

# *Can The Left Get It Right?*

## *Michael Shellenberger On Why Liberals Need To Abandon Complaint-Based Activism*

by Marc Polonsky

*“The era of small thinking is over,” writes Michael Shellenberger. “Today we have in our hands the power to reverse global warming, create millions of new jobs in the clean-energy economy, create a ‘race to the top’ in social and environmental performance by corporations and governments, create poison-free products made from materials that can be continuously recycled, reduce crime, and increase the quality of life for people living in cities.”*

*Dream on, you’re probably thinking.*

*Shellenberger may be a dreamer, but his dream has commanded the attention — and support — of labor unions, prominent philanthropists, environmentalists, and national politicians. At the age of thirty-three, Shellenberger describes himself as “merely a mouthpiece” for his distinguished associates, who include linguist George Lakoff, author and political strategist Joel Rogers, and former Sierra Club president Adam Werbach, but his accomplishments belie that humble self-assessment. Born in the meatpacking town of Greeley, Colorado, Shellenberger organized a chapter of Amnesty International at the age of fifteen and two years later went to Central America to pick coffee in Nicaragua, learn Spanish, and generally acquaint himself with the culture and politics of the region. While in college he worked briefly with the San Francisco-based activist group Global Exchange and got some experience in public relations. In graduate school at the University of California, Santa Cruz, he put his PR skills to work for a group of students who were protesting the elimination of affirmative action by the university regents. Sensing a political and business opportunity, Shellenberger and a close friend cofounded Communication Works, a political-strategy communications agency. “We were twenty-four and didn’t really know what we were getting into,” he says, “but we had the basic sense that progressive organizations had something to say and weren’t very good at saying it.”*

*Their first big client was Global Exchange. Communication Works coordinated the public relations for the group’s highly successful and well-publicized campaign against Nike sweatshops. Over the next five years, Communication Works’ staff grew to fifteen, and its clients read like a who’s who of the major U.S. environmental and civil-rights organizations: the Sierra Club, the Urban League, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Natural Resources Defense Council. By 2000, Communication Works was California’s largest public-interest communications firm.*

*In 2001, Shellenberger and his partner merged Communication Works with a larger progressive firm in Washington, D.C. Six months later Shellenberger left the company to “question our most basic assumptions about what it will take for progressives to start winning again.”*

*He came to the conclusion that “complaint-based activism” was ultimately ineffective, and that single-issue progressive organizations and social movements had, in many cases, become special interests. Some of Shellenberger’s own prior victories now appeared hollow to him. “Nike made some commendable reforms in those factories,” he says. “They fired abusive managers. They replaced carcinogenic glues with water-soluble ones. They even allowed some of their plants to unionize. But we’d been pushing for something much bigger — that Nike more than triple the wages of its workers, worldwide — and we didn’t get close to delivering that. All we had was a set of complaints and demands. We didn’t have a positive vision for the future of the industry that would help Nike become a force for good in the world. The Nike campaign taught me the limits of protest politics.”*

*At about this time, Shellenberger started associating with linguist George Lakoff, whose lifetime study of language and “strategic frame analysis” (elucidated in his influential books *Moral Politics* and *Don’t Think of an Elephant*) gave Shellenberger a new understanding of effective activism. Peter Teague, director of the environment program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, introduced Shellenberger to other prominent progressives. In the discussions that ensued, the question came up: “What if we started looking at the car companies and the United Auto Workers not as opponents, but as potential allies? What would it be like if we made an alliance among businesses, unions, and environmentalists for a grand plan to end our dependence on oil and create millions of new jobs?”*

*Shellenberger brought in pollster Ted Nordhaus, whom he had met when they worked together to save California’s last unprotected redwoods, the Headwaters Forest. “If you look at the polling,” Nordhaus observes, “the quandary with issues like global warming is that a strong majority agrees we should take action, but if you ask an open-ended question about which issues people care about most, very few will mention global warming or even the environment. So we looked at that and asked, ‘How do we make this an issue that figures strongly into the way people think about their future?’”*

*The two allied themselves with other progressive intellectuals who were thinking along similar lines to develop an ambitious vision for rebuilding America. They named it the New Apollo Project, and it calls for a major federal investment in clean energy and energy efficiency with the long-term goal of achieving freedom from oil dependence and creating three million good new jobs. In less than two years, the Apollo Alliance has garnered endorsements from labor unions representing more than ten million workers. Apollo also has the support of most major environmental organizations in the U.S., including the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Union of Concerned Scientists.*

*The Apollo Alliance ([www.theapolloalliance.org](http://www.theapolloalliance.org)) has mushroomed from the brainchild of a few visionaries into a forceful political platform and an expansive network of proponents with headquarters in more than twenty cities. As a cofounder, Shellenberger remains one of Apollo's principal advocates, but he sees it as just the beginning. Through his nonprofit Breakthrough Institute ([www.thebreakthrough.org](http://www.thebreakthrough.org)), Shellenberger is working with pollster Nordhaus and a Canadian corporate-marketing firm to practice sophisticated social-values research for progressive political ends. They are creating a "strategic-values science" that they believe will ultimately replace the old complaint-based activism. What the public will ultimately see, Shellenberger says, is a series of initiatives aimed at providing "big, positive, visionary solutions that solve multiple problems simultaneously while strengthening progressive and American values."*

*To balance his desire for long-term transformation with the need for short-term political impact, Shellenberger also maintains a for-profit political-strategy company, Lumina Strategies, though he limits his clientele to a few carefully selected groups. His most prominent client is Hugo Chavez, the president of Venezuela.*

*In 2003 Shellenberger cofounded the Business Ethics Network, which is currently helping to organize a nationwide campaign to hold Wal-Mart accountable for its labor and environmental practices. Shellenberger is the author of the white paper "Race to the Top: A Report on Ethical Business Campaigns," and has written for the LA Times, the American Prospect, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and the San Diego Union-Tribune.*

*In October 2004, Shellenberger and Nordhaus published a monograph titled "The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World" that stirred debate within the environmental community. The report faulted environmentalists for being so narrowly focused and negative that they miss any political opportunities not easily classified as "environmental."*

*Shellenberger is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese and holds a master's degree in anthropology from the University of California, Santa Cruz. I caught up with him at his home office in El Cerrito, California, in late August 2004, before last year's presidential election and the controversy over "The Death of Environmentalism."*

**Polonsky:** The New Apollo Project is pretty ambitious. You're talking about a \$30 billion annual investment from the federal government. What makes Apollo a new concept, as opposed to just a bundle of old progressive proposals?

**Shellenberger:** What makes Apollo special is that there's coherence in the values it represents, the policies it proposes, and the language it uses. Talking about the millions of jobs that will be created by accelerating our transition to a clean-energy economy moves the environmental movement away from its focus on eco-apocalypse and uninspired technical microfixes, like fluorescent light bulbs and hybrid cars. Environmentalism will never be able to muster the strength it needs to deal with global warming as long as it is seen by the American people as a special interest. And it will continue to be seen as a special interest as long as it fails to offer Americans an inspiring vision for the future. The strength of any given political proposal turns more on its vision for the future and the values it carries within it than on its technical policy specifications. What's powerful about Apollo is neither its ten-point plan nor even its list of endorsements but rather its generous, inclusive, and hopeful vision.

Apollo's underlying values are about improving the lives of working families *and* the environment *and* national security *and* the economy. Apollo aims to put an end to the “either/or” thinking that has characterized environmental proposals.

There may be all sorts of good, progressive policies out there, but they're only Apollo-worthy if they're big and bold, and good for workers, communities, the environment, and business.

**Polonsky:** Being good for business is the difficult leg to add to the stool.

**Shellenberger:** None of this is easy. But neither was going to the moon. Look, the federal government has always played an important role in supporting strategic industries. We did it during the New Deal and World War II and created the most productive industrial base the world had ever seen. And keep in mind that America's electronics industry would never have been possible had we not made strategic investments in microchips in the sixties. Intel would not exist had the federal government not guaranteed its market.

**Polonsky:** When I hear “Apollo Project,” I think of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon. How do you get people to make the conceptual connection between the first Apollo Project and the New Apollo Project?

**Shellenberger:** Both are visions of what our country can accomplish. The first Apollo Project put a man on the moon. This new project is a chance to make America energy-independent. Plus, it's a job-creation strategy. Instead of simply being against offshore drilling and against free trade, which gives Americans the impression that progressives are universally negative, we can be *for* what the United States does better than any other country in the world: we invent things. Invention and reinvention are defining aspects of our national identity and our culture of aspiration. We can't compete on lowest wages or cheapest natural resources, but we can invent. We can create whole new industries.

**Polonsky:** The auto industry, for example?

**Shellenberger:** You name it. The interstate highway system in the 1950s. The railroads after the Civil War. These are projects that led to the growth of industries. They had some very negative consequences, too; don't get me wrong. But the point is that the private sector couldn't have achieved these things on its own; it needed the federal government to play an important leadership role. Apollo wants to do more than inspire a set of policies — we want to define what it means to be American. Progressives need to help people imagine more ambitiously what we can do together. American liberals today are stuck defending government programs that are, in some cases, more than half a century old. We need to reinvent progressive politics by reinventing a strategic role for government that unites Americans and transcends interest-group politics.

**Polonsky:** The Apollo Alliance's ten-point plan mentions, among other things, cultivating deserts for hydrogen. Isn't that a rather far-out idea?

**Shellenberger:** Compared to what? Invading Iraq? We shouldn't be shy to brainstorm far-out ideas — that's how innovation happens. There are reasonable questions about how practical hydrogen cars would be. That's why Apollo is proposing a diverse portfolio of investments. Hybrids and high-performance cars have to be part of it. Also electric cars and fuel-cell cars. We have to look at improving the technologies to reduce carbon emissions from coal-fired plants. We're probably not going to have an entirely solar-based economy anytime soon, so all of those approaches need to be considered. The point is that the barriers to making Apollo happen are not technological. They're political.

Right now our government is chronically underinvesting in new technologies because of an ideology that says government can do nothing right. Bush just slashed the budget of the National Science Foundation. It's outrageous. To say that the federal government shouldn't play a role in stimulating invention betrays a complete ignorance of American history. Should we not have built the railroads? Should we not have invested in microchips? Should we not have created the Internet? It's ridiculous, but that's what we're fighting against: the notion that we should no longer invest our common assets.

The rhetoric of the Right says that the government is alien from the people, that it's a foreign entity that is occupying us. That's a dangerous, disturbing idea, because it concentrates power in self-interested private entities — namely, corporations. As much corruption as there is with Halliburton and the rest, we still elect our government. We *are* our government. We do not live under a dictatorship. Our government is there to represent the public interest. Apollo emerged from the notion that the government ought to reach out and work with corporations and labor unions and environmental groups and make a grand New Deal, so to speak.

**Polonsky:** And a lot of people have signed on to that notion.

**Shellenberger:** Yes, but we've also designed Apollo in a way that conventional-thinking Democrats don't really get. John Kerry and company haven't really picked it up and run with it because they see the world in terms of separate issue categories: one box for foreign policy, one box for the economy, and one box for energy independence. Apollo breaks out of these boxes by telling a story about America's past and future. Too many Democrats are stuck in abstract, single-issue categories that mean little to American voters.

**Polonsky:** Do you think this is a very important election?

**Shellenberger:** Yes, but not in the hysterical way that most liberals do. Because even if the Democrats win, it would only reinforce the belief that what they're doing is basically right, and I think what they're doing is basically wrong. They want to restore the Clinton-era politics of small proposals, deficit reduction (as opposed to investment), and fuzzy foreign policy. In the *New Yorker*, Kerry even said he doesn't want to have a foreign-policy doctrine. Well, you need a doctrine. A doctrine is a vision for your foreign policy. Kerry seems to resist vision, and that doesn't work anymore, if it ever did. You need a bold, exciting vision to bring new people into the political process and create a governing majority. People want a strong leader, and I don't think Kerry is being one right now.

Democrats frame their proposals around issues, when they should be framing them around values. What really determines how people vote is their core beliefs, not what their position is on an issue like the economy or abortion or healthcare. If you can understand what people's values are, you can figure out how to create a governing majority. Our theory is that even people who are fairly conservative on issues like guns and gay marriage hold a lot of progressive values, especially around economic questions, and the Left needs to identify and strengthen those "bridge values."

**Polonsky:** Name one.

**Shellenberger:** Well, the big one we've been talking about is the notion that government has an important role to play in our economic future. We know it's a progressive bridge value because it's one the conservatives feel the need to attack all the time. Just listen to Rush Limbaugh, or take a look at Bush's agenda for an "ownership society."

It's interesting how seldom we progressives sit around and talk about what our values are. Values are the core beliefs that guide human action. But ever since the rise of religious fundamentalism and all its talk of "family values," we liberals have shied away from speaking about our values.

**Polonsky:** I read about a speech Kerry gave in Nevada on the subject of the proposed nuclear-waste dump at Yucca Flats. He said that transporting radioactive waste and burying it at Yucca Flats goes against "sound science." Was that a bridge value he was invoking — sound science?

**Shellenberger:** "Sound science" is a value, but I doubt it's a bridge value. I think it's a value that works among educated liberals. I don't think a blue-collar Reagan Democrat in the Midwest is going to be moved by "sound science." Kerry's preaching to the base with that one, and I don't think he's even preaching to the base all that well, because liberals are as wary of science as they are supportive of it. Science is a value-neutral enterprise. It can be used for good or evil.

Here's a key difference between the candidates in this election: I think voters feel that if they were to have dinner with Kerry, Kerry would judge them on how smart they are, whereas if they were to have dinner with Bush, he would judge them on their values.

And though not everyone thinks they're smart, everybody thinks that their values are good values. They think, *I may not understand everything about politics, but I don't think I should be judged stupid because of that.* And they get the sense with Bush that they won't be. So the more Bush is accused of being stupid, the more the public identifies with him and blames the "liberal elite."

**Polonsky:** What's the essential flaw in liberal thinking?

**Shellenberger:** Liberalism is far too complex to be reduced to having a single flaw. That said, there are patterns of thinking that get us into trouble. One of them is the idea that we'll have more success if we define the problem as narrowly as possible. The way most progressive activism occurs is that scientists discover a problem — say, overfishing. Then somebody funds a few big studies on overfishing. Then the PR people take the studies to the media and get the press to talk about overfishing. And what the public hears is yet another thing that they have to worry about. Here they thought they had a lot on their plates already, and now they have to worry about overfishing! And the solution, of course, is not to eat the overfished fish, or maybe to send a letter to Congress. But the issue doesn't fit into a broad framework. There's no big question to be answered. There's no story or set of values that overfishing fits within.

**Polonsky:** A framework that captured my imagination when I was young, and has captured the imaginations of many people, is sustainable living: how do we coexist with other life forms on the planet? Isn't this a value? Why isn't it catching on?

**Shellenberger:** There are a few reasons. For one thing, although a majority of people will agree that we should do right by the environment, if you ask people, "What are the biggest issues facing the country right now?" the environment doesn't even make the top ten, often not even the top twenty. "Ecological concern," as we define it, may be a value, but it's not a strongly held one.

A value that is much more powerful is shared achievement. How do we do something great together? The United States is a culture of aspiration. Winning the gold at the Olympics, putting a man on the moon, freeing our country from dependence on foreign oil — they're all more motivating than "Let's keep the planet the way it's been for thousands of years." That goal actually tends to work against us. It's not a progressive goal, in either the literal or the metaphorical sense of the term.

**Polonsky:** But couldn't you also frame environmental action as a response to a threat? People on the Right have children and grandchildren too, and there exists a genuine threat to the survival of future generations. Why hasn't that framework been effective?

**Shellenberger:** People see global warming as a threat, but a very distant one, especially in comparison to terrorism, war, unemployment, and the loss of healthcare coverage.

**Polonsky:** But every life-sustaining biosystem on the planet is in sharp decline. Doesn't that fact have the power to alarm people?

**Shellenberger:** I wish I could tell you it did. We're obviously in a disastrous situation, ecologically speaking. But one of the things we've discovered from extensive opinion research on this is that when you tell people about the magnitude of the crisis, either they don't want to believe you or they get frightened into inaction and become pessimistic about the possibility of real change. So first you have to get people excited about a positive vision before delivering the bad news.

As a rule, hope is more sustaining than fear. Scaring people is like giving children sugar: you get a burst of activity out of them, but then they crash. I think we saw this happen with the Dean candidacy and the antiwar movement. Those were campaigns that had a lot of juice for a few months, but then ran out. They ran on anger. What they needed was vision.

**Polonsky:** I thought the antiwar movement expressed its position with intelligence.

**Shellenberger:** What I fault the anti-war movement for is that it was never very clear about what it stood for, neither its core values nor its vision for U.S. engagement in the world. The message coming out of the mainstream antiwar groups before the invasion of Iraq was “Let the inspections work.” What kind of vision and values did that elevate?

**Polonsky:** It elevated the values of deferring to international authority, creating international consensus, cooperating with our allies, using war only as a last resort.

**Shellenberger:** It’s hard to see how any of those values is more powerful than “We’ve got to do whatever it takes to protect our families against terror.”

You saw Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, right? One of the most resonant themes from *Fahrenheit 9/11* was that the people who made the decision to go to war not only suffered no consequences; they profited. That violates a core value: that people should take responsibility for their decisions. If there’s a price to be paid, they should pay it. Moore argued that when our elected representatives decide to go to war, they should volunteer their own sons and daughters first. If you’re going to make this decision for our kids, you have to make it for your own kids too. I think that is a bridge value. “Let the inspections work” is a policy position divorced from a larger vision and a coherent set of values.

**Polonsky:** How might you articulate core values for U.S. foreign policy?

**Shellenberger:** I think we need a foreign policy that encourages democracy and human rights. That would be a very different foreign policy from the one we have now, which is supposedly based on national security. I want to see the United States promoting democracy and human rights worldwide. My problem is not that the United States is an imperial power; my problem is that it’s an imperial power spreading the wrong set of values through its oppressive actions.

I believe in the idea of a “just war,” including U.S. military interventions in Haiti, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Yugoslavia. That said, I don’t support the ways in which many of those wars were fought. In most cases, including Afghanistan and Yugoslavia, the U.S. bombed civilian families in poor neighborhoods when ground troops could have done a better job with far less civilian loss of life. In Haiti, it wasn’t clear sometimes whose side we were on.

Not all wars are just, of course, and I don’t believe Bush made the case for war in Iraq. But I don’t think the Left ever articulated a coherent moral vision for Iraq either.

**Polonsky:** Were you the one who came up with the idea of giving an apology on the Arabic satellite news channel Al-Jazeera for the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison?

**Shellenberger:** That was my wife Karin’s idea. When I saw those images of torture and read the accounts, I felt like sending the victims money out of my own pocket and saying, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to seem crass, but you deserve some reparation.” Then I discovered that the United States military was already going to give the victims money. Karin figured that what we as American citizens ought to do was apologize. Bush’s half-assed apology wasn’t enough. So I spread the idea in an e-mail. Eventually MoveOn.org picked it up, and the apology was made through television and newspaper ads in the Middle East.

**Polonsky:** What good does an apology do?

**Shellenberger:** An apology acknowledges that I did something wrong and that someone else suffered because of it. For there to be healing in the relationship, I have to make amends. On a basic level, it acknowledges that there *is* a relationship. With the apology on Arab TV and in Arab newspapers, we were trying to promote the value of responsibility: that we, as American citizens, are responsible for what’s going on in Iraq. We also wanted to say that our fate depends on Iraq’s fate. The apology was as important for us to make as it was for them to hear.

**Polonsky:** You did some work recently for Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

**Shellenberger:** We tried to make sure that the pre-election polling was done accurately, and also that the press in Venezuela and the United States understood that Chavez was winning in the polls. With some notable exceptions, like the *New York Times* and the occasional AP story, most of the U.S. press coverage of Chavez is incredibly biased. And Venezuela's media are an arm of the oligarchs. The major TV channels in Venezuela literally participated in the two-day coup against Chavez in 2002.

Chavez was elected with 58 percent of the vote despite constant right-wing attacks on him. Here's a politician who has been elected president three times in six years, and the U.S. media and the U.S. government still attack him relentlessly. Why? Because he has brought millions of poor Venezuelans into the democratic process and because he has a huge amount of oil. That scares the hell out of U.S. policymakers and the Venezuelan elite, with whom our government tends to ally itself.

Chavez also commits the sin of doing business with Fidel Castro. He sells Castro oil, and in return Castro sends thousands of doctors to work in the poorest slums of Venezuela, where no Venezuelan doctors will go. It's such a popular arrangement that even Chavez's most vituperative opponents dare not attack it.

Can you imagine how much it drives the elites crazy that Chavez uses his country's oil wealth to benefit the majority and not just the well-connected few? Chavez calls it the "Bol'varian revolution," after Simon Bolivar, the great nineteenth-century champion of independence. And it is a true revolution, in that he's turned things upside down. They're using the state's oil riches to benefit the needy instead of the privileged.

It's obvious to everyone, even National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice, that Chavez is the most stabilizing force in Venezuela. Here you have a country of enormous wealth where 70 percent of the people live in slum dwellings perched precariously on hillsides with sewage running down the streets. When it rains heavily, the hillsides tend to collapse, sometimes killing tens of thousands of people.

Chavez is modernizing the country and spreading the wealth. It's been an honor to work for him and an embarrassment that our government and our media have mistreated him so. He's obviously no threat to us; he depends on us to buy his oil.

**Polonsky:** If he's no threat to the United States, then what are the government and the media afraid of?

**Shellenberger:** Well, look at the terrible example he sets. He says to the governments of the world, "Look, you can use your oil and natural resources to benefit the majority of your people." It's a radical idea in places like Angola and Nigeria — that a country's wealth should belong to its people.

**Polonsky:** On your website I read about an activist campaign conducted by Forest Ethics and the Dogwood Alliance that ultimately convinced Staples office supply to make recycled paper account for 30 percent of its sales. But 30 percent recycled is still not even close to sustainability. Can you honestly call that a victory?

**Shellenberger:** You have to walk before you can run.

**Polonsky:** And crawl before you can walk?

**Shellenberger:** Yes. But I think debates about how to define success hinge on the wrong questions. People within the environmental community love to ask, "Is what we're advocating extreme enough? Does it really get us where we want to go?" And I think the right question is "Does our proposal give us enough momentum to get us where we want to go in the future? Does it increase our power?"

**Polonsky:** The all-or-nothing debate reminds me of my activist days in the eighties. There was a certain counter-cultural identity within the peace movement. You had a sense of being more bohemian and hip than the mainstream. That identity was pleasant for us, but I don't think it served our overall objectives.

**Shellenberger:** And it's interesting what was left out of that identity. People on the Left often leave American-ness out of their identity. They're ashamed or embarrassed to be American. I do think the Left has gotten better about it. The antiwar movement this time did a better job of attaching itself to patriotic symbols. But as long as we're not presenting a vision for the future, we're swimming against the stream of America's populist culture of aspiration.

Let's define what we like about being American. There's a lot that I'm very proud of. I can get a business license from the El Cerrito Financial Services Department, and I don't have to bribe anybody. I can ride my bike with my son to the library, and, at least for now, my librarian won't call the FBI and tell them what I've checked out. I don't worry about going to jail for saying the things I'm saying to you right now. There are many things that I cherish about being an American, but progressives don't talk much about those things because we have such a complaint-based culture.

**Polonsky:** And that gives the Right fuel to say, "If you don't like it here, leave."

**Shellenberger:** At some point in the sixties, the Left bought into the big lie that its values were not American values. We actually believed people when they said that about us. I don't know why it happened, but it did.

Too many figures on the Left, from Noam Chomsky to Michael Moore to Ralph Nader, focus on the negative. I think there's something hard-wired into humans that attracts us to the positive. John Edwards has had a huge amount of appeal among voters because he describes what he loves about America and then talks about what we have to fix — in that order.

Apollo does the same thing. The story we tell at Apollo is "America is a great country, and here's why." Once we establish that context, corporate greed, pollution, and global warming can then be seen as un-American. That's a central part of our strategy.

**Polonsky:** All those left-wing figures you named provide an important perspective, though, don't you agree?

**Shellenberger:** Sure, but if you read a book by Howard Zinn or Noam Chomsky, it emphasizes just one side of America. People have suffered in America; there's no question about it. There's been genocide. There was slavery. We've decimated our native forests. All of that is true.

But it's also true that America has allowed people to worship whatever god they choose, that it offers an unprecedented amount of personal freedom, and that, compared to most of the world, we have achieved a freedom from want that our great-grandparents couldn't even dream of in their day.

Obviously there's a huge amount of suffering in the world, but is there more now than before? For most of human history we've had low life expectancies and high infant- and maternal-mortality rates. My grandparents, who were born at the end of the nineteenth century, had terribly hard lives. My grandmother, with no access to birth control, had nine kids. She didn't even want to have the last child, my mother, because her life was already so goddamn hard.

We enjoy a quality of life in this country that the majority of the world longs to have. For all our missteps along the way, and for all the problems we still have left to solve, our history is a story of progress. That's why I think the label *progressive* is a good one for liberals and the Left generally. We have an inspiring story to tell. Let's get out there and start telling it.