

A TALE OF TWO WORLDS

By Jimmy Carter

Ours is an age of complexity, contradiction, and challenge. As we enter the 21st century, we have wealth and technology unmatched in human experience, and the fortunate few who live in the world's developed nations are almost inevitably propelled toward a future enriched by advances in computers, communication, and life sciences.

But for most of the world's people the glittering opportunities of the new century are beyond reach. There are more than six billion of us on Earth, and by 2100 we may number ten billion. Most of us will live in urban centers, and many are likely to live short and impoverished lives. Lacking both the wealth or awareness to address problems of life in crowded cities, they will suffer from disease and inadequate food and water.

We face tremendous challenges as populations soar, mostly in the poorer nations, and consumption increases in the industrialized world. We must find ways to lessen the burden on Earth's resources, and we must encourage better stewardship of the planet so that all of us live in a clean and productive environment. The decisions we make in the decades to come will affect not only all of human civilization but also the fate of thousands of species representing millions of years of evolution.

All too often our fondest expectations are frustrated. Louis Pasteur, father of the science of microbiology and a key figure in the development of vaccines in the 1880s, suggested that humans had the power "to make parasitic maladies disappear from the face of the globe." Yet, since then hundreds of millions of people have died of infectious diseases—tuberculosis, malaria, AIDS, dengue fever, smallpox, cholera, plague, influenza, and scores of others. And after 30 years of discoveries in molecular biology—including DNA cloning, the sequencing of the human genome, and stunning new developments in techniques for human stem cell research—we still face the daily tragedy of preventable human illnesses, some ancient and others new, unpredicted, and even more virulent.

How can we heal our planet and achieve an Earth that nurtures humanity and nature in all their diversity? As individuals we can act to reduce our risk of exposure to disease and extend care to others. As communities and as nations, we can educate our citizens, legislate ethically and wisely, and support organizations that conduct research and help those who are ill.

Perhaps the most important challenge for the new century is to share wealth, opportunities, and responsibilities between the rich and the poor—for a world where the chasm between rich and poor grows wider will be neither stable nor secure. So far, we have not made enough of a commitment to this goal. Nearly a billion people are illiterate. More than half the world's people have little or no health care and less than two dollars a day for food, clothing, and shelter; some 1.3 billion live on less than *one* dollar a day. At the same time, the average household income of an American family is more than

\$55,000 a year, with much of the industrialized world enjoying the same, and in some cases an even higher, standard of material blessings.

The best measurement of a nation's wealth is its gross national product (GNP)—the total output of goods and services. The nations of the European Union have set a public goal of sharing four-tenths of one percent of their GNP with the developing world. But the United States and most other rich nations fall far short of this goal. Our contribution must increase greatly if we are to face future challenges to humanity with any real hope of success.

A growing number of private organizations, some quite small, are working to alleviate humanity's problems. During the past 20 years, for instance, The Carter Center has focused more than half its effort and resources on health care in Africa and Latin America. Experts have helped us identify some of the diseases we can hope to eradicate. One is caused by a parasite called Guinea worm. When our Guinea worm program started, more than 3.5 million people had this painful, debilitating disease, most of them in remote parts of Africa where only contaminated water is available to drink. We have now reduced this number by 98 percent. Fewer than 60,000 people remain affected—almost all of them in the war zone of southern Sudan—and we are working hard to address their plight. In our fight against river blindness, another tropical disease, each year we have traveled to villages to treat more than seven million people—preventing the possible blindness they would have suffered simply from the bite of a little black fly.

The success of these efforts reaffirms my faith that this is a time not for despair but for a global commitment to make the most of our scientific knowledge to address the problems of our age. This book highlights the challenges humanity faces in the 21st century: the global fight to control disease, the need to make our food safe and our water clean and to learn to live together fruitfully in megacities. The problems may seem insurmountable, but they are not. We have the tools; we have brilliant, dedicated people to find answers. All we need is a sense of sharing and the will to change. The will can grow from understanding. Once we understand, we can care, and once we care, we can change.