

SYMPOSIUM BREAKFAST

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HON. MIKE HUCKABEE

Governor
State of Arkansas

Over the years, Governor Vilsack has become more than just a colleague in the governor ranks but a true friend. And when we first announced that we would be dealing with the Healthy America initiative at the National Governors Association, Tom was the first person – he leaned over to me in the summer meeting in Seattle, and he said, “I want you to know this is of extreme importance to me and interest to me. I want to be a part of this.” And so it was quite logical that he would be one of the, in fact, the first governor that I asked to serve on the NGA Taskforce that’s overseeing the Healthy America initiative. And we were here yesterday visiting two magnificent high schools, one in the Des Moines area and one in Ankeny, that really exemplify Best Practices in terms of nutrition and physical education opportunities for children.

So I want to say thanks for his hospitality, his warmth, his friendship, and for the extraordinary gesture. And folks, I’ve said this all over America about him in ways he’s never even heard it yet. When he came to Little Rock last March in order to run with me in the Little Rock Marathon, he did so because when he heard that I was going to do it, knowing that for me this was a new pilgrimage, something I’d never embarked upon or imagined embarking upon, I remember him saying to me in Washington during a meeting of the Executive Committee of NGA, he said, “Congratulations on the weight loss and the effort to regain your health. I hear you’re trying to _____ a marathon.” I said, “Yeah, I’m going to do my best to do it.” He said, “You know, I’m so proud of what you’ve done, I may just come down there and run with you.” And I thought, yeah, right. Sure enough, the next week his staff called some folks on my staff, got the dates, and he actually came, and he ran the entire thing, much to his credit, on a very warm day. And I tell you, that’s an exceptional thing. Tom, I like you. I don’t know if I’d run 26.2 miles for you, and I think you’re a great guy, you know. I’ll tell you what. I’m dedicating the race two weeks from now, I’m going to dedicate one of those miles to you because I really am proud of you, and thank you very much for your friendship, you and Christie.

I love speaking out of state for the simple reason that nobody up here really knows me. You have not heard all my stuff, you might even sit through the whole thing – probably not but you might. I can always hope. I was lieutenant governor and had been in that position for not too very long when I was invited to speak at the Rotary Club in Stuttgart, Arkansas. John Ruan and I were talking about Stuttgart not long ago, because I think we both spend a little duck hunting time there during the winter.

This is a true story – I’d gotten there a little early for the noon meeting of the Rotary Club and pulled up to the place where I was told it was to meet. Because I was there a little early, wanted to make sure I was at the right spot, so I was walking up the steps to the building, and an elderly

gentleman was coming out just as I was going up. And in part to confirm the location of the meeting and in part just to make some small talk, I said, "Excuse me, sir, but is this where the Rotary Club meets?" He obviously did not know who I was, didn't really look up at me, but as we passed he said, "Yeah, but you sure picked a bad day to visit. The lieutenant governor's gonna talk today." I knew then it was not going to be one of my better moments as a public speaker.

Let me ask you something. Tell me if this scenario sounds familiar. Government officials become very concerned with the nation's dependence on foreign supplies of a particular product. And nations who have large supplies of this product intend to not only dominate the world stage, but they're able to exert extraordinary influence because of their possession of the product. It's the taxation of this particular product that helps fund much of the government's infrastructure. Wars are fought to preserve and to protect this commodity. And some of you are sitting right there saying, "Yes, you're talking about salt." Actually, I am.

You may remember this summer when the President was on vacation, they asked him what books he was reading, and one of the books that he said he was reading was *Salt, A World History*. And everyone thought, huh? Now granted probably the book *Salt, A World History* is not going to show up on Oprah's recommended reading list for great summer reading – 450 pages in a book about salt. But I decided I would just have to check it out, because I couldn't imagine what would be so intriguing and what could even create 450 pages to talk about the world history of salt.

But it turns out that through so much of history, wars were waged, trade routes were established, fortunes have been made, inventions created – all revolving around the issue and supply of salt. Without enough of it, our bodies die. But with too much of it, our bodies die. So it's appropriate in a way to say that, not unlike salt, when we talk about food we really talk about this essence of life, but we also are understanding that not enough of it causes people to die – something you have been involved with in this organization since its inception. The serious issues of malnutrition, people not having enough caloric intake to sustain their lives.

In this country, however, we face a different kind of crisis. And it is a crisis. And the crisis we face is that we have too much caloric intake, and it's causing us to die.

When the events of September 11th rattled this nation's soul, it did so in part because we saw on our television screens the deaths of over 3,000 of our fellow citizens. And it was a stark, shocking reminder to us of how frail life can be and how quickly it can end. And we were outraged. And literally the world turned on its axis as a result of the events of September 11. We changed the way government does business, we changed world outlook, we changed budget priorities. Nothing has been the same in any of our structure since September 11th of 2001.

But the fact is, as tragic as it was for us to lose over 3,000 people, as riveted as we were just a few weeks ago with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina where we saw 1100 people pass away in the horrors of that hurricane and then later with Rita coming right beyond it. We watched in horror as people from our own country looked more like folks from a Third World, waiting for rescue as they sat there on the overpass on Interstate 10. And we felt in a way so helpless, wanting to reach out there and go rescue them. And all of us – it didn't matter what our background or political persuasion were – were all frustrated that we weren't getting there soon

enough and we weren't getting there effectively in order to relieve the pain and suffering that we saw.

And we not only saw those people there, but in a way we saw ourselves, because the reality is, we all live below sea level. All of us live within the levies of our own fears and anxieties of what might crash in on us at any given moment. And for some, it might be the storms of a hurricane. But it might be the storms of leukemia, heart disease, a child's alcoholism, a father's Alzheimer's – all of us, sitting perilously close to something that can take our safety and our security away.

It's somewhat sad, however, that as captivated as we were by the deaths of 1100 from the hurricane, or 3,000 from September 11th, we have yet to be completely captivated by the fact that this year 600,000 Americans will die because they took in too much food, and they carried out too little exercise.

America in a way looks a lot like an NFL football game. You have 22 people down on the field who desperately need a rest and 50,000 people in the stands who desperately need some exercise. So the picture of America, a handful of people, a small percentage actually taking care of themselves but who could use a little bit of help. But the vast majority, overeating and underexercising their way to an early grave, to the point that we're now seeing a true crisis in America.

If I could call your attention, I want to show you what's happened in this country just in the last several years. If you will note, it hasn't taken too awfully long for the obesity trends... And this only speaks to obesity, not even just to overweight and obesity, just to those with a BMI of 30 or more. If we go back to 1985, you're going to notice a trend that is established. And I'm going to go through this quickly. Watch each year as you see the states that are colored in who begin to experience greater rates of obesity. And from 1989 to 1990 to 1991 to 1992 to 1993, and you notice in the Midwest, the southern regions, we often call it the "Bible Belt" – well, we are busting our belts, folks, in the Bible Belt. 1996, '97, and we continue to the point that we have to start changing the color code to keep up with the obesity trends among United States adults. By the year 2000, this is what the map looks like. In 2001 we now move into a new color scheme with red replacing. By 2002, 2003, 2004 it now begins to look like this, with increasing levels of people in the obese range – now to a point where more than 25% of the states in red now are with a BIM index of 30 or more.

Please understand – when we say that there is a crisis, there really is. This is not the disease of the month club coming to bear new news. This is a trend. Many people today are worrying a pandemic of Avian flu, and rightfully so. States are preparing, the country is preparing, the world is preparing for what might happen, for what might happen with a pandemic of Avian flu. What this country must do is begin to be concerned with what already is happening with an overwhelming trend toward an obesity crisis that is not only taking its toll on the health of Americans, but it's taking an incredible toll on the economy of our country – to the point that state Medicaid costs are simply unsustainable at the present rate of growth.

There's not a state in America that's not faced with a Medicaid crisis, doesn't matter whether it's Iowa, Arkansas, New York, California. Ask any governor the number one problem you've got in

your budget, and every governor will tell you it's Medicaid. It's the one item that no one can seem to be able to get a handle on, because it runs away from us.

Ask any corporate CEO today what's his biggest concern, and he'll tell you it's the healthcare costs of its employees. You may have read just recently, GM laid off 25,000 employees, not because people weren't buying cars but because they couldn't afford to pay the health insurance for employees. This year GM will spend more money paying for healthcare benefits for its employees than they spend in buying steel that goes into the cars they make. Now, stop and think about that. When you purchase a car, you really aren't purchasing the automobile. You are purchasing the healthcare for the employees who put the car together. The car is the incidental cost. Think about that.

I had a meeting with Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks Coffee – Starbucks, one of the most responsible corporate citizens in America that provides a vast array of health benefits for its employees. But its workforce is relatively young, for those of you who haven't shopped in Starbucks for a while. If you do, you find out that most people are younger than you. At my age most everybody is getting that way. But I would tell you is that even with a young workforce, an average age of about 27 in the Starbucks organization, Howard Schultz told me that this year Starbucks will spend more money in healthcare benefits for their employees than they spend purchasing coffee for their entire chain.

Healthcare costs are no longer a part of the cost of doing business. They are the primary cost of doing business. And the simple fact is that much of the cost is related to chronic disease, which is preventable if we would change the culture of health from where we focus on disease and how to treat it and instead focus on wellness and how to maintain it. And it is the culture of disease that has cost us what we now experience, and that is an economic and a health crisis.

The crisis is such that when we did body mass index screenings in every public school student in Arkansas, we anticipated that we would be comparable to the national averages of about 31% of our students who were either overweight or obese. We were shocked to learn that it's closer to 40% of our students. That's by actual measuring them. And it's something that we have found very revealing to us, realizing that there is a crisis.

Architects now are having to redesign buildings because they were designed for the weight and the fitness level of people 30 years ago who could get down a stairwell in a certain matter of minutes, and no longer can the average American get down a stairwell, because he or she is much larger and less fit and incapable of getting down a stairwell in the same amount of minutes. So the whole design and process of egress out of a building has to be rethought.

Airlines are now starting to charge people for the fact that they might be obese and need two and not one seat. Now, having flown on some airlines recently, I think it's in part because they're making the seats smaller than they've ever made them before. But you know, it makes sense. I remember having to pay a \$25 penalty on an airline that I'll allow to remain nameless, although its initials would spell out "Didn't Even Leave the Airport." But I paid a \$25 surcharge for the bags because I was three pounds over on a bag, and right in front of me was a lady who was 300 pounds over the bag limit, and she paid nothing extra. And I'm thinking – let me see if I get this right. You're going to charge me extra to carry three pounds of my luggage, but you're carrying

her luggage, her, for no extra charge. And they're finally figuring out they're going to have to start doing that.

My point is, the crisis is not manufactured. It's not something some government people have come up with so they can justify their jobs. I know that when people start talking about – we need to put attention on something, it's like when Warren Buffet has said, "Never ask a barber if you need a haircut." "Never ask the government does it need to have a focus." Of course, they're always coming up with something we need to do. But this is something, quite frankly, that it doesn't matter whether you're a public health official or the governor of a state, we had better be concerned about the incredible prices that we do face.

Let me mention briefly that the cause is not as simple as some people would like to make it. Some would like to say that the cause is as simple as the fact that kids have access to vending machines at school. I wish it were so easy. The truth is, a University of North Carolina showed that less than 2% of the total calories that most adolescents get even come from vending machines. So we could remove them and we wouldn't have made a big difference. There's not one single thing. And it's not just the fact that we don't have PE classes in schools – that's another factor that some people site as the reason, as if there is only one.

Once again, I wish it were so simple. But it's much more complex than that. And let me be the first caution all of us to just be careful that we think that we can't just somehow put all of this on the schools and expect them to fix this significant crisis, particularly of adolescents and children who are terribly overweight and in many cases obese. Because kids are not like laundry – they cannot be dropped off at school in the morning like a dirty suit, picked up in the afternoon, having been thoroughly educated, well-fed and properly exercised. And I'm afraid there are some people who want the school system to become the surrogate parents. That's not going to be effective.

Good health habits are more caught than they are taught. And it is not just that kids are not getting PE or maybe they're getting too many calories in their lunch line or in the vending machines.

The bigger problem is – we have a culture that has lived off its excess, and we now have underexercised our places so that we don't really walk anywhere, we don't run anywhere. We do as little as we can get by with, and it's killing us, killing us. And the cause is going to have to be addressed from a cultural perspective more so than just from a matter of blame.

In the next slide that I want you to see – and I'll just let you see it very closely – the percentage of obese adults, if you see the difference between 1987 and 2001 over this 14-year period, you'll see that there's a significant increase both in male and female populations, almost a doubling of the percentage of obese adults.

If you also compare, by looking at race, you'll see that even though there is a higher and a disproportionate level of African-Americans and to some degree Hispanics, the rate of increase among these various populations is virtually the same in terms of almost doubling in that period of time.

And perhaps what is most telling is that the average cost of medical care for adults who are 55 and older, by weight, if you look at a person who is of normal weight, those costs are almost \$2,000 less than the person who is obese.

Now, that's where it starts really adding up. Obesity for every individual is costing dramatic amounts of money. The total cost of medical care for adults, if you start looking at those figures again, you'll see a dramatic difference in terms of what it costs to take care of the medical needs of those who are overweight or who are obese.

And perhaps as telling as any slide is this one. Roughly 10% of the cost of medical could be saved if Americans, just the 55 and older, had normal body weight – \$32 billion a year. Now, that's not chunk change in anybody's budget. That's about seven, eight times my state's entire total budget. How much is the budget of Iowa these days? What is your annual budget? Five billion dollars. So we're talking a little more than six times the annual budget of the entire state of Iowa could be saved just from the 55 and over population. That is a dramatic savings. Think of the highways that could be built with \$32 billion. Think of the teachers' salaries we could increase. Think of the college scholarships we could provide. Think about the safety net that we could put under single moms that don't have insurance for their children. Think about the job training that could be available to Americans for \$32 billion a year. That's a lot of money. I'd take a check today from Washington for \$32 billion and not even look back.

The point is, this is not just a health crisis, it is an economic crisis. When I hear Americans say, "We don't have enough money to..." and then you fill in the blank, part of the reason is because we're spending it needlessly on chronic disease that could be avoided and completely missed if we exercised more and if we ate less.

The solutions, really, I don't believe, are going to be found in Washington. That's the one thing I'm absolutely convinced of. Washington is an environment that is so polarized that it is paralyzed. They seem to be unable to agree on where to have lunch, much less on what kind of future America should have. And the innovations will come from states, who have been the innovators and the leaders. As it has come to education reform or welfare reform, our road building or virtually anything that has happened that significantly shifted the culture of the country in the last 20 years has come from state leadership.

And that's why folks like Governor Tom Vilsack and Governor Janet Napolitano with Arizona and Mark Sanford in South Carolina, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, Governor Phil Bredesen of Tennessee, are working with me on the NGA Task Force to begin to find the Best Practices that are going on in companies, states, nonprofit organizations, the Medicaid population, and the general population, to begin creating that menu of Best Practices, whether it's discounts to employees for taking care of themselves, as we do in Arkansas. If they do a health risk assessment, we give them \$20 a month off on their health insurance benefits every month. They can earn points to wearing seatbelts, maintaining normal body weight, not smoking and exercising regularly.

We give people sick leave – we decided to start giving people health leave. They get time credited to them for being healthy, because you know what? They're costing us less money, and when they are on the job, they're productive because they feel better and they're not groaning

and moaning all day with their aches and their pains that are brought about by the chronic disease, the result of three basic bad behaviors – smoking, overeating and underexercising.

And that is giving us for the first time the opportunity to try to shift the culture of health, which is the goal that we must take as a country. And when people say, “But this is Herculean, we can’t do it.” Oh, yes, we can – and here’s why:

We’ve seen other cultural shifts in this country. Now, the problem is this, and let me be honest and blunt with you, and Governor Vilsack would certainly agree. And one of the reasons I have such respect for him is that he does understand it, he gets it, and he has the courage to realize this is not a problem we solve within an election cycle. And the reason that most politicians perhaps have historically stayed away from something of this magnitude is because most of us, quite frankly, like to solve problems that we can solve before our next election. It’s a good platform on which to run.

To be blunt, we’re not going to solve this one before the next election. But we have to turn the battle ship around. Remember in the early sixties when people routinely drove the highways of America and threw trash out the windows and we littered with sort of a disregard to how ugly it was. And Lady Bird Johnson came on the scene and said, “We’ve got to beautify America.” And the Keep America Beautiful was launched.

And the first thing that started to change was an attitude. Then atmosphere changed. We changed literally the environment where we put trash cans around places, and said, “Put your litter here.” And we gave people little bags to put in their cars so they wouldn’t throw it. Of course, some people collected the bags in their cars and when they got full, threw it out on the highways. That didn’t help us a lot. But over time the attitude resulted in atmospheric change, and it eventually resulted in action by the government. When most states, ours included, now can levy heavy fines up to a thousand dollars for a person who litters. Can you imagine having suggested that in 1962? “We’re going to charge you a thousand dollars for throwing a candy wrapper out the car window.” You would have been laughed out of the capital. But now people are mad at you if you don’t pass stringent laws against littering. And we’re intolerant of litter. We find it repulsive when we see someone doing it – because we’ve had a cultural shift.

In 1967 when the government first started mandating seatbelts in cars, I remember that people didn’t have seatbelts in cars. They were an aftermarket addition. And in ’67 when people put them in cars – I don’t know if it was this way in Iowa – but down in Arkansas, you know what people did with their seatbelts? Largely, when they came already factory equipped, they would either stuff them back down in the seat or they would cut them out because they didn’t want to sit on them. They never thought about using them. But attitudes started to change, and the atmosphere changed. And all those television ads with the crash dummies started convincing us that maybe we would be better off wearing one of those things. And now atmosphere led to action, and in most states, ours included and I’m sure Iowa, have a seatbelt law, a primary law that you can be stopped, pulled over and ticketed for not wearing your seatbelt.

Smoking, another cultural change. If this meeting had been held in 1975, there would have been ashtrays at every table. And about half this room, as soon as you finished the breakfast, would have probably lit up a cigarette and started smoking, and the rest of us would have just sat there and choked politely. Can you imagine what would happen if someone in this environment here

today decided to use your bread sauce or plate as an ashtray? People would look at you like you'd lost your mind. And if there are ten people at the table, eight of them would have probably said, "Could you put that out, please?" – if they didn't douse you with water even before they had a chance to ask you.

It's a cultural shift, a significant cultural shift. And when people say that we can't make a cultural change as it relates to health, I say, we've already proven in this country that we can make cultural changes. We can get people walking and biking instead of riding everywhere. We can get people to eat whole grains. We can get people to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables and healthier foods. We can get there. We can't do it by next week, but we can get there.

But in order to get there, it's going to require an extraordinary level of practice, perseverance, and specifically targeted actions on the part of those of us who are elected, and the willingness of those who elect us.

When Derek Redman was preparing for the 400-meter in the '88 Olympics in Seoul, he was favored to win a medal. This celebrated UK runner was considered one of the world's best. Ten minutes before the race, he had to withdraw because of a problem that he had with his Achilles tendon. All of that effort, all of that time and focus to get to the Olympics, and right before, ten minutes, he had to pull out. Five surgeries later and extraordinary levels of rehab and Derek Redman finally was rehabilitated enough that he got back his running form. And in 1992 he was prepared to go to Barcelona to run in that Olympics. And he knew that at his age, this could be his last real shot at being an Olympic medalist. He not only made the team, but once again he was favored to win a medal. And in the 400 meters he lined up, and as the gun sounded he got off to a good start. And as the race progressed, he clearly was in his form. As he rounded the last turn, he was leading the pack on his way to being if not the winner certainly a medalist, when as he rounded the turn, he ruptured his hamstring, collapsed to the track, writhing in pain. All that he had worked for suddenly gone.

Derek Redman's father, sitting up in the stands in Barcelona, watching the agony of his son, couldn't contain himself. Derek's father had been a part of his training, had been with him every step of the way through the surgeries, through all the grueling moments of being out there alone training. Without even thinking, he jumped out of his seat, across the rail, past the security guards and brushed them back and ran out to the track to get to his son. He scooped Derek up in his arms, he put Derek over his shoulder, and the scene in the Olympics that will not be soon forgotten in 1992 was that of Derek Redman's father carrying Derek on toward the finish line. He didn't get a medal. But his father said, "Son, we'll just have to finish this one together."

All over America there are kids laying on the track, the kids who are overweight, obese. I was one of them. I had to decide that that wasn't the way I wanted to finish. When my doctor sat me down and said, "If you don't make a lifestyle change, you're in the last decade of your life," he got my attention. And 110 pounds later, I finally realized that my personally journey is a journey that America has got to make. And it's a journey where we realize that we don't have to lay on the track, but we do need somebody to help lift us up and get us across the finish line. Not every person is going to run a marathon like Tom Vilsack or like I'm going to try to in a couple of weeks again. But every one of us has to be willing to try to make it to the finish line, if not for our sake, for the sake of our children.

Those of you in this room represent perhaps as much as anybody Derek Redman's father. You help produce the food and make it so that it's not only accessible but as nutritious and healthful as possible. And so I would say to you – Please, as you see the kids of the world and particularly the kids of America laying on the track, I hope you'll rush out of the stands, put them up on your shoulder, and let's help get them to the finish line. They deserve no less than that.