



# SIMMONS

Looking Toward the Future  
in Unsettled Times

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## Introduction

I would like to dedicate this talk to my mother, Rose Grossman, who died in December, one month away from her 97th birthday.

My mother was a social worker, and her career is relevant to our discussion today because it began in unsettled and desperate times. She graduated from Carnegie Institute of Technology's social work program in Pittsburgh in 1929. The country was in a severe depression, a situation which created a need for emergency assistance for the unemployed. The Allegheny County Emergency Relief Board was created, and my mother became a district supervisor. Years later, she wrote about her work in the following way: "Clients formed pressure groups demanding more financial assistance and help with their health and social problems. I met with these groups, gave them opportunities to express their frustration, and tried to channel it into effective action." She concluded, "In response to these pressures, state funds were released, and the Pennsylvania Relief Board was established." That was the beginning of my mother's career and also the beginning of large scale government welfare programs.

I followed in my mother's footsteps and have been practicing social work for 43 years. I have been affiliated with Simmons for 26 of those years. I graduated from social work school in 1961, having just cast my first vote in the 1960 presidential election for Kennedy. It was a time of promise and of feeling connected to the government. My classmates and I believed that we could change conditions for those in this country who were economically disadvantaged. We thought we could partner with government to make individual lives better.

We are once again in the midst of a desperate time in this country and a critical time for social work. Let us consider how some have evaluated the current state of affairs.

As 1999 came to a close, Howard Goldstein, now deceased, but then editor of *Families and Society*, asked a number of social work practitioners and educators to write brief commentaries about the state of social work at the millennium. I would like to set the stage for our discussion this morning by quoting two of these statements.

Emilia E. Martinez-Brawley (2000), Distinguished Community Service Scholar at Arizona State University said:

**"...much of what we are seeing and working with in social work today reflects a state of affairs that few of us either trained for or would have trained for had we been able to anticipate the future..." (p. 5).**

Bill Powell, (2000) Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin School of Social Work and the current Editor of Families and Society said:

**“Social work, it seems, is now content spending more time doing paperwork than working with people. We talk and write in the professional patois of pathology rather than with words that worry life and insight into dreams and aspirations and hope. We now too often speak the vapid language of objective science rather than in narratives that sing with the heart and soul of life and imagination. We seem to have lost our vision of great causes, of what is possible and worthwhile and worth struggling for, and of what could be if only we believed” (p. 4).**

Now what do these strong words tell us? They suggest that something has changed for the worse in social work practice. The implication is that we have lost our way as a profession and possibly lost control of our profession.

I would like to outline what I see as the important issues for contemporary social work and suggest how we might regain what has been lost. In social work parlance, we always begin “where the client is.” So I will begin by highlighting what I consider to be some of the important aspects of current conditions in this country and in the world and their impact on social work. Then, I will describe practices and alternative models that give reason for hope. Finally, I will consider the careers of two social work visionaries who might provide inspiration as we imagine the future of our profession.

## **What Has Happened to the World?**

As social workers, we know that context is important. So, in looking at the current state of social work, we must ask: what is the state of the world in which we practice? Here are the changes that I see as important.

First and foremost, violence is endemic. Our country has a foreign policy that endorses violating the integrity of other nations preemptively. With legal sanction at the highest level, we violate people’s civil rights in the name of fighting the so called “wars” against terrorism and drugs. These wars, both domestic and foreign, are most frequently fought against people who are different from the white male majority who govern and control this country.

We do violence to the environment in ways that will compromise life for future generations.

Our country’s borders have also been violated in a way that none of us would have once thought possible or imaginable. If we didn’t recognize it before, we now know that we are deeply connected to the world through daily acts of violence around the globe and at home, in which the United States is implicated and of which we are the target.

A second change, “globalization,” defines the growing interconnectedness between political, social, and economic systems beyond national borders. This is now occurring at an accelerated pace due to technological advances in communication and transportation (Oxford Reference Online: A Dictionary of Contemporary World History). This trend toward the internationalization of commerce has led to the creation of vast international conglomerates that defeat small enterprise and destroy local traditions. While our country espouses the concept

of “free trade,” we set up trade barriers and hierarchies that protect our corporate interests. These have had a devastating effect on working men and women in our own and in other countries (Fook, 2002).

A third change is our country's prioritizing of defense. We have seen the fulfillment of the predictions made by Eisenhower (1961), as he left office, when he warned of the implications of the growth of the “military-industrial complex.” Earlier, at the beginning of his presidency, he said (1953) “...every gun that is made, every battleship that is launched, every rocket that is fired, signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.” Our enormous defense budget and burgeoning national debt make it unlikely that we will be able to take care of our population's needs for decent health care, education, and a reasonable standard of living now or in the near future.

A fourth change in the world today is the extreme political conservatism of this country. The emphasis in government policy is on social control instead of social care in a period described as the “post-welfarist era”

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(Parton, 1994 in Hugman, 2001, p.321). In accord with the neo-conservative values that dominate current policy, social control is deemed the business of the state while social care is seen as the business of private organizations and individuals (Hugman, 2001, p. 321). As a result, the current administration is in the process of dismantling the welfare apparatus that was being put in place at the start of my mother's career.

Given this emphasis on social control, it is not surprising that the prison industrial complex is the fastest growing industry in this country. The overwhelming majority of prisoners in this country are people of color. By the end of 2002, there were ten times as many black and Hispanic males per 100,000 prisoners as there were white (Harrison & Beck, 2002). Incarceration has become the nation's mental health treatment with American prisons containing three times more mentally ill people than mental hospitals (Human Rights Watch report as quoted in Satel, 2003, p. A 29).

Finally, advances in information technologies have dramatically changed the contexts in which we operate. These technological improvements afford greater access to information and resources across the globe, but only to people who have access to the technologies (Fook, 2002). They also give government and private businesses new ways of monitoring people's activities and performances.

In summary, the changes in the world that I see as forming the context for social work practice include:

1. Increased violence.
2. Globalization.
3. An emphasis on social control instead of social care.
4. Conservative politics and the ethos of the business world.
5. Advances in communication and information technologies with possibilities for monitoring and intruding on people's privacy.

Now let us consider what it means to practice our profession in a post-welfare, globalized, technologized, terrorized, conservative era.

## Implications for Social Work

The dominance of ideas of social control and the prevalence of the business ethic are creating dramatic changes in the practice of clinical social work – a profession that developed within an ethos of social welfare. Conditions in the traditional service settings are tight and lean. Most agencies have experienced cuts in funding, as various state and federal sources dry up; and there have been cutbacks in staff and services to accommodate these funding changes. As agencies struggle to make ends meet, there are increased pressures on staff toward accountability and productivity.

Third party payers control the terms of service, requiring social workers to offer very brief interventions and limited possibilities to clients. The management of accounts and monies has taken priority over the service needs of client populations. Brief treatment and crisis intervention are the only forms of service available in these days of managed care, and we have had to become creative in developing solution-focused and narrative models of time-limited treatment. Long-term treatment has become the privilege of those who are able to pay out-of-pocket for it. Clients unable to keep regular appointments and show evidence of change are less likely to be served. In in-patient settings, clients cycle through brief hospitalization after brief hospitalization with little opportunity for treatment and stabilization.

Many social workers and clients no longer understand the potential benefits of longer-term, open-ended treatment. Without appreciating what might be achieved with adequate resources and time, they settle for limited, problem solving approaches that meet the requirements of managed care, as if that were all that could be done.

Let me give an example. My work with a 12 year-old boy at a neighborhood health center was progressing. There were fewer violent episodes in his home when he would threaten his mother and sisters with a knife, but this danger did still occur episodically. He was having many problems in his crowded school classroom; he

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could barely read; and his mother and I were working on a school transfer. He came regularly to his appointments, and his mother sought my help on the telephone at times of need, signs of trust from both of them that had been hard to come by. When we ran out of the fifteen sessions initially approved through Medicaid, my petition for additional sessions was rejected. I was told to refer him immedi-

ately to an anger management group and to hold two meeting with his mother at which time I was to teach her techniques for managing him. This kind of response from a managed care representative occurs all too often. It privileges a superficial behavioral approach that has little to do with the child's interest. It does not recognize the importance of the clinical relationship and its power to bring about change. Clients in difficult circumstances are expected to accept less than adequate care and manage desperate situations on their own. There is a movement in social work toward evidence-based practice as our field strives to become more scientific and accountable, which are admirable goals. But the pressure for measurable outcomes (further fueled by managed care) can lead to an emphasis on behavioral objectives which are

most easily observed and measured. And this trend tends to force practice toward behavioral interventions and over-simplified descriptions of problems, an approach that threatens to rob social work of its complexity and its humanity.

Thus, in our current system, forces in society pit people against each other in a daily struggle to survive; and the disparities of wealth fostered by these forces are increasing. (Schotz, Dean & Crosby). In such a system, social workers often become “middlemen” in the inequitable distribution of inadequate resources.

Instead of drawing on our skills in human relationships, we are expected to manage care and help people manage

situations without adequate support and resources (Parton, 1998, in Fook, 2002, p. 27). It has been suggested that “the more we do with less, the more we will be expected to do with even less” (Juliano, 2003).

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So, what are we to do? How do workers in agencies resist these pressures and create alternative models? What are the conditions that characterize more hopeful forms of practice that might lead us to better models for the future?

## Hopeful Alternatives in Social Work Practice

### Agency Practice

All too often when there is not enough to go around, members of service organizations blame each other or blame their clients for the frustrations and failures they experience. In hospitals, doctors blame nurses; nurses blame social workers; everyone blames the administrators, the patients, and patients’ families. The same thing happens in schools and other institutions. When we lose sight of the larger picture, it is all too easy to become embroiled in different forms of in-fighting.

If agency social workers are to maintain a vision of good practice in these desperate times, they must see how external, societal forces are shaping their work. An awareness of the ways that we and our clients are trapped in a structurally violent system allows us to begin to find ways of working within the system to change it without identifying with the system and adopting its values.

Let me give an example. A young clinician in an in-patient child psychiatry setting was working with the family of a fourteen year-old girl with anorexia. The patient was experiencing her tenth admission to an acute psychiatric service in a period of two years. Her family was angry with the hospital; why hadn’t their daughter been cured by now? Instead of accepting responsibility for the inadequacy of this form of treatment or blaming the family, the worker looked at the larger system. Then, in discussions with the family, she said, “Your daughter’s treatment requires placement in a long-term residential setting. Why isn’t the Board of Education providing this?” Their discussion enabled the parents to raise this question vehemently with the appropriate person at the Board of Education. Soon the hospital social worker received an angry call from an official at the Board of Education, who asked, “What do you mean inciting this family to call us? The Department of Education’s unwillingness

to provide residential care for this child has NOTHING to do with money.” She bawled out and threatened the young worker, who was very shaken; and then she called the worker’s supervisor, the director of the unit. But in this setting the director and staff were joined together in their analysis of larger system problems and the difficulty obtaining funding for necessary services. The director supported her staff person and further challenged the Board of Education to provide the needed care for the patient.

When solidarity like this exists among the staff and administrators of an agency, people work together toward social change. This co-operation may even mean helping clients understand the systemic problems and joining them in a fight for changes. It can also mean creating a culture within an agency in which staff and administration collaborate to determine together ways to change the agency’s practices so that it can survive. While we must deal with the cutbacks, we do not have to accept them passively. We need to come together in agencies, in our professional organizations, and in our schools to combat these horrendous policies and trends.

### Alternative Forms of Practice

Even in this impoverished climate for social work, there are examples of small, alternative forms of practice operating outside of the usual funding restrictions that continue the spirit of social work. These are small, grass roots, community-based efforts that hold possibilities for hope for our profession in these times. Let me describe a few that involve our graduates.

Anne Vinnick, a recent graduate, works in a tenant-owned housing complex in the Boston medical area. As Director of Program Development, she works closely with various tenant groups – teenagers, the elderly, new immigrants and others – to assess their needs and create programs. One of their current projects is a series of initiatives to get the near-by hospitals to hire people who live in the housing complex. Anne is working

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collaboratively to set up meetings with representatives of major agencies in the medical center, to tackle the problem of unemployment for her tenants. They will determine which jobs are difficult to fill and then obtain funds to train tenants so they qualify for these jobs. An ecological goal includes creating “walk to work” possibilities that decrease traffic and pollution in the neighborhood and enhance health

for tenants and hospital employees. Anne says that she uses her clinical skills every day but not in traditional, clinical situations.

Another graduate, Dawn Martinez, a current doctoral student and teacher, volunteers for an agency in Jamaica Plain called City Life, Vida Urbana. It serves low- income, working people of color, some of whom are recent immigrants. Their focus is on housing justice. For thirty years, they have been developing a tenant movement in an effort to empower working class people to transform an unjust system into one that is more democratic. They organize tenants who are about to be evicted from buildings, where developers want to raise rents and increase profits.

The workers help the tenants see that they are in the situation together. They analyze the problem and formulate

ways to apply pressure as a group to secure housing justice. They learn to negotiate, demonstrate, sit in, get publicity, and elicit support from others. As part of this process, the agency workers and clients discuss the social system in which these events are happening so that they can fully understand the forces that are affecting all of our lives. And just in case you don't think of this as clinical work, know that it is extremely effective in helping the tenants achieve greater self-esteem and a sense of being in charge of their lives.

Another Simmons alum, Larry Higgenbottom, has started an agency, the Osiris Group, which offers mental health services to black and Hispanic clients in the inner city delivered by practitioners who share the ethnicity of the clients they serve. Larry has developed a methodology of treatment based on a deep understanding of the potentially destructive process of acculturation that occurs for many black and Latino people in a racist society. He trains his staff to work from the model he has articulated. The work is home-based, intensive, and in the community. Its focus is on meeting clients through a shared experience of destructive forms of cultural socialization. The social worker joins the client's family, and together, they work to turn things around.

What do these alternative models have in common? They are "ground-up," grass roots initiatives that exist in community settings. The programs are built around client needs with minimal structure. They are flexible, fluid, and easily altered to suit changing situations. They are collaborative; clients and social workers are partners. They are based on an understanding of the importance of being able to see things through the client's eyes and the need for clinicians who reflect the clients they serve. These services operate in the neighborhoods where trouble happens and allow clients and social workers to meet on common ground.

I would suggest that these are the places and practices that keep hope alive for the future of social work practice. They are consistent with a vision of social work provided by Dennis Saleeby, (2000) a Professor at the University of Kansas School of Social Work, who described the future of social work with these words:

**"We are going to rise up like ferrets on Dexedrine and say... 'We are social workers, my friends, and we are players...' We are going to swarm like fire ants at a church picnic into communities that need us. We are going to make good on our pledge to become foot soldiers in the fight for social and economic justice, and we're going to do it in the neighborhood, in the community, in the center, in the school – with the residents. We are going to lock arms with those who have been stuck with the slick end of the stick and march up the hill. And we've decided that we won't take 'no' or 'maybe' for an answer" (p.6).**

Now there's a vision of community-based practice that might fit with the desperate times we are in and lead us to a more hopeful future.

So let me trace where we've been so far this morning in order to move us toward the future. We have been looking at certain trends that are part of the growing conservatism in this country. As we noted the ways these trends have affected social work practice, we considered some hopeful possibilities and alternatives. They included:

1. Social workers in agencies becoming alert to larger, systemic issues and creating, in solidarity with administrators, a culture of collaborative responses to systemic challenges.
2. They also include small, community-based, grass roots initiatives characterized by fluidity, cultural understanding and client/worker collaboration.

Now where do these hopeful signs take us as we envision the future of social work practice and education?

## The Social Worker of the Future

First, what kind of social worker is needed for the future? Clearly we need social workers who are able to work in many modalities (individual, family, group), at many levels (community, institutional, family, and individual), in many situations (from problems of ordinary life to problems deriving from unspeakable conditions and unimaginable crises) and with many forms of intervention (from counseling to advocacy to community organizing to other forms of social action).

In short, social workers need to be creative and flexible. Social workers will need to be prepared for a new fluidity of practice and move easily from one approach to another as required by the client or situation. Social workers will be ever alert to and understand the impact of such intersecting problems of addiction and violence in all of our lives. They will be skilled in working with the effects of these epidemics and in changing the structures that create them.

Social workers of the future will need to develop practice frameworks that are truly multicultural and balance an understanding of cultural differences with an awareness of our common humanity. Our agencies and faculties should reflect the diversity in our population. We will need to recruit a diverse spectrum of people to our profession and create the kinds of financial resources and bridging educational programs that allow true integration to happen.

Social workers of the future will need to be able to create programs, obtain funding, and demonstrate the effectiveness of their work. Instead of being overwhelmed by the needs they see, social workers will imagine ways of meeting these needs and bring them into being.

Take for example, my colleague, Jane Crosby, at the South End Community Health Center. She saw a need for teenagers from economically disadvantaged communities to experience something of the vastness and natural beauty of this country. She wanted them to have this experience as members of a community working together to complete a task. And so she developed a program called "Kidz to the River." She takes a group of carefully selected teenagers to Montana each year where they canoe down a river for two weeks, camp in natural surroundings, and talk through the challenges of the experience as they gradually become a cohesive group. With a great deal of hard work, devotion, and vision, she makes this experience happen. It is a life changing event for all of the kids who participate. We need social workers in the future who can dream and then turn their dreams into realities.

While social workers of the future will be oriented toward program development and community based practices, they will not lose sight of the importance of helping individuals and families through counseling. We know how to do this form of practice very well – better than other professionals – because we are so keenly aware of the social, economic, and cultural situations from which individual problems are derived. We need social workers in the future who will fight for opportunities to deliver counseling service to all people and not let ourselves be deluded into thinking that less is more.

Some might say that the description I have just provided is very close to where we are currently in social work practice and education. At the least, it represents our current ideals. But is it possible to imagine a future for social work that stretches us further? Perhaps a look at the careers of two social work visionaries from the past will help us move forward.

## Social Work Visionaries

Let's consider Selma Fraiberg and Bertha Capen Reynolds, whose contributions, while very different, represent two essential aspects of our profession.

Selma Fraiberg was an innovative clinician, writer, and scientist whose work with infants and their caregivers led to new insights into the human developmental process (Emde, in Fraiberg, 1987). This work paved the way for contemporary theories of intersubjectivity and infant-caregiver research (Emde, p. xi). She developed an intensive, home-based method of intervention with parents and young children relying on the insight that in some instances, "ghosts" from the parents' past could invade the nursery and condemn parents to repeat tragedies of their own troubled childhoods with their babies (Fraiberg, Adelson & Shapiro, 1975). Research on her work has shown that parents who develop a capacity to reflect on their own destructive early life experiences are unlikely to inflict them on their children (Fonagy, 1992). The parent's capacity to reflect is central – not the extent of the parent's early life trauma. These findings provide extraordinary support for work that all social workers do to help individuals reflect on their lives.

Fraiberg believed that we had the knowledge to prevent the problems of childhood and saw this ideal as the work of the social work profession. But she (1987) was also critical of public assistance programs which eroded family structure through regulations that provided women with money, as long as there was no able-bodied man in the home. She (1974) spoke out against programs initiated in the 1970's that made employment mandatory for welfare mothers without providing quality day-care facilities. (One can easily imagine what she would say about our current "welfare to work" strategies.) She would have joined our protest against the cynical, misdirected, and under-resourced program, "No Child Left Behind" having once said, "...a society that neglects its children and robs them of their human potential can extinguish itself without an external enemy" (1977).

In short, social workers need to be creative and flexible.

Now let's consider Bertha Capen Reynolds, a visionary of a different sort. She trained for "direct practice" at Simmons School of Social Work, graduating in 1914. Although educated in Freudian theory, she rejected the idea that pathology was located in the individual and instead saw individual problems as adaptive responses to a problematic social system (Reisch & Andrews, 2001). At the time of the Depression, she was radicalized by those who argued that there was wealth enough in this country to cure its social and economic ills, but that the "dead hand of profit" was preventing this cure from happening (Reynolds, 1963, p.151). She joined social workers who aligned themselves with the developing labor movement and who saw the role of government as serving the property rights of those with power. Her writings and speeches questioned the social order, and her clinical approach involved helping clients come together in groups to find mutual solutions to their problems (Reynolds, 1951; 1963). She wanted social work education to include the study of economics and political science and the social movements of people. She was forced to resign from her position of

associate director of Smith School of Social Work in 1937 by the dean of the school who, as she tactfully wrote in her autobiography, conceived of casework in a more “isolated” way than she found possible (Reynolds, 1963, p.208).

In the McCarthy era in the late 40’s, Reynolds was blacklisted because of her open association with the Communist Party (Reisch & Andrews, 2001). “Despite her tenuous status and precarious financial condition, she continued to write and speak out on controversial issues”(Reisch & Andrews, 2001, p. 116). She died in obscurity in 1978, her writings largely ignored. In 1985, her progressive ideals were rediscovered by social work radicals, and her vision was embraced with the founding of the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society, a group committed to humanistic practice aimed at individual and social change (Reisch & Andrews, 2001).

As a pioneer in the fight for social justice, she was at the center of controversies in social work concerning the relationship between treatment of individuals and searches for understanding social forces. She saw the need for people to organize to better their own condition rather than become recipients of social welfare services (Reisch & Andrews, 2001).

## Looking Toward the Future in Unsettled Times

Selma Fraiberg and Bertha Capen Reynolds were social workers who responded to the issues of their time with vision and foresight. Can we do the same?

Fraiberg represents the best of a tradition of theoretically-informed, relationally-directed, evidence-based clinical work. Reynolds represents the tradition of social justice through social change. Politically astute, she was able to see the larger picture, the socio-economic and cultural forces at work in society.

If we are to take a lesson from the examples of Fraiberg and Reynolds, then we must focus both on families and on society. While starting with families who need our services, we would combine this work with efforts to organize, to build better communities, to challenge existing cultural myths and create a new culture. But we also need the ability to analyze the interlocking power structures that control this country, never so blatantly obvious as they are in the current administration.

Activism is not new to social work. An analysis of the economic and social roots of violence and the way it is part of the structure of this country would add a new lens to our work. It will be important to see social issues and forms of violence in global terms and understand that forces that operate across the globe are manipulated to create markets and shortages, poverty for some, high profits for others. Defining violence as Nelson Mandela (1995) did, as anything that violates the integrity of another, we would work to create a culture of nonviolence in the institutions within which we work and in the greater society.

What would it take to educate social workers who had the forms of expertise represented by Fraiberg and Reynolds? For one thing, it would take time. Schools of social work are caught in a serious dilemma right now. We want to provide education to a diverse group of students including older students, working students, students with family responsibilities, and students with jobs that help them with tuition payments. And so we have shortened the educational requirements for many students, giving credit for prior work and

school experience. We have created a very flexible program, and that is good. But in the process of doing so, have we possibly short-changed our ability to provide the kind of education that is needed for the future?

Many of our students go on to do a post-graduate fellowship after they leave the master's program. Often these learning experiences are directed by people who are not social workers, and so our students' continued educational experience is not congruent with social work interests and values. One way of preparing for the future would be to offer a third, post-graduate year of training for those who seek it. This could be elective and part-time, so that students who work could attend. It would allow us to fully expand our curriculum with advanced studies in practice and, most significantly, in political and social change. This extension of schooling would enable us to meet the needs of the social worker of the future.

## Conclusion

And now let me return to where I began this morning. This is a dangerous time in the history of our country, and it is a time in which the very essence of the social work profession is threatened. The difficulties in our profession derive from internal and external pressures. These pressures make it very hard not to succumb to forms of practice and education that accommodate the current system.

But it is also a time for hope. There are tantalizing possibilities for change in the air. It is a time of great challenge, but social workers have never shied away from challenges.

Because we believe that social injustice is at the core of individual social and psychological problems, we need an expanded view of social work practice and of education. The social worker of the future must merge the personas of Fraiberg and Reynolds, becoming a scientific-humanist, a clinician-activist.

These are not new directions for social work; but they must be faced anew, with greater insight, energy, passion and skill. We will not be able to hold on to what we cherish about social work if we practitioners and educators do not take on the problems of the world and mobilize for social change.

In the words of Bertha Capen Reynolds, (written in 1951 but totally relevant today):

“Our practice has its roots and finds its opportunity in the kind of concern for the well-being of people which society really has. ...For this reason, what we believe and do in our profession is of great importance, not only for the growth of our profession in the future but because there is no more critical question in the world today than the relations of all nations to the well-being of their people...” (p. 163).

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