

## **WHAT ABOUT FOOD SECURITY? BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX**

The war in Iraq, says President Bush, is “a decisive ideological struggle and the security of our nation is in the balance.” We will end up spending more than a trillion dollars on a war with a purpose that constantly changes – first we went to Iraq to get weapons of mass destructions, then to ensure democracy, and now to secure our national security.

There’s another kind of security our president might want to focus on, and that’s food security at home. To be sure, he mentioned hunger and poverty in passing during the State of the Union address, but only in the foreign policy context. Yet 11 percent of all Americans are “food insecure”, which means they are hungry or living on the edge of hunger. That’s 12 million households – 35 million people, including 13 million children, who are too poor to eat balanced meals, or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food. These are folks who have “more mouth than money” and who visit food banks toward the end of the week or the month when their food runs out. Their food insecurity ought to have as high a priority as our national security does.

Our nation fights hunger by providing poor people with food stamps to supplement their budgets, but more than a third of those who are eligible for food stamps don’t receive them. Low-income children may also get school breakfasts or lunches, but again, fewer than half of poor children participate in school breakfast or lunch programs.

Food insecurity in the United States is often recurrent but not chronic. In other words, the food insecure eat most days, but possibly not every day. They sometimes supplement their household food supply with charitable donations from food banks or community food programs. Some, but not all, of those who experience food insecurity are homeless. Households that are poor, headed by single parents, or by African Americans or Latinos are more likely to experience food insecurity than other households. Households with children were more likely to experience food insecurity than those without children.

To be sure, the world hunger problem makes food insecurity in the United States seem manageable. After all, in the rest of the world, 46 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 of the day. In parts of the world, there are famines, floods, or wars that affect the food supply. In Darfur, Haiti, Somalia and other parts of the world, hunger is a major issue. Pictures of children with matchstick-thin limbs and distended bellies are often used to raise money for those international concerns that fight hunger, and we’re very unlikely to see such images here in the United States.

Still, it is a cruel irony to see our nation described as the most powerful in the world and to realize we seem to be powerless to eliminate food insecurity, especially among children. Allocating more money for food stamps and school breakfast and lunch programs would go a long way toward eliminating food insecurity, but in our

quest to "balance the budget" will spending freely in Iraq, this matter seems to have a very low priority.

Internationally, too, we could do more to fight hunger. Mr. Bush raised the issue obliquely in his State of the Union Address mentioning the Millennium Challenge Account and the "strength and generosity" of the American people. He might note that both domestically and internationally the fight to eradicate hunger has a direct bearing on our national security. Hungry people do desperate things, often for small sums of money. If we want to reduce the level of terrorism abroad, we might questions whether some terrorism is purely ideological or if it also has an economic component.

We must work to eliminate food insecurity because it is the right thing to do. In his Nobel peace Prize acceptance speech, Dr. Martin Luther King talked about his "audacity to believe that people everywhere could have three meals a day for their bodies." Even though our nation celebrates Dr. King's birthday, we lack his audacity and his focus on eliminating poverty and food insecurity both in this country and in the world.

Written for the Progressive Media Project