FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO CHILDREN’S RIGHTS: MARIAN
WRIGHT EDELMAN, THE CHILDREN’S DEFENSE FUND,
AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, GHI

The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) was established by the African American civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman in 1973. Its mission is to improve the living conditions of children and young people in the United States, and in pursuit of that goal it supports research, engages in political lobbying, and runs social welfare programs.

A founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Edelman was among the leading figures of the civil rights movement during the 1960s and was a principal organizer of the Poor People’s Campaign. From her experiences in those movements, she became convinced that continued pursuit of her goals would require direct contact and cooperation with governmental institutions in Washington, DC. In 1968, Edelman moved from Mississippi to the national capital and launched the Washington Research Project (WRP), which sought to gauge the effectiveness of recently enacted federal laws on racial equality and social welfare at the state and local level. The project uncovered a diverse array of administrative irregularities, but only in rare cases did its efforts result in redress. Edelman thus launched the Children’s Defense Fund in May 1973 in the hope of creating a new coalition of progressive forces:

I’d learned the importance of being highly specific in my goals, and I got the idea that children might be a very effective means of broadening the base for change. The country was tired of the concerns of the sixties. When you talked about poor people or black people you faced a shrinking audience. That was really the beginning of looking at children and their unmet needs as a new way to build a coalition for social change.¹

Martin Luther King Jr., Edelman’s role model, had often called on his followers to speak out on behalf of the weak and defenseless, “to be a voice for the voiceless.” Children undoubtedly count among the voiceless: they cannot vote or put forward their demands or organize for action. Through the CDF, Edelman sought to use concern for the well-being of the coming generation to create a broader basis for social justice – and in so doing she was acting fully in line with King’s ideas.

The CDF can thus be understood as an organization that emerged directly from the spirit of the African American civil rights movement. It sought to pursue that movement’s goals by new means and methods after classic protest measures – boycotts, sit-ins, protest marches, demonstrations – had lost the power to shape public opinion and political decision-making. In this respect, the CDF stands as an especially striking example of the institutionalization of the social protest movements of the 1960s.

Over the last three decades, the CDF has become one of the most renowned child welfare organizations in the United States, and Edelman has been bestowed with honors ranging from the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism to the Presidential Medal of Freedom. To date, however, the CDF has not been the subject of scholarly attention. My project is envisioned as a step toward filling this lacuna. I intend to provide a comprehensive overview of the growth of the CDF and the development of its activities and programs. I will also set the CDF in the context of the history of children’s aid initiatives and social welfare activism in the United States. In the process, I hope to substantiate my argument about the institutionalization of the civil rights movement.

The CDF’s political work will stand at the center of my investigation. That encompasses its cooperation with other non-governmental organizations, such as African American churches and teachers’ associations, as well as its often close but by no means conflict-free collaboration with the Congressional Black Caucus and other progressive members of Congress. An important aspect of the CDF’s political work that must not be overlooked is its publication program. Another point of focus will be the CDF’s relations with the chief executives from Nixon to Obama. In addition, I will examine the CDF’s diverse social assistance programs and initiatives, including the Black Community Crusade for Children, the CDF Freedom Schools program, and the Child Health Now initiative.

The main source of information for my project will be the records archived at the CDF’s headquarters. I will also interview CDF staff members and participants in CDF programs along with both admirers and critics of the organization. Through an evaluation of these sources and an analysis of internal and external studies, legislative decisions, and statistical data, I will assess the long-term effectiveness of Edelman and the CDF’s initiatives as an agent of progressive social change.