Form I, over by the United Nations, which stands as a tribute to one of the great peacemakers of our time, Ralph Bunche.

*Nathan C. Belth, *A Promise to Keep* (New York: Times Books, 1979) pp.284–285.

The inscription at the base of the sculpture quotes from Bunche's statement in 1950 upon his receipt of the Nobel Prize:

Peace, to have meaning for many who have known only suffering in both peace and war, must be translated into bread or rice, shelter, health, and education as well as freedom and human dignity.

If we can focus on our shared interests and values and reject group labeling wherever it is employed to restrict or limit the choices or opportunities for individuals, then those who look back on this era in our history will remark that we took difficult, trying, exasperating circumstances and found a way to weave and create a social fabric that enhanced life for more of the citizens of this planet.

With all of his duties—Chairman of Citicorp, business leader, civic leader in New York, many worldwide concerns and demands—loyal friend that he is, Walter Wriston made the time to check daily on the heroic struggle for life of our mutual friend—another great peacemaker—Vernon E. Jordan.

Congratulations, Walter.

