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The Context

The social, economic, and fiscal problems the country now faces are severe and challenging in fundamental ways, and all of us must be willing to be part of the solution. The job will be difficult. The present powers-that-be are formidable. Those who would change our country must have vision and courage.

There are answers to our problems. They require will, discipline, and sacrifice to bring about, but even that is not sufficient. As citizens, we must have the confidence that our democracy gives us the tools to improve our circumstances. As human beings, we must see our interconnectedness and recognize that we are capable of great things when we cooperate with one another. These attitudes are necessary because the problems we face come from neglect over many years—by both of our major political parties and by ourselves as individual citizens. Just as no one guaranteed that the Greek, Roman, or Ottoman empires would last forever, no one has guaranteed America its continued dominance in the world. If overreaching

abroad and decay at home cause us to falter, the world will be a place with considerably less hope.

America's idealism, optimism, and spirit of self-reliance, its celebration of concerted action, its suspicion of the abstract, its hands-on practicality, its recognition that in hard times people need one another—all these have created the unique American character, a character that has inspired people around the globe. But the America of today is in a state of confusion. We don't see our problems clearly; or if we do, we often—out of inertia, fear, or greed—fail to deal with them. We too frequently live in the past or revel in the present instead of adopting the actions that would secure the future. The federal government has amassed an enormous debt in just the last ten years. Many of our state and local governments, far from being laboratories of democracy, have pursued the “free lunch,” spending lavishly on pensions and health care and then handing on the bill to future state administrations. Much of the financial sector seems unable to decide whether it wants to help build a new world or suck the life out of the declining one. The corporate sector is consumed with the short term, trapped in a financial prison of stock buybacks and quarterly earnings reports, unable to invest or hire in its own long-term interest. Ten years ago, sixty-one U.S. companies had triple-A bond ratings; today there are four. Our culture also seems excessively coarse, marked by gratuitous violence and sex without meaning. Everywhere people are making excuses for their failures, from the athletic field to the corporate boardroom, and then salving their mistakes in the warm balm of public relations. As long as you act a hair's width within your lawyer's definitions of the law, you get a pass that exempts you from doing what is not just legal but also right.

I had a friend who worked at the highest levels in three major investment banks over twenty-five years. He told me that once when

he refused to work on a deal because he didn't think it was right, the head of the firm came to him and said, "I know what we're doing is unethical, even immoral, but I can assure you it's not illegal." The travails of our major religious institutions—the Catholic Church with its pedophilia scandals and cover-ups; the gay-bashing fundamentalist preachers arrested on morals charges; the four rabbis in New Jersey convicted in 2010 of money laundering—serve to remind us that while no one is free from sin, the land is engulfed by arrogance, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness. Meanwhile, secularists indiscriminately deplore the spiritual bedrock of every society since the time of the ancients.

Exacerbating these failings is a mass media that champions the superficial, sensational, and extreme view. Style, social trends, sports, and popular culture are often covered in greater detail than foreign and economic policy. Only a few major newspapers, all of them under relentless financial pressure and apparently unable to reinvent themselves in order to attain a level of profitability, still attempt to ferret out the truth, but reporting, the craft of going out to discover what isn't known, too often gives way to opinion pieces. Paying serious television journalists good salaries costs more than putting two guests on the air with a celebrity host to bat around some issue without reference to the facts. The guests spin the issue to suit their interest, and the host, given the pressure of time, often doesn't follow up. These exercises rarely educate or even try to persuade the audience with facts and analysis; rather, they tend simply to confirm knee-jerk opinions. Thanks to demographic targeting, a TV network knows what the viewers of particular programs care about—what appeals to their tastes and moves them to action—and playing to these preconceived ideas ensures a high Nielsen rating and consequent healthy advertising revenues. Fox News Channel is one of the most profitable news organizations in the world.

The losers here are the people, who would like to know: What happened in the city council meeting? Or in the congressional committee room? How was the money for schools spent? How did that special-interest tax break make it into the tax code? Who agreed to the pensions that bankrupted our town? What did corporation X do for the ten thousand workers it just fired? How will the latest technological innovation affect jobs? These are the kinds of questions that rarely get answered, at least on television. If people in power are not held responsible for what they do, it will be easier for them to abuse that power. Without facts to challenge a government official or a CEO, the people's questions and accusations are parried by elementary public-relations tactics.

It's a sad comment on the media that it is rewarded more for invading the privacy of celebrities—even, as we saw in England last summer, hacking their cell phones—than for uncovering fraud in the defense sector or revealing the misuse of union members' dues. Instead of investigating a politician's private life, the media should be investigating his or her public actions. There's a Pulitzer Prize embedded in nearly every tax or appropriation bill if a journalist simply digs for it. Would the pure food and drug laws have passed, or even have been proposed, in the early twentieth century without the muckrakers? Would Watergate have led to Nixon's resignation without the *Washington Post*? Would the Vietnam War have become as controversial without TV network reporting in the war zone?

Now the military has learned how to handle the media, too, by confining the information flow to the briefing room, so that what's seen on TV is not the war itself but what some general wants us to know about the war. Corporations have departments devoted to crisis management, so that when an embarrassing story breaks, the danger can be contained by admitting wrongdoing to some lesser offense and promising quick action to punish a few low-level per-

petrators. If the story is about an investigation, the suggestion for the accused is always to settle as quickly as possible. When the press charges you with a cover-up, you just release mountains of information, which gives the appearance of transparency and guarantees that the press will generally fail to uncover the buried incriminating information.

Occupants of the White House in recent administrations have played the game of manipulation as well as any CEO, and often more ruthlessly. If you become a relentless questioner, you'll be estranged from the White House. What journalist would want to be cut out of the flow of leaked information? Your editors will wonder why you aren't getting the good stories. Your family needs your paycheck, so you tone down your intensity and settle for covering the dueling press releases of two candidates, or two legislative parties, with the full knowledge that objective truth is the casualty. Moreover, the twenty-four-hour news cycle is relentless. With two to three stories breaking every day, often planted by campaign consultants, reporting in depth on the country's real problems becomes difficult. With this kind of media culture, is it any wonder that we know less and less about what's going on around the globe?

The current American condition exists in a world where other nations are on the rise: China, with 1.3 billion people, a relentless work ethic, strong families, economic farsightedness, and a thirst for higher living standards; India, with nearly 1.2 billion people, a burgeoning entrepreneurial drive, deep spiritual traditions, and a functioning democracy; Brazil, with plentiful water, rich forests, farmlands, mineral wealth, and a developing sense of democratic nationhood; Indonesia, with abundant natural resources, a presence on both sides of the Malacca Straits, and a unique cultural mix of animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam; Turkey, with a history of empire, a unique position between Europe and Asia, and relative stability in a volatile part of the

world. And as America confronts new ambitious national actors, it must still cope with such mature powers as Japan, with its democratic rule of law, technological prowess, and highly educated population; Russia, with its massive mineral and energy reserves and renewed strategic assertiveness; Europe, with its euro zone market (bigger than our own), its diverse talents, and lessons learned from a bloody history; and finally our neighbors to the north and south, Canada and Mexico—one remarkably stable, the other threatened by the flow of drugs north and guns south—without whose friendship our world would be a much more dangerous place.

This is not 1945, when the United States bestrode the world like a Colossus. Today our circumstances are more perilous than in the past. The full-time job of leadership requires more subtlety. Listening carefully to partners and opponents alike is as important as impassioned oratory. Persuasion is the leader's most effective tool and national example his best weapon. We need to foster a new spirit of partnership among all countries, in which we learn from what other societies have to teach us as diligently as we promote our homegrown solutions.

Our international standing will diminish unless we get into shape—not just in the next administration or the next decade or the next big crisis, but now. In fact, the crisis is here today; it is a slow-motion crisis. Our predicament is like that of the frog in the pot of water on the stove, who doesn't notice the temperature is rising until it's too late. You see denial of reality in everything from our eroding infrastructure to our declining dollar. Timidity and self-interest have produced the bad public policy that has gotten us to this point. And time is running out. We're lucky that the financial crash of 2008–2009 woke us up to an aspect of our situation and offered us a window into what has gone wrong. Can we marshal the willpower, discipline, candor, imagination, and resilience to bounce back from where the last several decades have put us? Can we regain our championship form?

America starts with many strengths. We are endowed with vast natural resources. Our economy is still the largest and most dynamic in the world by a wide margin, with the most sophisticated capital markets and the most mobile population. Our people are resourceful. Our graduate schools and many of our universities are among the best in the world. Our political institutions remain flexible enough to accommodate bad news and then allow us to regroup. We have a legal system that functions with relative impartiality (unless you're poor and black) and a judiciary that for the most part is above politics. Americans remain deeply patriotic, willing to heed the nation's call in times of danger. An appealing tolerance allows most of us to live side by side with people from different backgrounds in such a way that we often learn from them. Creativity abounds—from scientific research to the arts, from entrepreneurship to the innovative cultures of many large business organizations.

Americans, although we differ on the best way to respond to it, are uncomfortable with the poverty in our midst. It offends our sense of America's promise. Most families teach their children to be diligent and abide by the rules, because they believe that with honesty, hard work, and a little luck you can accomplish anything in America. The nonprofit sector has given the charitable impulse a way to improve society and has provided individuals with the means to serve their neighbors. History itself gives us reason to hope—from the revolution led by George Washington to the efforts in nation building by Jefferson, Adams, and Hamilton to the leveling instincts of Andrew Jackson, the almost mystical sense of destiny expressed by Abraham Lincoln, the tough progressivism of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the ebullient caniness and resolute courage of FDR, the plainspoken decisiveness of Harry Truman, the battle-tested wisdom of Eisenhower, the expansive inclusiveness of LBJ, the unflinching determination of Ronald Reagan. The outcome of upheavals in each of these presidents' times was

uncertain. Settling a continent, fighting a civil war, overcoming the violence and inequality of industrialization, persevering through world wars and ideological confrontation, rebounding from economic depression after economic depression, overcoming the legacy of slavery, and remaking our democracy at regular intervals: America has been tested. Each time the challenge seemed formidable. Each time we made it through. The assumption is that we will make it through our current crisis, too, but nothing is guaranteed. In a democracy, it depends on what the people want and how their leaders lead.

In times of great stress, inaction is not an option. You have to act, because if you don't change the downward trajectory of a bad situation it will only get worse. Wishing it weren't so doesn't make it better. Ignoring it perpetuates it. Only well-considered action will allow us to move beyond our current situation.

Can we all do better?