

"We Must Act Now", by Bill Clinton



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One year ago this summer, things were going great. Preparations for the opening of my Presidential library in Little Rock were in high gear. The Clinton Foundation was working in Africa, India, China and the Caribbean bringing lifesaving medicines to people living with HIV/AIDS. And I was on an extended tour promoting my autobiography, *My Life*, signing books for thousands of people.

As Labor Day weekend approached, I returned to Chappaqua, N.Y., from a book signing in New Orleans and was looking forward to joining Hillary at the State Fair in Syracuse, N.Y. It was not to be. As I got off the plane, I felt a severe tightness in my chest—something I had experienced a few times before, but always during exercise, so I had attributed it to exhaustion.

I was concerned enough to call my doctor, who recommended that I be tested. An electrocardiogram revealed that I had not had a heart attack. But I also had an angiogram, in which dye is injected into the bloodstream to determine whether arteries are blocked. It showed severe blockage, including 90% in two arteries. I was a heart attack waiting to happen.

The doctors would not even let me go home from the hospital where the tests were performed. Instead, an ambulance took me to NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan for open-heart surgery. Hillary cut her visit to upstate New York short to join me at the hospital, as did Chelsea. The surgical team decided to delay the operation for a couple of days, to give the blood-thinners I had received when my blockages were discovered time to wear off.

So we spent that Labor Day weekend waiting, visiting with friends, watching sports on television and playing cards. An enterprising—some might say intrusive—photographer for a New York tabloid used a long lens from a perch near the West Side Highway to get a shot of me. I was just glad I wasn't wearing one of those open-backed hospital gowns!

On Labor Day 2004, while most Americans had the day off, my surgical team was hard at work, sawing my chest open, stopping my heart for close to an hour, putting me on a heart-lung machine, relocating a vein from my leg and rerouting an artery from my chest to bypass my four blocked arteries.

Of course, I don't remember much about that day, but as I was going under, I do recall seeing dark masks coming toward me, followed by circles of light containing the faces of Hillary, Chelsea and others close to me. They smiled and flew away toward a brightness. I'm not quite sure whether it was one of those "near-death experiences" or a life-affirming one—perhaps it was a bit of both.

Thanks to God and the great medical team at NewYork-Presbyterian, led by Drs. Craig Smith and Allan Schwartz, things went very well, and I was soon on the road to recovery. Hillary and Chelsea helped me every step of the way. Friends sent more good movies and books than I could watch or read. And more than 80,000 people took the time to send me an e-mail or a letter offering their prayers and best wishes.

Among the letters that arrived in the weeks after my surgery was one from the American Heart Association (AHA). They, like me, appreciated all that the media had done to publicize the facts of my experience in a way that educated lots of people about heart disease. I had already heard from a number of folks who had gone for a checkup after hearing what happened to me and, as a result, had

discovered their own health problems. Other people had gotten back into an exercise program, started eating right or went back on anti-cholesterol drugs that they had stopped taking. I also appreciated having the chance to warn people that, even if they can pass a stress test—as I had in the years prior to my surgery—it doesn't mean they're in the clear.

The AHA wanted to explore the idea of working together in some way to see if we could extend this "teaching moment" beyond the short media lifespan of the story of my operation. It was as if they had read my mind, because I wanted to do the very same thing—something more than a onetime public-service announcement. On top of all the other gifts I had been given in my life, I now had been given a second chance at living itself, and I wanted to do what I could to help others enjoy longer, healthier lives too.

After my staff and I explored the options with the AHA, we decided that one of the most important issues facing Americans today is the epidemic of childhood obesity, which can lead to early heart disease, diabetes and other problems.

More than 9 million children and adolescents in this country are overweight or obese. That is nearly four times the number 40 years ago.

Carrying around excess weight for years can lead to high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and premature death. For the first time, we are seeing substantial numbers of children with type 2 diabetes, a condition that normally develops only in adults.

Why is this happening? Because children are eating more unhealthy foods and exercising less. Who's responsible? We all are. Too many parents don't have enough time to prepare—or believe they can't afford—healthier foods. Too many schools have stopped physical education programs, rely on vending machines with sugary treats to raise much-needed cash and don't serve healthy meals in the cafeteria. And too few restaurants and fast-food outlets offer low-fat, low-salt and low-calorie meals.

The American Heart Association and I—along with Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who has lost more than 100 pounds and has done impressive work to change eating habits in the schools and restaurants of his state—will mount a comprehensive challenge to childhood obesity.

We will encourage the entire restaurant industry, especially the fast-food and fast-casual restaurants, to create healthier children's menus. By offering more whole grains, fruits and vegetables, as well as healthier versions of popular foods, restaurants could be a powerful force in turning the dangerous tide of childhood obesity and unhealthy living. We also will work to support school-based efforts to educate children about healthy eating, increase physical education, improve the quality of cafeteria food and either eliminate vending machines or fill them with healthier snacks.

Finally, we will ask young people across America to give their energy, creativity and commitment to leading their generation away from the health problems that obesity and inactivity can cause.

The older I get, especially following my own brush with mortality, the more determined I am to try to prevent anyone younger than me from dying. That's why my foundation is bringing care and treatment to children and adults with HIV/AIDS in the developing world and why I continue to promote religious, racial and ethnic reconciliation in troubled areas. And that's also a big part of why I believe we've got to act now to turn the tide of childhood obesity in America.

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste" is the wonderful motto of the United Negro College Fund. I hope we all believe that a heart, especially the heart of a young child, is a wonderful thing to save.

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