WHAT’S RIGHT FOR CHILDREN

Jimmy Carter*

Of course, I would like to see the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified. If this was unanimous, nations that have already ratified it would be much more enthusiastic about implementing it. But both political and theological objections make American ratification of the Convention unlikely.

Our country was founded on a premise that is incomprehensible to a lot of foreign visitors, and maybe to many Americans, too: We are a collection of semi-sovereign or autonomous states. In the negotiations to conclude the drafting and ratification of the United States Constitution, we left many major rights and powers with the states, and only a few were subsumed within the federal government. Because the rights of states are very precious to Americans, we have been averse for many years to the adoption of international treaties or agreements or conventions that would encroach on the rights of individual states.

There are some very strong feelings in this country about religion, too. As you know, there is a biblical ordination that the father is the head of the household. And some provisions in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child contradict that supremacy of the father. In fact, one great argument within my own Baptist denomination is whether women are to be subservient to their husbands. A major portion of Baptists in this country believe that a woman has no right even to speak in a religious worship service. I disagree with this, but that’s a premise. Given this understanding, to elevate a child, as the Convention does, to a position of near equality with a father is a very disturbing thing for some who believe in that biblical ordination of a father as superior.

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There is a phrase in the Convention that tends to get around that objection because the Convention recognizes responsibilities of parents to provide “appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized” by this Convention. So there is an escape clause there for those who want to find it. I guess many nations of the world, 192 of them, have in fact taken advantage of that distinct clause, knowing that parents can deal with children who need direction or who need restraint or who need discipline within the family itself, and that seems to be permissible.

There is another very important circumstance that has arisen in the United States in the last few years, and that is the move toward fundamentalism in religion and in government and the increasingly overt effort to meld the two—even though Thomas Jefferson said there should be a fence or a wall built between religion and government. That statement and the premise on which I was raised as a child, separation of church and state, is being increasingly challenged and broken down. This fundamentalist tendency is becoming more deeply ingrained, not only from the church pulpit, but also within the top councils of our government.

One of the premises among fundamentalists in both religion and government is that there should be a strong aversion to any interference by a foreign government or foreign organization, including the U.N., into the internal affairs of our country. The argument is that America is indeed sovereign, and there should be no recognition of an international agreement that might challenge or decrease the right of Americans to be completely sovereign and independent. This has resulted in a number of disturbing changes. One is the increasing derogation of the U.N., not only by subtle statements but by open condemnations that come from the very top levels of our government. Another change is the United States’ abandonment or rejection of key treaties. For example, the President’s father played a key role in Rio de Janeiro a number of years ago when the first move was made to deal with global warming. He personally recommended, for instance, that developing nations not be included in the formula that would reduce the explosion of carbon dioxide and other toxics into the air. That was followed up by a number of studies, and when the Kyoto agreement was reached, there seemed to be unanimous agreement by all the countries in the world that we will take care of this threat to the environment. If you looked at the New York Times this morning you saw a big article about the melting of the Arctic. I was in Alaska not too long ago, and the headlines when I arrived that day were that the polar bear is doomed to be extinct within the next few years. But we have
rejected the Kyoto agreement. This may have caused more negative reaction against our country than our decision to go into the Iraqi war. We have also rejected the proposal for the control of land mines. We’ve rejected all human rights agreements, including the agreement against the discrimination against women. We’ve rejected or subverted every single nuclear arms control agreement that has been negotiated beginning with Dwight Eisenhower, every one, and in addition to that we have added some new premises that change the policies of America against non-first-use of nuclear weapons against a nation that does not have nuclear weapons. We’ve publicly announced that this is no longer a restraint on the United States. In addition, we are making plans to deploy weapons in space, which violates a long-time agreement that space would not be used for attacking another country.

Because of these changes that I have outlined, let me be blunt about it: I don’t see any chance in the near future, maybe in the lifetime of some of us, for the United States to ratify the Children’s Rights Convention unless there is a provision in it of non-applicability to the United States. We’ve done that in other cases. The International Criminal Court is a good example. We not only have rejected the International Criminal Court, but we are putting tremendous pressure on small and weak and poverty-stricken nations specifically to exclude the United States from its provisions, and we withhold American assistance to them unless they agree. So, I don’t see any chance that we will ratify this Children’s Rights Convention. And even if it was ratified, with the reservation against its applicability to America, the effect will be: “OK we’ll approve it just as long as it applies to foreign countries” and not to us. With that kind of ratification, I don’t think there would be any tangible benefits to children.

But this is not the end of my speech. The purpose of this conference is to see what we can do for the rights of children. I think it’s almost a moot question just to deal with the Convention. We can work together as enthusiastically and individually and collectively as possible to implement the non-controversial provisions of the Convention. I would hope that everybody here, if you have not done so already lately, would re-read the Convention because it really just spells out for children what is normally believed, at least by Americans, to be the human rights of a human being. The Convention refers, for example, to the safety of children and their “right to life.” But this is one of the rights being subverted today.
UNICEF reported last year that more than one billion people live in extreme deprivation. And the primary cause of this extreme suffering is war and poverty. Just since 1990 there have been more than sixty-five major wars. Uppsala University in Sweden defines a “major war” as one in which more than 1,000 soldiers have been killed on the battlefield. I travel a lot in war-torn areas. The Carter Center has programs in thirty-five nations in Africa. I’ve been in East Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is looking for an election in the next few months, and I’ve traveled in southern Sudan, where more than two million people have died. And I came back this weekend from visiting Liberia, which has been torn apart by war for almost twenty years. If you go into the capital city of Liberia, which is named for an American president, James Monroe, Monrovia, with the exception of the embassy residences of foreign governments like ours and that of Great Britain, there’s not a single building that hasn’t been completely destroyed or completely damaged. And the people of Liberia are living on less than one-half dollar a day. You hear the horrible stories of people living on less than a dollar a day. Liberians are living on less than fifty cents a day. It’s incomprehensible. When you think about food and clothing and housing for fifty cents there’s nothing left over for education or health care or self respect or hope for the future.

My wife and I stood in long lines and visited forty-eight different polling places when the Liberian election was held on October 11, 2005. And it was amazing how many people came there to vote who were blind. As a matter of fact, they had furnished a very simple pasteboard over the ballot, and the blind people could feel the holes in the pasteboard cover and count down eight holes and put their thumbprint there at the bottom. The single most prevalent cause of blindness in the world except for cataracts is trachoma. There is no program in Liberia for trachoma. Malaria is another major problem for children. About 1.2 million people die every year from malaria; 80% of the human beings who die from malaria are less than five years old. And prevention requires only a bed net that costs five bucks and that is impregnated with an insecticide that lasts eight years. An average of 1.4 people sleeps under every bed net. You can figure how much it costs a year to keep a child from dying from malaria. The child mortality rate in Sweden—I looked it up this morning on Google—is three out of 1,000 before the age of five. In Liberia, 235 out of 1,000 die before they are five years old.

What I’m saying is that this doesn’t have anything to do with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. That’s a moot legal question. If
ratified, it wouldn’t change the circumstances in Liberia one iota. But for you and me, and all of us collectively to ensure that a bed net gets to the kids in Liberia would transform their lives and save their lives.

A lot has been done lately about this. I went to a convention in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002. It was an assembly to talk about the Millennium Challenge. President George W. Bush was there, along with a large number of others. All the leaders pledged that we would do a major effort to alleviate poverty in the world and be generous above and beyond what we were doing now. The man who now has the official responsibility for implementing the Millennium Challenge Program has come up with a premise that if we could just provide 44 cents per $100 in national income by the year 2006 we could cut world poverty, including the kids who died in Liberia, by half. And as an exalted ambition, one that may be ridiculous, the goal is to increase that amount to 70 cents per $100 in national income by the year 2015. Eight countries already comply with the 2015 requirement. And almost every country in the world has pledged to meet the 44 cents per $100. The United States’ contribution is 16 cents per $100 of national income. And when this premise came up in at the General Assembly meeting in December to set goals and reforms for the United Nations, the United States opposed the vote that would have called upon all the nations to meet the 44 cents increasing to 70 cents contribution rate.

I’m not here just to criticize my own country, but the point is that we are Americans, and in a democracy our voices ostensibly have some impact. President Bush did announce three years ago with great fanfare what he dubbed a Millennium Challenge Fund, of $5 billion annually. I was really happy and gratified. I was proud to be an American. Five billion dollars annually. That was three years ago. There were some restraints or caveats included. Countries had to meet certain criteria to qualify. So far, just one country has met the criteria: Cape Verde. A total of $400,000 has been distributed in the last two years. That’s less than one-half of one percent of what was pledged. The New York Times a few weeks ago had an article about the United States USAID funds for malaria, and they discovered that ninety-five percent of the funds allocated were spent for American contractors’ administrative costs; only five percent was spent for bed nets or for spraying insecticides or for treating malaria.

It’s not a hopeless case. The fact is that the poverty stricken children in the world who are suffering unnecessarily can be helped. Most of the diseases that
The Carter Center now addresses in the remote areas of Africa we had when I was a child in Plains, Georgia. And they don’t even exist anymore in the developed world. That shows that the diseases are waiting to be eradicated. The people we have found in Africa and in other places are just as intelligent and just as hard working and just as ambitious and have family values that are just as good as mine. And when you go into a village and tell them what they can do to eradicate guinea worm, one of the most horrendous and disgusting diseases, they respond with alacrity.

The Carter Center adopted this as one of our goals: to eradicate guinea worm. We had 3.5 billion cases we found in the first year; this year we had about 8,500 cases. That’s a reduction of 99.7%, and we’re working on the other 0.3%. The Carter Center employs 150 people, and that includes gardeners and landscape architects and people like that. Last year we delivered free medicine given to us by Pfizer, Inc. to over 11 million people so they won’t go blind from river blindness.

People respond beautifully when given the chance. We just got back with the President of Emory and the Executive Director of the Carter Center, Dr. John Hardman, from a province in Ethiopia where we’re trying to treat trachoma, which causes blindness. And it’s emotional to see the degree of enthusiasm and alacrity and competence that they use. We just taught them something they didn’t know, a really easy surgery on the upper eyelid. With trachoma you get filthy eyes because flies are on your eyes constantly. And your eyes get infected, and the upper eyelid turns inward, so every time you blink your eye, your eyelashes slash your cornea; that’s what causes trachoma. So if you have surgery which nurses can learn, and you give them an antibiotic (which Pfizer gives us free of charge, and doesn’t cost them anything), and you teach them to wash their face the disease can be cured. It’s surprising to us but these little kids in this village in northern Ethiopia and in Liberia have never been told by their mamas, “you got to wash your face.” They never thought about washing their face.

And flies are ubiquitous there, so we taught them how to dig a hole in the ground and to put some bricks or hard clay around the top to make a latrine. On the farm where I grew up, we didn’t have running water or electricity; we had a latrine. There were six other families right next to us and they didn’t have a latrine. They defecated and urinated on the ground. And there was trachoma. So we taught them how to do it, and we thought we might have 1,000 latrines in this one territory in northern Ethiopia last year. We found out
that women cannot relieve themselves in the daytime. It’s completely taboo for a woman to urinate or defecate and be seen. So when we introduced the concept of digging a hole in the ground and putting a screen around it, the women adopted the project, kind of as a women’s liberation project. And in less than a year, they, not us, completed no fewer than 89,500 latrines. By the end of this year we’ll have 300,000 latrines, and the kids who are washing their faces and going to the bathroom in a hole in the ground will never go blind.

The concept of helping children is extremely important, not just giving them a chance to improve their own lives, but to cut down on the threat of war. Nowadays, for every soldier killed in battle, there are nine civilians who perish, and a good portion of them are children and mothers. And with aerial bombing, the ratio is much greater than 9:1. I just saw the statistics in Iraq the day before yesterday—39,000 civilians have been killed in Iraq since the war was over.

So the best approach is peace and justice and generosity and respect and active help for little children who are in need. To me that’s the best way to implement the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.