

In September 2004, Entergy CEO J. Wayne Leonard accepted the Corporate Champion Award at the Community Action Partnership's 40th Anniversary Gala and Annual Convention. The speech, based on President Franklin Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" address, calls for national attention to be placed on alleviating poverty in the United States.

Wayne Leonard explains the role corporate America should assume in alleviating poverty.



On behalf of all the folks at Entergy, I want to express our sincere appreciation and humility at this recognition. I look back at the goals we have established each year at our Low-Income Summits, and it is extremely disappointing to all of us that as hard as our people have worked, as committed as they have been, that we have not accomplished more as a partner with all of you or as a friend to those in need. I guess I am a bit naïve, but it has been surprising to me to see some of the obstacles like the lawsuit in Arkansas challenging the State's right to establish a Public Benefit Fund. But I am still confident this is a war we will win together.

When I decided to enter business as a career, my mother was genuinely horrified. To her, businessmen were the people that had my father fired from teaching when he insisted the rules applied to kids from either side of the tracks. Businessmen were the people who sold the home we rented for years without so much as a week's notice after promising my father the sweat equity he put into the house over the years could go as a down payment if the house was ever sold. Businessmen were the customers on my paper route who refused to pay their bill

President Franklin Roosevelt

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because the paper got wet or was late or any number of other reasons a 10-year-old kid had little control over or any power to argue otherwise. And as the years passed – and without judging my questionable career choice - she continually reminded me that, “We are judged by the company we keep.” And like any mother - with the possible exception of Tony Soprano’s mother - she would be most happy and proud to see the crowd I’m with tonight.



My father grew up in an orphanage. It was the only life he ever knew until he signed up for military service in World War II. My mother grew up in the hills of eastern Kentucky near the West Virginia line during the Depression, orphaned at 10-years-old and left to care for her two younger sisters who would follow her to school and sit outside the one room school house all day until they were old enough to attend school themselves. It was a hard time in America, and my mother, even at 80 years old, still vividly recalls how President Franklin Roosevelt saw the nation through this difficult time.

Most Americans can’t remember when Roosevelt was President but have read of Roosevelt’s address to Congress on January 6, 1941 where he articulated the idea of four universal freedoms that all people are entitled to; freedom of speech, of worship, from want and from fear. Roosevelt saw freedom from fear as inextricably linked to freedom from want. The supreme objective connecting freedom from fear and freedom from want is “security:” physical security and economic security. Economic security meant a good education, a useful job, adequate food and clothing, a decent home, medical care, protections against economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, unemployment. And only by successfully achieving this at home can we make claim to our rightful place as the world’s moral leaders and peace keepers.

Roosevelt strongly believed that if people are poor in this, the land of riches and opportunity, it wasn’t because of the lack of moral character on their part or not because they have to be, but simply because we as

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Wayne Leonard accepts the Corporate Champion Award from Derrick Span, national president of the Community Action Partnership.

a nation are permitting it to happen. A product of conscious social choices or through a failure to provide equal opportunities, say for education, or decent opportunities for above minimum wage work. If any of that sounds familiar, it's only because it is. Under virtually any definition the percentage of people living in poverty today fall well within Roosevelt's definition for moral shame.

For example, Business Week recently claimed that even under the grossly outdated government's standards for what constitutes poor, one in four Americans fall into the working poor category. But you already know that. You see it every day. In World War II when we were faced with physical aggression that threatened our most basic freedoms, the nation banded together and ended that threat. Following 9/11 when physical aggression threatened those same basic freedoms, once again we found the money and the national will do what had to be done. Including the creation of a Cabinet post for Homeland Security to address the ongoing threats of "physical aggression" on our nation's people.

But Roosevelt believed we would never achieve security at home until we achieved freedom from both fear and want. If we are to achieve real Homeland Security then freedom from want must rise to the same priority level of national attention and national sense of urgency that freedom from fear of physical aggression is receiving. Maybe if we did that people might feel less patriotic and more ashamed when they do things like file lawsuits challenging Public Benefit Funds that assist those in need.

A good start might be establishing a Cabinet post reporting to the President and the American people, overseeing all the existing public assistance programs, which are spread out among various Cabinet members and departments and often times traded off during the budget crunch. Or make Homeland Security -- responsible for security as Roosevelt accurately defined it -- freedom from fear and freedom from want. Whatever we do, we need to create accountability and force leaders to turn campaign promises into commitments and provide the means to give the same recognition to those on the front lines -- like you all who are fighting for the freedom from want -- as we do those fighting for the freedom from fear. We wouldn't think of sending soldiers into battle with impressive-looking guns but no ammunition. But we send many of you into an equally-important war every day with great programs but no bullets because funding has run out.

The war on poverty is endless. There are no ceasefires, no quiet periods between battles, no medal ceremonies, and the death toll mounts every hour of every day. If we are to retain and attract leaders to this cause, we must recognize these unsung heroes by giving them a seat at the table and the funding necessary to win the war.

Our national sense of morality and decency should not force those doing God's work in assisting the poor elderly or disabled to take a personal vow of poverty themselves so the rest of us can feel better about ourselves and the world we have turned our back on.



The audience applauds Wayne Leonard with a standing ovation after he accepted the Corporate Champion Award on Sept. 3.

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One of my favorite movies is *The Big Kahuna*. It is a story that takes place one night in a hotel room where three industrial lubricant salesmen are at big convention trying to land a big account. I won't go into the movie's plot, but it ends with Danny DeVito -- a burned out middle-aged guy who is actually contemplating suicide because his life lacks meaning -- lecturing a young man who is just starting out in the business and thinks he knows it all. DeVito reminds him that not only does he not know it all, but he doesn't know enough to even regret his past mistakes. He is so self-righteous he can't be honest with himself. He says real honesty comes when you can see the folly in your past actions. Things that mattered that you didn't pay enough attention to. Like relationships with people or service to mankind. And you wish you could do it over. But you can't. Life goes on, but carry this with you as reminder of what's important for the rest of your life: Character comes when you actually do it differently next time. Don't continue to make the same mistakes. You can't go beyond a certain point in your life in honesty in character until you realize that. Our generation is at that point.



Discussing Entergy's position on poverty in the United States are Wayne Leonard and Billy McCain, executive director of the Bolivar County CAP in Cleveland, MS.

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Coming out of World War II after achieving the freedom from fear, the previous generation made it a mission to achieve universal freedom from want. They made great progress in the 1960s under President Johnson's leadership, but since then we have gradually slid into old patterns of complacency focused on protecting what we have as individuals instead of what we can become as a nation. The moment you do that the spiral of decline sets in. Surely, we do not want to be known as the generation that chose pleasantness over goodness, cleverness over wisdom, personality over character, and ultimately put money before people.

But the sand is rapidly running out of the hourglass. As a generation, we have failed to deliver on the promises we made 30 years ago. We have failed to live up to the responsibility that goes with greatness and the great gift of wealth and opportunity we have inherited. We have become so self-righteous in our advancing years that we don't see the folly of our past mistakes. We are in danger of losing sight of what really matters, of losing track of the very reasons this country and its principles are worth fighting for. William James said, “As individuals, we typically lead lives inferior to ourselves. That we are capable of so much more.” And we are. And it's not too late. As the conflict in Iraq comes to a close we have a very real chance -- make that a very real choice -- not determined by chance but by choice, to do it differently this time. To achieve lasting and meaningful national security -- not just “freedom from fear” -- but permanent and real “freedom from want.”

Pretty simple, really. It means putting People before things, Others before ourselves, and Needs before abundance. Just like our mother raised us.



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