

What If Children Became Conventions' Focus?

By Dr. Todd Huffman

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Both political parties are preparing for their national conventions this month and next, with the usual arguments over the lineup of speakers and the nature of their addresses. No one, to my knowledge, is pushing to ensure that a speech directly addressing the well-being of children is part of either conventions' schedule.

Such a speech might go something like this:

"On this night, I would like to depart from the usual speech demanded on such occasions when, every four years, we celebrate the process of democracy. On this night, ladies and gentlemen, I would like instead to speak about America's children.

"While our nation has dutifully kept its gaze fixed on approaching catastrophes, we have become blind to the catastrophes already upon us. In the most economically developed nation in the world, at least 11 million children are uninsured and receive little or no preventive medical or dental care. This is to say nothing of the millions more undocumented children in our midst.

"Millions of our children live in substandard housing. Millions are suffering mental and physical malnutrition from chronic hunger, and chronic neglect and abuse. Our infant mortality rate ranks an abysmal 28th internationally. An astounding one-fourth of American 3-year-olds have not received their complete immunizations.

"And while our nation obsesses over threats from abroad, every day here at home our children face a barrage of threats to good health. One-third of American children are overweight or obese. Under siege, they are confronted daily by powerful fast food and soft drink industries, endless junk food advertising, underfunded schools selling unhealthful food and reducing physical education, and a lack of safe and accessible places to play due to decades of poor community planning.

"My fellow Americans, the child is the canary of our societal coal mine, and I'm here tonight to tell you that the canary is not looking too healthy. From the household level to the school and community levels, and finally to the governmental level, our society is failing to protect the health and welfare of our greatest resource.

"Given that the truest measure of a nation's maturity is its ability to safeguard the hope of a better future for its youngest members, our nation is showing that it needs to grow up, and quickly.

"Tonight, I propose that our advance to maturity will begin when our nation views social, economic and political issues almost solely from the perspective of what is best for our children. Begging your forgiveness, I take an enormous liberty in modifying the wisdom of the great Martin Luther King, Jr. by a single word: 'We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a children-oriented society.'

"Our nation does not really have a money problem; we have a priorities problem. Our political priorities have long favored the needs of business while overlooking or dismissing the needs of children, though the two are, surprisingly, not mutually exclusive.

"Our leaders have discovered that mobilizing us against unknown enemies is more politically useful and requires of us fewer sacrifices than mobilizing us against the known enemies: hunger, poverty, obesity, AIDS, abuse, shamefully underfunded schools, and the corporate exploitation of children.

“Our nation has a long history of protecting the health and welfare of children. It is time we do so again. Making children our focal point can tie us together as nothing else can. On issues as wide-ranging as the environment, education, energy policy, and foreign affairs, if elected I vow to frame every decision with the simple question: What is best for our children?”

“That is not to say that there will be simple solutions. Compromises and sacrifices will be required. Just as no single political party offers a monopoly on solutions, no single party is to blame for letting things get out of control. Just as the child is blessedly untainted by political orientation, so should be the means employed in addressing his needs.

“Like a “typical” teenager, our nation often behaves as if invincible, and able to live forever. With maturity, however, comes the realization that we live forever only through our children, and our children’s children. With maturity, even childless adults often come to realize that their immortality rests upon making the world a better place for generations to follow.

“Ladies and gentlemen, children are one-fourth of our population, and all of our future. Every child we’re leaving behind in the great nation of plenty is, in the final sense, one more wasted opportunity to improve that future.

“Thank you, and God bless the children.”