

Climate Change Leadership and Legacy

**Presentation by Ross C. “Rocky” Anderson
Former Salt Lake City Mayor and
President, High Road for Human Rights**

**Regional Mayors’ Institute on Climate Change
Regional Plan Association**

**September 4, 2008
India House
New York, New York**

Imagine great leadership. Far-sighted leadership with integrity and vision. Bold, effective, principled leadership. People who will stand up, even when it may be unpopular or risky. People who will lead – even in the face of enormous forces of inertia, and even when opposed by powerful, wealthy, entrenched interests – toward better lives and a safer, healthier, more just world, now and far into the future.

It shouldn’t be left for our imaginations. For a change, we and our children are entitled to honorable, capable leadership. Let that change – let that leadership – begin with us.

Imagine not only insisting on competent, moral leadership by others, but insisting it of ourselves in all we do – in our homes, our local communities, our nation, and our world. Imagine being leaders in all we do, every day of our lives.

Immoral and Illegal Military Occupation -

Because of the absence of competent, farsighted leadership, we are engaged in an immoral and illegal military occupation that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives, resulted in horrendous, lifetime physical and psychological injuries for even more, and created chaos and tragedy for millions of Iraqis. Most of our so-called leaders in Congress who voted for this disastrous crime against peace, and who are largely responsible for the war crimes that have accompanied it, did not even take the time to read the National Intelligence Estimate, which was readily available to them. Had they bothered to read that document, they would have discovered, contrary to the gross deceptions heaped upon us by the President and Vice-President, the vast disagreement among the US intelligence community about whether Iraq was building up a nuclear capability or possessed other weapons of mass destruction.

At a time when the US is investing only \$5 billion per year in research and development of alternative energy sources, we are pouring \$12 billion per month into the big, black hole of catastrophic military occupation in Iraq – creating more hostility, more hatred, more terrorism every day we are viewed by the Muslim world as an occupying force.

It is an outrage. Just imagine if real leaders – people of competence, non-partisan integrity, and a focus on the future – had been guiding our country. And imagine if we, the people, had stood up, or at least now will stand up, resolutely against the deception, the immorality, and the illegality of the devastating debacle in Iraq.

Destruction of the Rule of Law and Torture -

Instead of leaders, we have wannabe dictators in the White House who have contemptuously violated our Constitution, our treaty obligations, and domestic law, while declaring that, during this so-called war on terror, their power is unconstrained. So they lie to us and commit felonies under laws passed by Congress, as they secretly order the warrantless electronic surveillance of telephone conversations and email correspondence. For the first time in our nation's history, these immoral hypocrites, with a craven Congress that, in bi-partisan fashion, is largely complicit, cause people around the world to be kidnapped, disappeared, and tortured, dragging our

nation down to the same moral sewer inhabited by tyrannies in other countries from whom we used to proudly distinguish ourselves.

Ruinous Accumulated Federal Debt -

Run by people who have egregiously betrayed the long-term national interest and who have not had the vision or will to adjust our budget priorities to become energy independent with funding for the utilization of clean, renewable sources of energy, our federal government has amassed the largest burden of accumulated debt in our nation's history. The White House just announced that President Bush would leave a record \$482 billion deficit to his successor – a disastrous turnabout in our nation's fiscal situation from 2001, after President Clinton racked up three consecutive years of budget surpluses. That unconscionable deficit will contribute to the astounding current accumulated debt of over \$9.6 trillion.

How much is 9.6 trillion dollars? It's over \$30,000 for every man, woman, and child in the United States. If you threw down a dollar bill every second, it would take you over 304,000 years to throw down 9.6 trillion dollars. Or, if you were throwing down hundred-dollar bills, one every second, it would take you over 3,000 years. Imagine: A one-hundred-dollar bill every second from 1000 BC until now.

In fiscal year 2007, we wasted about \$238 billion paying interest on that accumulated debt. That's almost 50 times what our federal government budgets for research on alternative energy. We spend the same amount on interest on our unprecedented debt each year as our federal government spends on Education, Agriculture, the Departments of Labor, Justice, Interior, Commerce, Transportation, and Treasury, plus the Corps of Engineers, the Small Business Administration, the EPA, NASA, the National Science Foundation, the Social Security Administration, and all state and international programs combined.

Thomas Jefferson was adamant about the destructiveness of accumulated public debt, saying that he “place[d] economy among the first and most important republican virtues, and public debt as the greatest of the dangers to be feared.” Imagine where our nation could be if we had responsible leadership, rather than the earmarking politicians who have recklessly burdened us and later generations with unsustainable, crippling debt.

Imagine what could be accomplished if we joined together in making it impossible for our elected officials to continue on this ruinous fiscal course.

Health Care Disaster -

The “deciders” in our nation, year after year, submit to the interests of the parasitic insurance industry, leaving 47 million Americans completely uninsured and tens of millions more under-insured. This doesn’t happen in Germany, England, Canada, Sweden, or other major industrialized nations. Each year, 18,000 Americans die because they cannot afford health care. Diseases go undiagnosed until it is too late to treat them. Why do we spend more than twice as much per capita on health care as the rest of the industrialized world? Because \$350 billion – nearly one-third of our “health care” funding – is wasted on insurance company profits, sales and marketing, overhead, underwriting, billing, and outrageous executive pay. Leave out the middleman insurance companies and we could apply the \$350 billion savings to comprehensively cover everyone without paying one more cent than we do right now. Imagine if we had the kind of leadership in the United States that could accomplish universal health care coverage. Imagine if we all embraced our democracy and insisted on change.

Catastrophic Climate Disruption -

We face many horrendous problems because of the absence of courageous, principled leadership, but nothing will match the devastating, long-term consequences of the warming of our planet – the transformation of Earth to a largely uninhabitable place – if we do not take effective, urgent action to dramatically reduce the burning of coal, oil, and gas.

Those in power have been self-serving and dishonest, manipulating scientific reports and doing all they can to mislead the public. They have served the interests of their Saudi tyrant friends and the rapacious oil and coal companies, as they cavalierly dismiss the devastating consequences to the inhabitants of our planet, now and far into the future.

The consequences of human-caused global warming already include the severe melting of glaciers around the world, the Arctic Ice Cap, parts of Greenland, and the Antarctic; rising oceans; desertification of millions of acres of previously productive lands; the killing of major coral reefs; the destruction of major forests by bark beetles that now survive warmer

winters; major droughts; and significantly reduced snowpack in areas that depend upon snowpack for water supplies.

Business-as-usual spells disaster for our Earth and for many, if not most, of its inhabitants. Hundreds of millions of people will be driven by rising oceans from their coastal-area homes. Water will be unavailable to farmers and others depending on major glacial systems, including the Himalayas and the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau, which feed all the major rivers of Asia. Forests will be killed off at a rapidly increasing rate. Deserts will expand. Fisheries will collapse. Many species will become extinct. And heat waves will kill more and more people. Planet Earth will be a very different, far less habitable place for our children and those who follow.

With so much at stake, many of those with the greatest power in our country have engaged in campaigns of misinformation, in which much of the federal government has conspired and in which the mainstream media has been complicit, telling us the virtues of “clean coal,” when no such thing exists, and won’t exist in time to prevent climate disaster. They advocate nuclear power, when there is still no way to build safe nuclear power plants nor to assure the safe storage and transportation of highly lethal radioactive materials. They parrot the fiction that combating climate change will be economically devastating, when it is abundantly clear that the real economic devastation will result from the failure to take aggressive action to radically reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.

I referred to the complicity of the media. I’ll offer a recent example. The League of Conservation Voters analyzed transcripts of TV interviews and debates with the Democratic and Republican presidential primary candidates. As of January 25, five prime-time journalists had conducted 171 interviews with the candidates. Of the 2,975 questions they asked, only six mentioned the words “climate change” or “global warming”. What has happened to our media when we hear more about what lapel pin Barack Obama wears or doesn’t wear and about the hair style of John McCain’s wife – and even more about which starlets are going through substance abuse treatment or whether they are wearing underwear – than about the urgent threat to our planet and to its inhabitants?

The Need for Farsighted, Honorable Leadership -

Never before has our nation, and our world, been in greater need of competent, principled, knowledgeable, far-sighted, non-partisan, inspiring leadership. And never before have we been in such need of “upstanders” – people who will stand up and fight effectively and honestly for solutions, rather than submit to the myth – the cop-out, soul-destroying myth – that they are powerless as individuals, or to the tendency of so many who cower in fear of rocking the boat.

Consider what Lee Iacocca, former CEO of Chrysler Corporation, has to say in his excellent book, *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* Iacocca writes:

Had Enough? Am I the only guy in this country who's fed up with what's happening? Where the hell is our outrage? We should be screaming bloody murder. We've got a gang of clueless bozos steering our ship of state right over a cliff, we've got corporate gangsters stealing us blind, and we can't even clean up after a hurricane much less build a hybrid car. But instead of getting mad, everyone sits around and nods their heads when the politicians say, "Stay the course."

Stay the course? You've got to be kidding. This is America, not the damned Titanic. . . . Someone has to speak up. I hardly recognize this country anymore. The President of the United States is given a free pass to ignore the Constitution, tap our phones, and lead us to war on a pack of lies. Congress responds to record deficits by passing a huge tax cut for the wealthy. While we're fiddling in Iraq, the Middle East is burning and nobody seems to know what to do.¹

That is the same Lee Iacocca who blasted Congress when Ford and GM convinced it to back off fuel efficiency standards in the mid-1980s. In classic fashion, Iacocca then declared, “We are about to put up a tombstone, saying: ‘Here lies America’s energy policy.’” An advertisement placed by Chrysler in the *New York Times* in 1985 said, “If CAFE is weakened now,

¹ Lee Iacocca, *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* (Scribner: New York, 2007), pp. 3-4.

come the next energy crunch American manufacturers will not be able to meet the demand for fuel-efficient cars.”

Now, there was real leadership! The CEO of an automobile manufacturer actually calling for more ambitious fuel efficiency standards. Iacocca didn't just have his eye on the next quarter's financial statements; he was looking down the road several years, recognizing that if Detroit didn't build cars that ran on less gas, manufacturers from other nations would take the lead.

So what happened after decades of Congress bowing to the resistance of Ford and GM to more stringent fuel-efficiency standards? GM and Ford's debt was reduced to junk bond status, GM is worth less than Harley-Davidson, and the top three auto manufacturers are all now outside the United States.

The Leadership Imperative for Each of Us -

In the face of the tremendous challenges facing us, there are no good excuses. And time's running out, very quickly indeed. The truth is: If there is to be leadership toward solutions, that burden, that privilege, that responsibility of leadership is for each of us to assume. It's not for someone else to do. It is for each and every one of us.

Too often we think of “leaders” as only those we elect to public office. The sad fact is that principled leaders in public office – those who help lead toward the policies and practices that best serve those whose interests they are supposed to advance, including later generations – are few and very far between.

Electing the “right” people is never enough. In order to find solutions to the tough problems facing our nation and our world, and in order to embrace the grand opportunities that abound, we need competent, honorable leaders at every level, in every aspect of our lives. The leadership of responsibility and role-modeling of decency in our homes, our schools, and our churches. The leadership of a moral legacy, taking into account, in all public and private pursuits, the interests of our children, grandchildren, and those who come along in later generations, who will rightfully inquire whether we left the world better or worse off because of how we conducted ourselves during our short time here.

Jim Wallis describes the personal responsibility we all share as follows:

[T]he members of Congress [are] the ones . . . who walk around town with their fingers held high in the air, having just licked them and put them up to see which way the wind is blowing. . . .

* * *

Many of us believe that by replacing one wet-fingered politician with another, we can change our society. But it never really works, and when it doesn't we get disillusioned. We then get tempted to just grumble, withdraw, or give up altogether on ever changing anything. But that's where we make our mistake.

The great practitioners of real social change . . . understood something very important. They knew that you don't change a society by merely replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change a society by changing the wind.²

We won't change the wind by waiting for someone else to do it, waiting to elect the "right" person to public office, and certainly not by simply giving up.

Kurt Vonnegut, in his last book, wrote:

Don't spoil the party, but here's the truth: We have squandered our planet's resources, including air and water, as though there were no tomorrow, so now there isn't going to be one.³

I've always been a Vonnegut fan, but to resign ourselves to that dire assessment, and because of such resignation to simply give up, is as immoral and disgraceful as the misconduct that led, in the first place, to the squandering of our planet's resources.

When considering the characteristics of great leadership, we are well served to consider William Faulkner's speech when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949, during which he called for writers to focus on, as he put it, "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths

² Jim Wallis, *God's Politics* (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, 2005), pp. 21-22.

³ Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (Seven Stories Press: New York, 2005), p. 44.

lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed – love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” Faulkner declared: “Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man.”

Then Faulkner proclaimed:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things.

I submit it is a leader’s duty – the duty of each of us – to exercise and exemplify these things in all we do: love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice and endurance. It is exactly those qualities that are sorely missing in our nation’s current foreign relations, in our disregard for international standards of fundamental human rights, in our health care system, in our corrupt campaign finance system, in our federal fiscal fiasco, and in our irresponsible neglect of the global crisis of catastrophic climate change. Instead of love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice and endurance, we witness hatred and division, dishonor, scorn, shame, indifference, greed, short-sightedness, and meanness toward the most vulnerable.

We can all point the finger of blame at whoever is in the White House. We can point to Congress. And we can even, at times, point to the courts. But the ultimate responsibility, particularly in a democracy where we have the freedom to speak and to assemble, is ours. If we are not “upstanders”, if we do not provide and demand principled, effective leadership, we also are to blame.

The solutions to our most urgent challenge, cataclysmic climate change, are at hand, if we act aggressively, treating the situation as the emergency it is – an emergency that far surpasses the attack on Pearl Harbor or the threat of terrorism. The global warming challenge is of the greatest significance humankind has ever experienced – and it presents us with tremendous positive opportunities if we will only embrace them.

In the end it will come down to leadership – and to whether people will be “upstanders” – standing up, even against vocal, well financed, powerful opposition, and demanding that our nation, and the international community, rise to the challenge.

Will we stop the building of coal burning power plants and phase out existing ones? If we are to prevent irreversible, catastrophic climate change, we must, and we must do it soon.

Will we retool our industrial sector as we did during World War II, mobilizing the creativity and determination of the American people to conserve precious resources and to develop, build, and implement clean, renewable sources of energy – while at the same time building a stronger, more sustainable economy?

Will we export clean renewable energy technologies to other countries, particularly in the developing world, helping them as we did Europe with the Marshall Plan? If we could spend more on bailing out the thrift and loans than the cost of the Marshall Plan and the bailouts of Chrysler, Lockheed, Penn Central, and New York City combined, we should be making at least that same level of investment in researching, developing, manufacturing, and implementing clean, renewable sources of energy like wind, solar, geothermal, tidal, and ground heat energy.

Many city officials are demonstrating their commitment to make a difference. I have worked on climate change policy and practices for many years. When I was Mayor of Salt Lake City, with ICLEI’s tremendous help, we were able to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in municipal operations by 31% in just four years. We did what just about every city, county, state, and federal government can do. We recovered methane at our wastewater treatment plant and landfill and used it to produce electricity. We utilized smaller vehicles in our fleet and switched to alternative fuel vehicles whenever possible. We used some of our cost savings to purchase wind power, instead of electricity produced at coal-burning power plants. We retrofitted the lighting in our buildings and traffic signals, utilizing energy-efficient compact fluorescent and LED bulbs. We set new energy-efficiency standards for city buildings and structures for which city funds are used. We provided convenient recycling for residents. We expanded opportunities for alternative transportation, including light rail, bicycling, and safer walking, becoming the nation’s most improved city for pedestrian safety. We fought

against sprawl-inducing highways and developments, although our then-Governor and state legislature were furious about it. And we enlisted dozens of businesses and hundreds of citizens to utilize high-efficiency practices in their everyday ventures.

Reasons for Optimism -

My work is driven by optimism – and by a profound hope that we will do the right things quickly enough to make the difference. And it is driven by the same passion that led me to swear on the night my son was born that I will do everything I can to make this a better world for him and his children.

Finally, my optimism is driven by people like you – upstanders and leaders who are smart enough and informed enough to know what we’re facing and principled and courageous enough to take up the challenge, even in the face of a stubborn, selfish, misinformed and misinforming opposition.

I am optimistic when I see funding partners like Rockefeller Brothers Fund, organizations like ICLEI, Regional Plan Association, and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, mayors, committed municipal staff members, policy professionals, and grassroots activists focus so effectively on achieving real, meaningful results, in cities all over the country.

When I see people who will stand up, when necessary, against state legislatures and other powerful interests like the coal or utility industries, it gives me hope for the future, and brings me joy to know that, in response to the title of Lee Iacocca’s book, “Here are leaders. Here are people who will stand up, take on the slackers and the global-warming-profiteers, and be bold enough and effective enough to move our nation and our world toward a safer, more secure place.”

Thank you all for your leadership. Thank you for being upstanders. Thank you for tackling the challenges posed by climate change, with the recognition of what is at stake, and for embracing the positive opportunities presented to us. Your work will save lives and save species. Your work will improve the quality of life. And your work – your leadership – at such a pivotal moment in the history of civilization, will help build a safer, healthier, more compassionate world.