

Public Officials of the Year Acceptance Speech

Rick Cole, Washington D.C. November 15, 2006

A century ago, "The Shame of the Cities" exposed a national crisis of urban corruption and poverty. Lincoln Steffen's book challenged Americans to join what he called, "the fight for good government."

A century later, "A Planet of Slums" exposed an international crisis of urban desperation and poverty. Mike Davis' book confronts Americans with what he calls, "the permanent battlefields of the 21st Century."

A century ago, for the first time in our history, America's cities surpassed the population of those living on farms.

A century later, for the first time in human history, the world's cities will soon surpass the same milestone.

Over the next 25 years, the planet's urban population will explode, from three billion to more than five billion. The future of the human race depends on making cities that are livable and sustainable for five billion people.

It is not America's wealth or power that will be put to the test. It is our example. My 8-year-old daughters and my 10-year-old son never let me forget the responsibility we owe them-and to the millions of children living in cities around the world who go to bed hungry.

That is why it is so inspiring tonight to be among genuine heroes of public service. No matter how daunting the challenges, from rebuilding devastated Mississippi towns to ending homelessness in America, each of you represents what Senator Barack Obama calls "the audacity of hope."

We have hard work ahead. So I take heart from words I first listened to as a child, when President Kennedy declared, "I do not shrink from this responsibility, I welcome it. The energy, the faith, the devotion we bring to this cause will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world."

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