Commitment to Children's Rights

By Kenneth H. Phillips

I t is generally, if painfully, ac-
cepted at this point that the
so-called programs for "child-
care" and education are expla-
ned away by the ramifications of not funding
them. It is also true, however, that
blood cannot be gotten from a stone.

With a federal budget deficit bordering the twilight zone, and
increasing state and local fiscal pressures, our chances of
making any effective dent in infant mortality and dis-
case, poverty, child abuse and neglect, hunger, homelessness,
and illiteracy, not to mention crime, drug abuse, and increas-
ing hopelessness in this century are dif-
cult to imagine.

Despite the odds, however, we are
making some inroads. In the recent budget negotiations, Con-
cgress managed to pass a package of
child and family-help legis-
lation even within the strict
Gramm-Rudman constraints.
The package includes the first in-
crease for Head Start in 25 years,
bringing funding for this stellar early childhood edu-
cation program up from less than $2 billion in 1990 to almost $8 billion in 1994.
Congress also appropriated
$2.5 billion over the next three
years for the country's first child-
care bill, and enacted tax credits for poor working families with
children.

These measures are just salve
on a deep wound. But their im-
portance is much more than skin
deep. They signal at long last a
public commitment to get to the
heart of the problem.

Of course, commitment is no sub-
stitute for funding of full-
scale, comprehensive programs. But com-
mmitment is essential be-
fore priorities can be reordered
for any serious attempt to help
improve conditions for children
and families in jeopardy.

Now that we have the commit-
ment of Congress (albeit pre-
nliminary), it is time that neutral,
unambiguous indication from President Bush that he is willing
to go along.

The president took a tentative
step in this direction by partic-
ipating in the World Summit
for Children at the United Nations in
September. The largest-ever
 gathering of heads of state, the
children's summit accomplished
the impossible: It got the leaders
of 71 nations to agree to a World
Declaration of Survival, Protec-
tion and Development of
Children, and a plan of action for im-
plementing it.

Unfortunately, President Bush
waved it to coming his fellow summiteers in carrying out the very first specific action
"called for in The United States' first and earliest possible ratification" of
the Convention on the Rights of
the Child, an international treaty of
minimum standards for
the well-being of children.

The treaty was laid out for all
attending heads of state to sign.
All of them did, except the US
president. That leaves us out of
the total of 130 nations that have
signed the convention, indicating
their intention to seek ratifica-
tion, and the 36 that have actually
ratified it.

The president's failure to take
action on this landmark treaty is
surely less a rejection of the treaty
than a hesitation to commit to it.
Certainly George Bush, who cam-
paigned on an education platform,
and has carefully and deliberately identified himself with
family values, could not pos-
sibly oppose the categorical right
to survival for every child, through
the provision of adequate food,
shelter, clean water, and primary
health care. Or the right to protec-
tion from abuse, neglect, and ex-
ploitation. Or the right to be brought
down the road in a safe environment.

The president's retreat can only be a reluctance to obligate
himself, at a time when most dom-
estic programs are necessarily
taking a back seat to the deficit
and the crisis in the Persian Gulf.

But now is the time to complete
the convention on children's rights not
with expendable outreach pro-
grams, but rather with our indis-
putable moral commitment.
The United States should be able
to commit up front, and uncondi-
tionally, to the premise that chil-
dren, whether female or male, of
their physical, emotional, and legal immaturity,
ought to be entitled to special care
and protection as a matter of
democratic principle.

The Convention on the
Rights of the Child does not ask for in-
stantaneous remedies to deep-
seated ills. It asks that each nation
work toward the identification of
crises and progressively apply
them.

President Bush must permit the
United States to accept this
challenge by ratifying the chil-
dren's treaty. The actual cost of
our commitment now will be far
less than the potential cost to our
children's, our integrity, and our
budget down the road. It's the only
right thing to do.

Kenneth H. Phillips is president of Plan International USA
and chairman of the American Council for Voluntary
International Action (InterAction).

The Environment, White Man's Burden

By Thomas Spear

Take up the White Man's burden —
Send forth the best ye breed —
Go land your sons to colonize.
To serve your captives' need;
To wilt in hungry harness,
On flatterd folk and cold —
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child....

S o wrote Rudyard Kipling almost
a century ago in a popular poem to
colonialism. The lines sound quaint
today, but make no mistake, British and
French colonialists of the time did believe
that they were fighting "savage wars of
peace" to save the benighted races of the
world from themselves by forcing
the benefits of civilization, Christianity,
and commerce on them.

The crowning achievement of colo-
nialism was its self-justifying ideology,
that European superiority obligated
them to conquer and exploit others
for the others' benefit, an ideology that
ended the benefits colonialists themselves
received from colonial exploitation.
Oddly enough, we are embarked on a
contemporary "conquering mission" of
our own in the name of saving the envi-
ronment, that we ourselves are largely re-
ponsible for destroying. We are again
calling others to account, holding
them responsible for our own exploitation.
And again these are the poor and
weak of the world, those who have been the
victims of our violence.

Take the issue of population. It is an
established doctrine in the West, en-
shrined in the policies of the World Bank
and in such popular books as Paul
Ehrlich's "The Population Bomb," that
"rampant population growth" is a
time bomb that threatens to destroy
the world; that poor third-world peoples
are primarily responsible for that growth;
and that these same people will not
become any richer until they can control
their irrational passion to increase their
numbers.
The only indispensable fact here is that
population growth is most rapid today in
the poorer nations of the third world,
but the rest of the equation is,
quite simply, wrong.

First, it is not population that
threatens the environment but how much
that population consumes. Who consumes
the most? Certainly not the poor of the
third world. The richest people are
those living in the third world of the
world's population, but we con-
sume over half of all its resources. An
American annually consumes hundreds
of times the resources of an African, but
we who pose far more danger to the envi-
environment than the poor and their chil-
dren.

Second, we must ask why poor people
have so many children. It is a well es-
blished fact of historical demography
that people only begin to limit their families
when they become wealthy. Why is this
true? Because there are no competing
sources of the poor, helping them to work
their farms and providing security in their
old age, while money is the main re-
source of the wealthy and children cost
money.

People are not poor because they
have too many children, as we would have
it, nor because they have too few,
but they are poor. It is the rational thing
for them to do, and only improving their
standard of living will encourage them
to limit the number of children they have.

The more we wish to improve the
world's environment, we must be
prepared both to reduce our own consump-
tion and to share our remaining wealth
so that others do not have to depend so
heavily on their own children to survive.
That, however, is an unpalatable doc-
trine, so we blame the victims because
we have exploited for their own
poverty.

Other examples abound. We blame
Africans for not conserving their wildlife,
when the establishment of game parks
has integrated both domestic herds and
wildlife by artificially constricting their
grazing routines, to the benefit only of
wealthy Western tourists. At poor African
farmers and herders require more and
more land for their own survival, conser-
vation strikes them as yet another colo-
nialist plot to exploit their resources,
especially their land.

We blame Brazilians for callously
destroying the tropical rain forest, heed-
less of the needs of poor Indians, rubber tap-
pers, and landless peasants for its re-
sources or of the fact that it is our pollu-
tion and destruction of our own forests
that makes preservation of their rain for-
est ecosystem.

No one can deny that environmental
degradation is the most serious crisis the
whole world faces today, but until the
environmental movement accurately assesses
our own contribution, the idea of environ-
mental destruction, places poor people
among those endangered by it, and
considers their needs a par with our own,
this world will find its self-serv-
ing morality no more acceptable than
that of the colonialists a century ago.
Otherwise, environmentalism bores well
and rapidly threaten the imperialism of the 21st
century.

Thomas Spear teaches African history at
Williams College and has lived and worked in
Tanzania and Kenya.