

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDEST

Ideas for a Better Tomorrow



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DEFENDING AMERICA'S PROMISE))

JUAN WILLIAMS

As we look to the future at the start of the twenty-first century pollsters are finding a chilling response to the question of how do Americans feel about America?

In October 2008, just before the presidential election, only 12 percent of Americans told pollsters for the Pew Research Center that the nation was headed in the right direction. And only 7 percent expressed satisfaction with the current state of the U.S.

That means nearly 90 percent of Americans saw their country going in the wrong direction and over 90 percent reported dissatisfaction with what they saw at that moment as we, the American people, finish out the first decade of the twenty-first century.

These are numbers that pollsters usually find in war-torn countries or in the middle of epidemics of disease or economic depression. We have never seen polling numbers like this in modern America.

After the election there was a revival of spirit. With the inauguration of a new president, Barack Obama, the level of optimism more than tripled according to a Pew poll, with 41 percent of Americans saying they believed the country was on the right track. While that was good news, the majority—59 percent—still said the country was on the wrong track. And there was not a similar, positive jump when pollsters

asked Americans if they were satisfied with the status quo or “with the way things are going.” On that question the level of satisfaction went from 7 percent to just 20 percent, leaving 80 percent standing together as unsatisfied.

These poll results came during a recession, on-going concern about terrorism, and as the nation continued to fight in an unpopular war in Iraq. But the deeply pessimistic attitudes the polls revealed gave voice to a something beyond the immediate difficulties facing the country.

One measure of this is a poll by Public Strategies Inc. released in January of 2009 which found more than half of Americans turning their thumbs down on the future by saying it is not likely or not very likely that “the next generation of Americans will enjoy a better life than we do today.”

The sad view of prospects for the next generation of Americans reaches beyond the ups and downs of elections to concerns such as whether the nation’s children can expect to live as well as their parents.

Will our children be able to afford the rent on a good apartment or buy a house? Will they be able to get good health care? Will public schools be up to the job of keeping America’s children at the forefront of global competition? Will the environment deteriorate to the point of causing natural calamities and shortening life

spans? Will the nation ever come to grips with how to control gun violence? Will the American family remain a foundation to nurture the young and the old?

In *Actions Speak Loudest* that deeper level of concern, which hides behind the headlines, is opened and examined by people who have put their hands in the muck and mire of life and tried to create something of beauty—a better outcome. The authors cross all the predictable lines. There are Democrats and Republicans. There are athletes and intellectuals. There is a former president and a queen. Here are people who not only know the statistics but know the reality of these issues.

For example, Richard Castaldo, who was shot at Columbine High School in 1999, discusses gun violence in personal as well as strategic terms. And in this book his essay and all the others is followed by a section on how individuals can take action at home, in their communities, and in the nation to make a difference on gun violence.

Dr. Irwin Redlener, a pediatrician, takes us along for a shocking medical examination inside the mouth of a poor child who has never had the basic medical attention necessary to give him the chance to speak properly. Again, his essay is followed by specific steps that individuals can take

to make a difference in protecting the health of all children.

And Geoffrey Canada, executive officer of the Harlem Children's Zone, Inc. writes with painful, first hand knowledge about the 12 percent of black men who are in jail on "any given day" in America and ties it directly to the fact that 90 percent of them do not have a high school diploma. Again, the essay is followed by suggestions for getting involved with creating solutions to the nation's most important problems.

Actions Speak Loudest is a unique user's guide to making a change. The photographs, by themselves, are inspirational. With the essays and the "action" guides, the photographs create a starting point for lifting the American spirit and stirring people to take a risk, make a sacrifice.

This book is in keeping with the American heritage of Paul Revere and his "Call to Action" for true citizens to defend the promise of America. The key idea is to shift the pessimism found in the poll numbers that suggest Americans are getting comfortable with the idea that our children will not have a better life than the current generation.

If you have this book in your hand you are a dangerous American. You have a tool for radical action to make our great country even greater for the greatest gift—our children.

ABOUT ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDEST))

In 1908, Congressman William Kent made a generous gift to future generations in giving three hundred acres of beautiful redwood forest to the newly created National Park System. President Theodore Roosevelt wanted the forest to be named after its benefactor but Kent insisted it be named after the man largely responsible for the creation of the system, John Muir. In declining President Roosevelt's recommendation, Kent wrote, "Your kind suggestion of a change of name is not one that I can accept. So many millions of better people have died forgotten, that to stencil one's own name on a benefaction, seems to carry with it an implication of mandate immortality, as being something purchasable.

"I have five good, husky boys that I am trying to bring up to a knowledge of democracy and to a realizing sense of the rights of the 'other fellow,' doctrines which you, sir, have taught with more vigor and effect than any man in my time. If these boys cannot keep the name of Kent alive, I am willing it should be forgotten."

Inherent in Kent's words is an appropriate definition of legacy. It is our actions that speak loudest in determining the impact of our lives. And while what we leave behind takes many forms, none is so precious or important as our children.

As a new father myself, I have felt the profound sense of responsibility that comes with having a child. My daughter did not come into this world easily and there isn't a day that goes by when I don't consider how fortunate I am to

have her. Implicit in my responsibilities is a pact, an unspoken generational promise that I and all parents make that says we will go to great lengths and actions to ensure that our children will lead better lives than we have.

Our legacy begins with our own children, but should not end there.

There is an aspect of the American dream that is both self-evident and taken for granted. Inherent in our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is the belief that in doing so we leave our country and the world a better place because of it. Not just for our children but for all children.

Progress and prosperity have allowed past generations to keep good on their promise, but today we find ourselves at the crossroads wondering if we will be able to keep it for the next.

The wealthiest nation in the world should have the healthiest children in the world, yet we do not. The most advanced nation in the world should produce the most intelligent and prepared children in the world, yet we do not.

The American family as we've known it is in grave danger. There are over ten million children in the U.S. without health insurance. Childhood obesity has increased more than 200 percent in the last twenty years. American children are falling behind other countries in educational skills. We are eliminating arts, music, physical education, and history from the curriculum in an attempt to catch up, and their imagination and perspective suffer as a result.

Our youth spend over forty hours a week in front of a screen and fewer than seventeen hours a week with their parents. They are dropping out of organized sports and other community groups at an alarming rate. Every nine seconds, a child drops out of school. They are the first generation of children expected to live shorter lives than their parents. And it can be expected that we will fail in the American ideal to see our children lead happier and more prosperous lives than the ones we did.

When we look forward to what we are leaving behind, not for just the next generation but for the ones that will follow, the picture becomes even bleaker. We are currently in the midst of the most severe global economic crisis since the Great Depression. The world is rife with conflict, and the precious resources that could be going toward solving problems instead go toward creating war. Our planet is in peril, as our resources from energy to food are being used at a rate that fails to consider future generations. Climate change and global warming pose unimaginable consequences. And when in the future troubled times befall our children and grandchildren, the decisions we are making today will compromise their ability to deal with them.

The good news is that we have an unprecedented opportunity to change their future. To still keep our promise, we must have our Scrooge moment of redemption and wake up to realize that the world we see in our nightmares does not have to be.

We live in the wealthiest, most advanced nation in the world. We have the resources—both financial and human—the technology, and the determination to do whatever we want. We

have put men in space, defeated time and distance in communications, cured diseases, and saved the world from tyranny. We have done great things before and we can do them again.

Actions Speak Loudest: Ideas for a Better Tomorrow is a book designed as a clarion call to help us keep our generational promise. It uses the cumulative power of ideas, images, and actions to very simply yet powerfully draw attention to some of the major issues facing America's children, and, most importantly, offer accessible ideas on how to address them.

The issues highlighted in this collection are diverse but share several characteristics. They are serious; they impact a significant percentage of children today, and if not dealt with will have profound consequences not only on individual lives, but also for all of America.

Our contributors are equally diverse, from heroes on the playing field to heroes in the community, from household names to everyday moms and kids. While their backgrounds and political loyalties may be different, they share a common and unquestioned commitment to improving the lives of our children. Their individual legacies have been established not through their words but by their actions and each offers a testament to the possibilities that lie within us to create a better future for our children.

We have brought these issues and contributors together in one collection because too often we fail to recognize how interconnected they are and how much can be gained by looking at our generational obligation as a whole versus the sum of its parts. Martha Graham once said "...every action of ours is passed on to others according to its value, of good or evil, it passes from father to

son, from one generation to the next, in a perpetual movement.” This book serves to remind us of the intrinsic relationship between our individual actions and this larger movement.

In the different debates addressing children’s issues we’ve spent too much time pointing fingers and not enough time holding hands. The intent of this book will be to help depoliticize these issues by assembling pieces from all sides and camps, and finding a common ground by focusing not on the politics, but on the children who are profoundly affected by our inability to act. This book hopes to reframe the discussion surrounding these issues away from the “debate” and on to the action that is necessary to improve the conditions in which our youth are being raised.

Each chapter has been designed to allow you—the reader—multiple access points into each issue.

The saying “a picture speaks a thousand words” has been at different times attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte and Confucius. Most people have uttered it at one time or another, and it is something many of us have thought of when moved by an image, perhaps a famous one like Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” or a more personal one from our own families. Given the capacity of the still image to make us feel, each chapter will open with a moving photograph that embodies the human element of each issue.

To test this premise of a picture speaking a thousand words, in this book an essay of approximately a thousand words follows each image. There is no question that a few well-chosen words can equally rally people to act: Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, or Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I

Have a Dream” speech are but three. This book’s concept is centered on the hope that the combination of words and pictures will inspire us to take action.

Which brings us to the title of this book. It is inspired by the famous Mark Twain saying whose end is not as well known as its beginning, “Actions speak louder than words, but not nearly as often.” Our hope is that in our time our actions will indeed speak *loudest* and with such frequency to create a chorus of change that will ring on from generation to generation.

To help you create your own verse, at the end of each chapter, you will find a section also titled “Actions Speak Loudest” which shows how readers, like you, can become involved in your own homes, communities, and even on a national level to make a difference in the issue at hand.

With great humility, I hope that this book might serve simply as a starting point to a larger movement. As such, while we believe that we have covered many of the major issues of our day and highlighted hundreds of worthy actions and organizations, we also recognize that there may be other issues of import and actions deserving of attention that are not included within these pages. So as you read this book and consider your own legacy, we encourage you to visit www.actionspeakloudest.org. This online community is a place where you can go to share your own ideas, images, and most importantly actions with other readers and gain more information on how you can help create positive change for children in your own community.

On the day my daughter came into this world, twelve thousand other children were also

born in the United States, including ten who shared my daughter's nursery. I often wonder what will become of them. How many of the challenges addressed in this book will they have to overcome? None had any control over the circumstances into which they were born and far too many will unfortunately suffer in the face of these challenges. And in spite of the advantages into which my daughter was born and for all the love my wife and I give her, she will not be exempt from them all either.

As I consider my own legacy, as a parent it must start with the welfare and the future happi-

ness of my daughter, but as an American it extends far beyond her to include the ten in her nursery, the twelve thousand who share her birthday, and the millions who share her generation.

As we look forward to what we are leaving behind, we hope this book gives us all pause to consider the legacy we are creating and the promises we have yet to keep. More importantly, we hope it inspires us all to act so that we may renew our generational commitment to see our children lead better lives than we have and to leave the world a better place than we have inherited.