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The Moral Test of Our Generation

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Oct 29, 2007

St. Anselm's College, Manchester, N.H.

Many of you know that I am the son of a mill worker -- that I rose from modest means and have been blessed in so many ways in life. Elizabeth and I have so much to be grateful for.

And all of you know about some of the challenges we have faced in my family. But there came a time, a few months ago, when Elizabeth and I had to decide, in the quiet of a hospital room, after many hours of tests and getting pretty bad news -- what we were going to do with our lives.

And we made our decision. That we were not going to go quietly into the night -- that we were going to stand and fight for what we believe in.

As Elizabeth and I have campaigned across America, I've come to a better understanding of what that decision really meant -- and why we made it.

Earlier this year, I spoke at Riverside Church in New York, where, forty years ago, Martin Luther King gave a historic speech. I talked about that speech then, and I want to talk about it today. Dr. King was tormented by the way he had kept silent for two years about the Vietnam War.

He was told that if he spoke out he would hurt the civil rights movement and all that he had worked for -- but he could not take it any more -- instead of decrying the silence of others -- he spoke the truth about himself.

"Over the past two years" he said, "I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silence and speak from the burning of my own heart."

I am not holier than thou. I am not perfect by any means. But there are events in life that you learn from, and which remind you what this is really all about. Maybe I have been freed from the system and the fear that holds back politicians because I have learned there are much more important things in life than winning elections at the cost of selling your soul.

Especially right now, when our country requires so much more of us, and needs to hear the truth from its leaders.

And, although I have spent my entire life taking on the big powerful interests and winning -- which is why I have never taken a dime from Washington lobbyists or political action committees -- I too have been guilty of my own silence -- but no more.

It's time to tell the truth. And the truth is the system in Washington is corrupt. It is rigged by the powerful special interests to benefit they very few at the expense of the many. And as a result, the American people have lost faith in our broken system in Washington, and believe it no longer works for ordinary Americans. They're right.

As I look across the political landscape of both parties today -- what I see are politicians too afraid to tell the truth -- good people caught in a bad system that overwhelms their good intentions and requires them to chase millions of dollars in campaign contributions in order to perpetuate their careers and continue their climb to higher office.

This presidential campaign is a perfect example of how our politics is awash with money. I have raised more money up to this point than any Democratic candidate raised last time in the presidential campaign -- \$30 million. And, I did it without taking a dime from any Washington lobbyist or any special interest PAC.

I saw the chase for campaign money at any cost by the frontrunner in this race -- and I did not join it -- because the cost to our nation and our children is not worth the hollow victory of any candidate. Being called president while powerful interests really run things is not the same as being free to lead this nation as president of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. If protecting the current established structure in Washington is in your interest, then I am not your candidate. I ran for president four

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Town Hall Meeting with John Edwards
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Reno, Nevada

Town Hall Meeting with John Edwards
Jan 16, 2008
Las Vegas, Nevada

years ago -- yes, in part out of personal ambition -- but also with a deep desire to stand for working people like my father and mother -- who no matter how hard things were for our family, always worked even harder to make things better for us.

But the more Elizabeth and I campaigned this year, the more we talked to the American people, the more we met people just like my father, and hard working people like James Lowe. James is a decent and honest man who had to live for 50 years with no voice in the richest country in the world because he didn't have health care. The more people like him that I met, the more I realized something much bigger was stirring in the American people. And it has stirred in each of us for far too long.

Last month Ken Burns -- who made the great Civil War documentary -- launched his newest epic on World War II on PBS -- and what a story it tells.

At the cost of great suffering, blood and enormous sacrifice, within four years after Pearl Harbor it is incredible what this nation achieved. America built the arsenal of democracy worthy of our great history. We launched the greatest invasion armada in the history of warfare against Hitler's fortress Europe, and, with our allies, we freed a continent of suffering humanity.

At the same time on the other side of the globe we crossed 10,000 miles of ocean and liberated another hemisphere of humanity -- islands and nations freed from the grip of Japanese militarists. While at the same time succeeding in the greatest scientific endeavor ever undertaken -- the Manhattan project -- and topped it off with building the Pentagon, one of the largest buildings in the world in a little over a year.

It is incredible what America has accomplished. Because no matter what extraordinary challenges we have been faced with, we did exactly what America has always done in our history -- we rose to the challenge.

And, now, as I travel across America and listen to people, I hear real concern about what's going on. For the first time in our nation's history, people are worried that we're going to be the first generation of Americans not to pass on a better life to our children.

And it's not the fault of the American people. The American people have not changed. The American people are still the strong, courageous people they have always been. The problem is what our government has become. And, it is up to us to do something about it.

Because Washington may not see it, but we are facing a moral crisis as great as any that has ever challenged us. And, it is this test -- this moral test -- that I have come to understand is at the heart of this campaign.

Just look at what has happened in Iraq. What was the response of the American people to the challenge at hand? Our men and women in uniform have been heroes. They've done everything that's been asked of them and more. But what about our government? Four years after invading Iraq, we cannot even keep the lights on in Baghdad.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the American people were at their best. They donated their time and their money in record numbers. There was an outpouring of support. I took 700 college kids down to help -- young people who gave up their spring break. But what about our government? Three years after hurricane Katrina thousands of our fellow Americans, our brothers and sisters, are still housed in trailers waiting to go home.

There's no better example of the bravery and goodness of the American people than the response to the attacks of 9/11: firefighters and first responders risking and too often giving their lives to save others, charging up the stairs while everyone else was coming down; record bloodbank donations; and the list goes on. But what about our government? Six years after 9/11, at Ground Zero there sits only a black hole that tortures our conscience and scars our hearts.

In every instance we see an American people who are good, decent, compassionate and undeterred. And, American people who are better than the government that is supposed to serve and represent them.

And what has happened to the American "can do" spirit? I will tell you what has happened: all of this is the result of the bitter poisoned fruit of corruption and the bankruptcy of our political leadership.

It is not an accident that the government of the United States cannot function on behalf of its people, because it is no longer our people's government -- and we the people know it.

This corruption did not begin yesterday -- and it did not even begin with George Bush -- it has been building for decades -- until it now threatens literally the life of our democracy.

While the American people personally rose to the occasion with an enormous outpouring

My Vote, My Voice Deadline
Jan 16, 2008
National

Town Hall Meeting with John Edwards
Jan 17, 2008
Henderson, Nevada

Rally with John Edwards in Los Angeles
Jan 17, 2008
Los Angeles, Calif.

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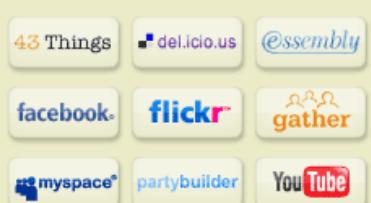
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of support and donations to both the victims of Katrina and 9/11 -- we all saw our government's neglect. And we saw greed and incompetence at work. Out of more than 700 contracts valued at \$500,000 or greater, at least half were given without full competition or, according to news sources, with vague or open ended terms, and many of these contracts went to companies with deep political connections such as a subsidiary of Haliburton, Bechtel Corp., and AshBritt Inc.

And in Iraq -- while our nation's brave sons and daughters put their lives on the line for our country -- we now have mercenaries under their own law while their bosses sit at home raking in millions.

We have squandered millions on building Olympic size swimming pools and buildings that have never been used. We have weapons and ammunition unaccounted for that may now be being used against our own soldiers. We literally have billions wasted or misspent -- while our troops and their families continue to sacrifice. And the politically connected lobby for more. What's their great sacrifice -- higher profits.

It goes on every minute of every day.

Corporate executives at United Airlines and US Airways receive millions in compensation for taking their companies into bankruptcy, while their employees are forced to take cuts in pay.

Companies like Wal-Mart lobby against inspecting containers entering our nation's ports, even though expert after expert agrees that the likeliest way for a dirty bomb to enter the United States is through a container, because they believe their profits are more important than our safety. What has become of America when America's largest company lobbies against protecting America?

Trade deals cost of millions of jobs. What do we get in return? Millions of dangerous Chinese toys in our children's cribs laden with lead. This is the price we are made to pay when trade agreements are decided based on how much they pad the profits for multinational corporations instead of what is best for America's workers or the safety of America's consumers.

We have even gotten to the point where our children's safety is potentially at risk because nearly half of the apple juice consumed by our children comes from apples grown in China. And Americans are kept in the dark because the corporate lobbyists have pushed back country of origin labeling laws again and again.

This is not the America I believe in.

The hubris of greed knows no bounds. Days after the homeland security bill passed, staffers from the homeland security department resigned and became homeland security consultants trying to cash in. And, where was the outrage? There was none, because that's how it works in Washington now. It is not a Republican revolving door or a Democratic revolving door -- it is just the way it's done.

Someone called it a government reconnaissance mission to figure out how to get rich when you leave the government.

Recently, I was dismayed to see headlines in the Wall Street Journal stating that Senate Democrats were backing down to lobbyists for hedge funds who have opposed efforts to make millionaire and billionaire hedge fund managers pay the same tax rate as every hard-working American. Now, tax loopholes the wealthy hedge fund managers do not need or deserve are not going to be closed, all because Democrats -- our party -- wanted their campaign money.

And a few weeks ago, around the sixth anniversary of 9/11, a leading presidential candidate held a fundraiser that was billed as a Homeland Security themed event in Washington, D.C. targeted to homeland security lobbyists and contractors for \$1,000 a plate. These lobbyists, for the price of a ticket, would get a special "treat" -- the opportunity to participate in small, hour long breakout sessions with key Democratic lawmakers, many of whom chair important sub committees of the homeland security committee. That presidential candidate was Senator Clinton.

Senator Clinton's road to the middle class takes a major detour right through the deep canyon of corporate lobbyists and the hidden bidding of K Street in Washington -- and history tells us that when that bus stops there it is the middle class that loses.

When I asked Hillary Clinton to join me in not taking money from Washington lobbyists -- she refused. Not only did she say that she would continue to take their money, she defended them.

Today Hillary Clinton has taken more money from Washington lobbyists than any candidate from either party -- more money than any Republican candidate.

She has taken more money from the defense industry than any other candidate from either party as well.

She took more money from Wall Street last quarter than Rudy Giuliani, Mitt Romney, and Barack Obama combined.

The long slow slide of our democracy into the corporate abyss continues unabated regardless of party, regardless of the best interests of America.

We have a duty -- a duty to end this.

I believe you cannot be for change and take money from the lobbyists who prevent change. You cannot take on the entrenched interests in Washington if you choose to defend the broken system. It will not work. And I believe that, if Americans have a choice, and candidate who takes their money -- Democrat or Republican -- will lose this election.

For us to continue down this path all we have to do is suspend all that we believe in. As Democrats, we continue down this path only if we believe the party of the people is no more.

As Americans, we continue down this path only if we fail to heed Lincoln's warning to us all.

"At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected," he asked, "if it ever reaches us it must spring up amongst us. It can not come from abroad. If destruction be our lot -- we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men we must live through all time or die by suicide."

America lives because 20 generations have honored the one moral commandment that makes us Americans.

To give our children a better future than we received.

I stand here today the son of Wallace and Bobbie Edwards. The father of Wade, Cate, Emma Claire and Jack -- and I know, as well as you, that we must not be the first generation that fails to live up to our moral challenge and keep the promise of America.

That would be an abomination.

There is a dream that is America. It is what makes us American. And I will not stand by while that dream is at risk.

I am not perfect -- far from it -- but I do understand that this is not a political issue -- it is the moral test of our generation.

Our nation's founders knew that this moment would come -- that at some point the power of greed and its influence over officials in our government might strain and threaten the very America they hoped would last as an ideal in the minds of all people, and as a beacon of hope for all time.

That is why they made the people sovereign. And this is why it is your responsibility to redeem the promise of America for our children and their future.

It will not be easy -- sacrifice will be required of us -- but it was never easy for our ancestors, and their sacrifices were far greater than any that will fall on our shoulders.

Yet, the responsibility is ours.

We, you and I, are the guardians of what America is and what it will be.

The choice is ours.

Down one path, we trade corporate Democrats for corporate Republicans; our cronies for their cronies; one political dynasty for another dynasty; and all we are left with is a Democratic version of the Republican corruption machine.

It is the easier path. It is the path of the status quo. But, it is a path that perpetuates a corrupt system that has not only failed to deliver the change the American people demand, but has divided America into two -- one America for the very greedy, and one America for everybody else.

And it is that divided America -- the direct result of this corrupt system -- which may very well lead to the suicide Lincoln warned us of -- the poison that continues to seep into our system while none notice.

Or we can choose a different path. The path that generations of Americans command us to take. And be the guardians that kept the faith.

I run for president for my father who worked in a mill his entire life and never got to go to

college the way I did.

I run for president for all those who worked in that mill with my father.

I run for president for all those who lost their jobs when that mil was shut down.

I run for president for all the women who have come up to Elizabeth and me and told us the like Elizabeth they had breast cancer -- but unlike Elizabeth they did not have health care.

I run for president for twenty generations of Americans who made sure that their children had a better life than they did.

As Americans we are blessed -- for our ancestors are not dead, they occupy the corridors of our conscience. And, as long we keep the faith -- they live. And so too the America of idealism and hope that was their gift to us.

I carry the promise of America in my heart, where my parents placed it. Like them, like you, I believe in people, hard work, and the sacred obligation of each generation to the next.

This is our time now. It falls to use to redeem our democracy, reclaim our government and relight the promise of America for our children.

Let us blaze a new path together, grounded in the values from which America was forged, still reaching toward the greatness of our ideals. We can do it. We can cast aside the bankrupt ways of Washington and replace them with the timeless values of the American people. We can liberate our government from the shackles of corporate money that bind it to corporate will, and restore the voices of our people to its halls.

This is the cause of my life. This is the cause of our time. Join me. Together, we cannot fail.

We will keep faith with those who have gone before us, strong and proud in the knowledge that we too rose up to guard the promise of America in our day, and that, because we did, America's best days still lie ahead.