tion medication for 7.5 million senior citizens could be subsidized. And with $500 million, which represents only one B-1 bomber out of a planned one hundred, immunizations and basic health supplies for 50 million children in Asia, Africa, and Latin America could be provided.

Interestingly, the media have attributed the recent disarmament proposals on the part of the Soviet Union to its need to decrease military production in order to provide more goods and services for its population, allegedly suffering the effects of an ailing economy. Well, if anyone's economy is ailing, it is ours. If any government needs to decrease military spending in order to minister to the needs of its people, it is the U.S. government. What is wrong with the Soviet Union wanting to cut back on military production in order to build more housing, provide more health care, subsidize more education for its people? That is the only rational thing to do.

Many of us are associated with the mass challenge to apartheid. Yet we tend to forget that South Africa is a developing nuclear power. Moreover, if a nuclear war does occur, it will in all likelihood be occasioned by a conflict over a situation not unlike those presently existing in South Africa, Central America, and the Middle East.

In recent years, some Black people have indicated that they are tired of demonstrating and that mass street marches are passé. But, sisters, we cannot afford to tire of demonstrating, and mass marches will not become obsolete until we have achieved equality, justice, and peace. We must make ourselves heard, and we must put forth our demands as vigorously and resolutely as we can. Peace is a sisters' issue too.

Slaying the Dream: The Black Family and the Crisis of Capitalism
(with Fania Davis)

God knows there was plenty wrong with Walter Younger—hard-headed, mean, kind of wild with women—plenty wrong with him. But he sure loved his children. Always wanted them to have something—be something. Big Walter used to say, 'he'd get right wet in the eyes sometimes, lean his head back with the water standing in his eyes and say, "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile."

—Lorraine Hansberry, Raisin in the Sun

Within every culture in the world, children represent promises of material and spiritual riches that their mothers and fathers have been unable to attain. African-American culture is no exception, and, as Lorraine Hansberry's character insists, children make more realizable those grand as-

—Earlier versions of this article, under the title "The Black Family and the Crisis of Capitalism," appeared in Black Liberation Journal 9, no. 1, Spring 1986, and in Black Scholar 17, no. 5, September/October 1986.
pirations toward progress that are not within their parents' reach. In the often-quoted words of José Martí, “Children are the hope of the world.”

Throughout the centuries following the forcible transplantation of African people from their motherland to America, children have represented the very special promise of freedom for an entire people. Even as Black people's efforts to hold on to and strengthen their family ties were cruelly assaulted, the family has remained an important cauldron of resistance, forging and preserving a vital legacy of collective struggle for freedom. Though our great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers may not have expected to free themselves from slavery or sharecropping or Mr. Charlie's kitchen, they could at least pass on their dream of freedom to successive generations.

Today, however, the lives and futures of those to whom the dream should be offered are in great jeopardy. According to the most recent report of the Children’s Defense Fund, Black children today are far more likely to be born into devastating conditions of poverty than they were five years ago. They are twice as likely as white children to die in the first year of their lives, and they are three times as likely as whites to be misplaced in classes for the educable mentally retarded. Afro-American children are twice as likely as white children to have no parent employed, to be unemployed as teenagers, and to live in substandard housing. They are three times as likely as whites to have their mothers die in childbirth. Moreover, those between the ages of fifteen and nineteen are four times as likely as white children to be incarcerated in jails and prisons. Perhaps the most startling reality about the present predicament of Black children is that in some major urban centers they have been found to suffer from kwashiorkor and marasmus, diseases of malnutrition commonly found in famine areas of Africa.

Our families, of course, have never corresponded in structure and function to the prevailing social ideal. First of all, original African cultural traditions had a much broader definition of the family than that which prevails in this society; it was not limited merely to biological parents and their progeny. Especially during the earlier phases of the African presence in the Americas, the extended family was a vital tradition. Second, the brutal economic and political pressures connected with slavery and continuing throughout subsequent historical eras have consistently prevented African-American family patterns from conforming to the dominant family models. Finally, Black people, both during and after the slave era, have been compelled to build, creatively and often improvisationally, a family life consistent with the dictates of survival. Yet because the Afro-American family does not reflect the norm, it has been repeatedly defined as pathological in character and has been unjustly blamed for the complex problems that exist within the Black community—problems often directly attributable to the social, economic, and political promotion of racism. This is not, of course, to deny that Black families are beset with serious difficulties. But to focus myopically on family problems as the basis for the oppression of the Afro-American community—as if setting the family in order will automatically eradicate poverty—is to espouse the fallacious “blame the victim” argument.

The current ideological blame-shifting, which targets the Black family, reflects the broader trend of placing the family in general—falsely represented as an isolated, privatized area of social life—at the heart of dangerous dysfunctions that
affect the moral well-being of U.S. society. As the traditional male-supremacist hierarchy in the family, based on male “providers” and their economically dependent wives and children, is being fundamentally challenged by the increasing participation of working-class women in the labor force, ultraconservative advocates argue that the family itself is falling apart due to, among other things, the rising support of abortion rights and socialized child care. They even go so far as to claim that homosexuality threatens to destroy the fabric of the family. In this way, they attempt to divert public attention from some of the most serious demands of the contemporary women’s movement: equal pay for jobs of comparable worth, reproductive rights, paid maternity leave, and subsidized child care—demands that are increasingly antimonopoly in character.

The era ushered in by the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency has been marked by a renewed propagandistic attempt to deem the breakdown of the Black family structure responsible for the erosion of material well-being in the Black community. It is frequently pointed out that almost half of all Afro-American families revolve around single women and that 55 percent of Black babies are born to unmarried mothers—a substantial number of whom are under the age of twenty.

The Reagan administration audaciously purported that the welfare system brought about this breakdown in the structure of the Black family. Thus, the logical solution would involve the reduction of government programs and the requirement that individuals on welfare offer their labor to the state, as well as the implementation of programs designed to apprehend absent fathers, compelling them to contribute to the support of their children.

A conservative economist argues that the welfare system encourages female dependence on government handouts and diverts male attention away from the pursuit of legitimate work:

In the welfare culture money becomes not something earned by men through hard work, but a right conferred on women by the state. Protest and complaint replace diligence and discipline as the sources of pay. Boys grow up seeking support from women, while they find manhood in the macho circles of the street and the bar or in the irresponsible fathering of random progeny.³

Moreover, Gilder maintains, AFDC offers a guaranteed income to any child-raising couple in America that is willing to break up, or to any teenaged girl over sixteen who is willing to bear an illegitimate child.⁴

Robert B. Carleson, Reagan’s adviser for social policy development, put forth similar arguments, holding existing government social programs responsible for the increasing number of single-parent, female-centered households. Moreover, he asserted that the main problem is the failure in the Black community to form families at all. The implication, of course, is that the Black community is morally out of sync with the rest of U.S. society. Yet statistical evidence demonstrates that the great majority of female-centered households are caused not by unwed women, but by the breakup of married couples with children. Of the single women heading families, only one-fourth have never been married: 28.7 percent are married with an absent
spouse, 22.2 percent are widowed and 21.9 percent are divorced. Would the withdrawal of welfare payments resurrect dead fathers, annul divorces, or cause unemployed husbands to return to their wives and children? Would it make sex education available to teenagers and bring into being safe, effective, and accessible contraceptive measures? This last question has serious implications, since the birthrate among single Black teenagers actually declined during the 1970's—a fact that clearly flies in the face of the prevailing belief that Black teenage girls are having more babies than ever before. What has caused a disproportionate number of births to unmarried teenagers is the even more rapid decline in the birthrate among older and married Black women. These groups are far more likely to rely on contraception and to have abortions—and, indeed, to become sterilized—than unmarried Black teenagers.

While the relatively high rates of pregnancy among Black teenagers are certainly cause for alarm, it should not be assumed that the isolated eradication of this problem would automatically lead to a significant reduction of the impoverishment of the Black population, as James McGhee has pointed out in his article on the Black family in the Urban League's 1985 *The State of Black America* report:

There is nothing inherent in the married state that leads to higher family income. Black married couples have higher incomes primarily for two reasons: because both householders are often in the labor force and because males generally have higher median incomes than females do.

The impoverishment of Black families will not miraculously disappear as a consequence of reducing the high rate of teenage pregnancy to a more manageable level. However urgent a problem this may be, it is by no means the root cause of the Black community's deteriorating economic status. On the contrary, it is a symptom of a deeply rooted structural crisis in the U.S. monopoly–capitalist economy—the reverberations of which are being felt most acutely in the Afro-American community. There is a direct correlation between the unprecedented rates of unemployment among Black teenagers and the rise in the birthrate among Black women under twenty. Yet the Reagan administration's policy shapers consistently formulated the problem of teenage pregnancies in terms that implicitly held Black girls partially responsible for the depressed state of the Black community.

Conservative theorists who express outrage about the accelerated rate of Black teenage pregnancy and the corresponding breakdown of the Black family rely, directly or by implication, upon old historical distortions about Black women's—and men's—morality, or alleged lack thereof. They accuse government welfare programs of promoting the ethical failures of the Black community. Shortly after the Black Family Summit that took place in the spring of 1984, William F. Buckley, Jr., praised the Black organizations—the NAACP, the Urban League, and others—that had finally recognized that the Black family's problems were the Black community's problems. In an article appearing in the *National Review*, Buckley quoted John Jacob, president of the National Urban League, who claims that "... we may have allowed our just anger at what America has done to obscure our own need for self-discipline and strengthened community values." At the same time, Buckley criticized the Black Family Summit for not recognizing that there is
an "inverse correlation between state welfare and black progress."

Welfare checks do more than merely convert a government voucher into food and rent. They tend to affect the spirit and particularly they tend to dissolve the natural bonds of loyalty a man feels toward the woman he has impregnated and the child born of a union that is increasingly fleeting rather than lasting.8

There are many destructive pressures exerted on Black families, such as the decreasing availability of quality education to young Black people, the proliferation of drugs and the prevalence of other antisocial phenomena that are directly encouraged by the racist institutions of this country. The most devastating encumbrance, though, especially among young Black men and women, is pervasive joblessness. Current observations on the Black family continually point out that between 1960 and 1980, the percentage of single Black women with children rose from about 21 percent to 47 percent. What is seldom noted, however, is that during the same historical period, the percentage of employed adult Black men plummeted from approximately 75 percent to 55 percent. It is common knowledge that government census figures undercount the Black population, which means that probably fewer than half of Afro-American males in this country actually hold jobs. Official unemployment rates among Black teenagers project a 50 percent rate of joblessness, but the reality is that fewer than 20 percent actually hold jobs. The rest are simply not counted as being a part of the labor force. Moreover, to unemployment must be added the more subtle symptoms of underemployment and undercompensation. According to the Children’s Defense Fund annual report, if almost half of all Black children are poor (as compared to one in six white children) it is because the median income of Black families is less than 60 percent that of white families. In 1983, half of all Black families had incomes below fourteen thousand dollars.9

While the difficulties besetting the family should by no means be dismissed, any strategies intended to alleviate the prevailing problems among poor Black people that methodologically target the family for change and leave the socioeconomic conditions perpetuating Black unemployment and poverty intact are doomed to failure from the outset. In 1965, Daniel Moynihan authored the government report entitled The Negro Family: Case for National Action. The document had important strategic implications, for it attempted to justify the withdrawal of government measures that had been specifically designed to counter the racist edge of the social crisis that seemed destined to hurl the Black community into the throes of permanent impoverishment. The real problem, Mr. Moynihan argued, was the patriarchal structure of the Black family. As far as government programs were concerned, those that directly intervened in Black family life were deemed most desirable. Once the Black family began to reflect the prevailing nuclear (male-supremacist) model, problems such as unemployment and the decline in the quality of housing, education, and health care, would eventually be solved.

During the Reagan administration, official spokesmen proposed the curtailment of government programs designed to bring some relief to poor families—ostensibly in order to revive a two-parent family structure in the Black com-
munity. Just as the ulterior aim of the Moynihan Report was to provide a philosophical justification for reversing government policy meant to eradicate the causes of racism in U.S. society, the Reaganite strategy was designed to deny the existence of institutionalized forms of racism in the post-civil rights era. Reagan propagandists asserted that Black people are suffering in the 1980's because of our own inadequacies, and that we must deal with our problems without the assistance of such institutions as the AFDC welfare program.

While the 1984 Black Family Summit did not entirely dismiss the deleterious impact of objective economic factors on the Black community, it placed the greatest emphasis on strategies of volunteerism. John Jacobs of the Urban League asserted that it is high time Black people begin independently to address our problems. "In concentrating on the wrongs of discrimination and poverty," he said, "we have neglected the fact that there is a lot we can do about our problems ourselves." Even as most conference participants assented in principle to the notion that help from the government is essential, the need for self-help was the clear conclusion of the gathering. This is the consensus that emerged from the two hundred delegates present:

Black churches could create credit unions, establish and support Black entrepreneurship, use their publishing houses to publish Black authors and teach sex education. Affluent Blacks could make venture capital available to Black businesses. Organizations could register voters and urge them to vote in elections from the school board to the Presidency. Youths could consider the military for employment and skills training.¹¹

In a 1985 New York Times article entitled "Restoring the Traditional Black Family," Eleanor Holmes Norton set forth views on the Black family that reveal the influence of blame-the-victim syndrome. Though she acknowledges the destructive pressures of extreme poverty and unemployment, she also argues that the causes for the actual disruption of our families must be sought elsewhere. "If economic and social hardships could in themselves destroy family life, the family could not have survived as the basic human unit throughout the world," she theorizes.¹² According to Norton, the true culprit today is the "destructive ethos" and the "self-perpetuating culture of the ghetto." Moreover, she argues,

[the remedy is not as simple as providing necessities and opportunities. The family's return to its historic strength will require the overthrow of the-complicated predatory ghetto subculture, a fact demanding not only new government approaches, but active Black leadership and community participation and commitment.¹³

Unfortunately, Norton succeeds in contemporizing and exacerbating the approach launched by Moynihan in the 1960's. Norton urges the government to replicate existing successful training and jobs programs for "ghetto males." She further calls for the systematic duplication of "successful workfare programs such as those in Baltimore and San Diego," and suggests that public assistance programs should "concentrate on changing lifestyles as well as imparting skills and education." She emphasizes the need for "ghetto institutions" and Black middle-class individuals with "ghetto roots" to engage in a range of self-help remedies,
including family planning, counseling, sex education, day care and, most important, passing on the enduring Black American values of "hard work, education, respect for the Black family and, notwithstanding the denial of personal opportunity, achieving a better life for one’s children." Although Norton makes obligatory mention of the fact that "[t]he disruption of the Black family today is, in exaggerated microcosm, a reflection of what has happened to American family life in general,"14 her proposed solutions focus myopically on what she calls "the ghetto." Dr. Martin Luther King’s critique of the original Moynihan Report, in which he called attention to the danger that "problems will be attributed to innate Negro weaknesses and used to justify neglect and rationalize oppression," is no less relevant to Norton’s formulations of 1985.15

In the meantime, Moynihan has reassessed his views. He now argues that precisely because of the pervasiveness of single-parent families and the impoverishment of those families, the resulting problems should be attributed not simply to Black people, but to society as a whole. And while this modified description of the problem certainly represents an improvement, Moynihan still admits that he is incapable of proposing anything other than piecemeal solutions. He cautions that “[w]e do not know the processes of social change well enough so as to be able confidently to affect them,”16 and merely suggests that personal tax exemption and welfare payments be increased to take inflation into account and that the government assume responsibility for enforcing laws against drug trafficking.

In an attempt to address specific problems associated with the Black family crisis, organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women have developed practical community programs. According to Dorothy Height, president of the council, SMART (Single Mothers Advance Rapidly through Training)

... is a program designed to improve the employability skills of young mothers through classroom and on-the-job training. The ultimate goal is to help stabilize the life of the young mother and to help her see the need for education, training and marketable and life skills development.

Our first goal must be to prevent the initial pregnancy. The second goal must be to ensure that a girl who has had a baby does not have a second. Then, we must make sure that pregnant teen mothers receive adequate prenatal care so that prematurity, low birth weight and birth defects do not additionally handicap their babies’ lives. Our efforts must be targeted and tailored to reach all young people.17

However, if such goals are to be achieved, employment and educational opportunities must be readily available. And the fact is that the U.S. economy has been rapidly phasing out jobs traditionally held by Black people, thus shoving ever-larger numbers of our people to the outer margins of this country’s economic life. The severe structural problems that can be detected within the Black family are symptomatic of a much larger problem: the structure of the economic system is on the verge of collapse. Eleanor Holmes Norton placed “permanent generational joblessness,” with roots in the post–World War II era, “at the core of the meaning of the American ghetto,” but she simply proposed that we need to “cull the successful aspects” from existing training and jobs programs and duplicate these models nationwide.18 The discordance between the magnitude of the
assessed problem and the triviality of the proposed solution is, to say the least, deeply disturbing.

The era in which we live has seen the entrance of the world capitalist economy into a phase of decline. Any strategy that does not acknowledge this fundamental reality and fails to appreciate the new level of the capitalist crisis will result in temporary and superficial treatment of its symptoms and will only allow it to continue on its current path. Furthermore, a faulty assessment of the problem will lead to a dangerous underestimation of the bold and radical stands that must be taken if we are to eradicate such capitalist phenomena as unemployment and homelessness. Steel and other basic industries have sharply declined, leaving Black people especially vulnerable to unemployment. Entire plants have been shut down or transferred to other parts of the country or abroad. Between 1979 and 1984, 11.5 million jobs were permanently lost due to cutbacks in production. Other features of the structural crisis include compounding of huge budget deficits, the unprecedented scope of inflation, the agricultural crisis, and the urban crisis.

The increasing militarization of the economy is perhaps the most prominent feature of the structural crisis of capitalism. The retooling of the productive process in accordance with the dictates of the military-industrial complex creates the means with which to produce untold billions of dollars in weapons whose destructive potential is unprecedented. In the process, however, Black people are literally robbed of jobs—at the rate of thirteen hundred jobs for each increase of $1 billion in the military budget. The runaway U.S. military budget is at the heart of an economic “tangle of pathology”—to borrow Moynihan’s terminology—which is currently causing the devastation of the Black com-

munity and the resulting structural problems within the Black family. Since 1980, the military budget has literally doubled, while nonmilitary programs have been slashed by almost $100 billion. Between 1981 and 1985, military budgets have totaled $1.2 trillion, and the Pentagon has proposed $2 trillion more for the next five years. To place this amount in perspective, let us consider that $3 million spent every day for the past two thousand years would equal $2 trillion—the amount the Pentagon proposes to spend in the next five years. In 1986, the Pentagon spent nearly $1 billion a day, which amounts to $41 million an hour, or $700,000 a minute.20

While health programs are being steadily cut to feed the Pentagon’s exorbitant military budget, fewer than half of all preschool Black children are being immunized against polio, diphtheria, tetanus, and smallpox. The Reagan administration convinced Congress to make cuts in student financial assistance programs at a time when almost half of all Black seventeen-year-olds are functionally illiterate. The nation’s welfare recipients, 53 percent of whom are Black, receive an average of only $111 a month each—and only a little more than half the nation’s poor children are being reached by the AFDC programs. Yet Reagan attacked the program, and his policies were responsible for severe cuts, which began in 1980. Following Reagan’s entrance into the White House, 6 million more people fell into the ranks of the poor. Twenty million were hungry, yet 1 million were completely taken off the food-stamp rolls. While subsidized housing was cut by 63 percent, homelessness continued to grow at an alarming rate. These are but a few examples of the consequences of an increasingly militarized economy.

Given the historic decline and contraction of the contem-
porary capitalist economy, exacerbated in large part by the rapid militarization of the productive process, it is plain that conditions of mass unemployment and rising poverty in our communities will persist unless a radical antimonopoly program of jobs with peace is instituted. The Income and Jobs Action Act of 1985, introduced by Representatives Charles Hayes (D-Ill.) and John Conyers (D-Mich.) incorporates a strategy to end unemployment which will be of inestimable value in future efforts to combat joblessness, both within the context of a progressive congressional agenda and in mass movements for full employment. Hayes and Conyers call for a federal jobs program at decent wages that will bring full employment with affirmative action; a thirty-five-hour work week with no cut in pay; adequate income for the unemployed from paycheck to paycheck and for unsuccessful first-time job seekers; measures to curb the effects of plant closings; and, most important, conversion from military to civilian spending as a means of financing the program.

Our families cannot be saved unless we manage to preserve our right to earn a decent living under conditions of equality and unless we can exercise our right to make political decisions in the electoral arena. Therefore, what is necessary is a program of jobs with peace and affirmative action, democratic nationalization of basic industry and of the military-industrial complex, and the halting of racist assaults on Black people's political rights. This is the only framework within which practical programs addressing specific problems of Black families will have any hope for success.

Observers of the current crisis within the Black family might find it instructive to examine the present situation in

some of the socialist countries such as the U.S.S.R. and the German Democratic Republic that are also experiencing a rapid growth in the number of single-parent families. In those countries, there is no semblance whatsoever of the soaring poverty associated with the increase in such families in the United States. If we as Black people in the United States want to guarantee that the dream for a better life is realized through our children, we must recognize the importance of setting our sights on a socialist future.

NOTES

4. Ibid., p. 123.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.