



# ACCOUNTABLE

MAKING AMERICA AS GOOD AS ITS PROMISE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR **TAVIS SMILEY**

WITH **STEPHANIE ROBINSON**

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# FOREWORD

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A nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.

—PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

Our democracy, as it was envisioned by the founders of the nation, promises citizens a system of checks and balances, including politicians who lead with authenticity. The real test of authenticity in leadership is the willingness of politicians to tell the truth to the American people whether they want to hear it or not.

The 2008 presidential election will undoubtedly go down as one of the defining moments of the 21st century. Inasmuch as the results reflect both an attitudinal and demographic shift in the American electorate, they also represent a long-overdue exercise in active democracy. The inspiring level of engagement among youth, new voters, African Americans, Hispanics, and the electorate in general this time around in presidential politics was almost as significant as its unprecedented outcome.

While this extraordinary event answered a number of questions regarding the changing American electorate, it has also raised as many: How can we keep voters informed and involved in the political process long after the polls have closed? What does it take to keep our democracy active? How do we invest the engagement dividend that we've now realized?

And, as active citizens, how can we be sure that our elected leaders are telling us the truth? Or how do we make sure that those we select to represent us face consequences when they don't tell the truth?

In *ACCOUNTABLE*, the third book in a series, our mission is to equip citizens with the appropriate tools to assess the performance of our elected leaders and us. Accordingly, my coauthor and I present both inspiring and tragic accounts of everyday citizens and arm readers with "Promise Charts" (at the end of the book) designed to compare the actions of our new ad-

ministration with the initial 10-point agenda outlined in the *Covenant with Black America*, the first book or political primer, published in 2006.

*ACCOUNTABLE* is the yardstick for measuring whether our politicians, our leaders, and we ourselves have satisfied our respective duties in this democracy. Our purpose is clear and nonpartisan; we pull no punches.

During the run-up to the 2008 presidential election, while I was still the resident political commentator on the *Tom Joyner Morning Show*, I caused quite a stir among the listeners—who are largely African American—by insisting that we hold then-Senator Barack Obama accountable for both his political record and his campaign promises. I wasn't singling him out, but rather applying the same standard to him that we should apply to all. I feel now, as I did then, that it is our responsibility as engaged citizens to expect now-President Obama to live up to the promises that made him an appealing candidate. I want Barack Obama to be a great president. I believe he can be. But only if we help make him a great president by being the kind of active citizens democracy demands.

Certainly, I recognize that this transformative moment in American history is much bigger than me, and even bigger than our iconic new president. I revel in the progressive possibilities that this moment portends. But evaluating accountability, in its truest form, acknowledges neither friends nor enemies, and favors neither faction nor party. True accountability goes hand in hand with good government and representation that an active democracy creates, ensuring all of us—elected leaders, public officials, and private citizens—a role in making America as good as its promise.

We, the people, have a big job ahead to hold our elected officials and ourselves accountable. Therefore, we decided, at the inception of this book, that unlike the titles that precede—*The Covenant* and *THE COVENANT In Action*—we would address readers including and beyond the African American community. *ACCOUNTABLE* is aimed at the total *American* community, in the belief that we need “all hands on deck” in this ambitious and perpetual process, regardless of background, socioeconomic level, or ethnicity. There is certainly strength in numbers, and speaking to this expanded audience is fitting for the considerable size of the mission at hand.

Our mission to make government and ourselves more accountable is not shared by all. Some elected officials, business leaders, and others attempt and often succeed in throwing roadblocks in our path. They sometimes question the timeliness and popularity of our efforts. We believe though that the time is now, that there are legions of fellow citizens who share our concerns. As Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" reminds us, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes from the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood."

So let us take Dr. King's lead and use our time creatively, arm ourselves with information, go forth and make real the promise of our democracy.

*Tavis Smiley*  
*Los Angeles, CA*  
*December 2008*

# INTRODUCTION

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The most important political office is that of the private citizen.

—JUSTICE LOUIS BRANDEIS

In the introduction to the landmark 2006 work, the *Covenant with Black America*, Tavis Smiley tells a poignant story about the legendary African American labor organizer A. Philip Randolph. After dinner at the White House with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on September 27, 1940, Randolph was invited to the president's study for cigars, after-dinner drinks, and conversation. There, at Roosevelt's urging, Randolph talked about the dismal conditions for Negro workers and outlined an agenda for government action designed to empower his struggling people.

Roosevelt, after fully acknowledging the validity and merit of Randolph's arguments and the merits of his substantive proposals, challenged the well-known activist with the following words: "Now, go out and make me do it."

While Smiley left the story there and moved on to discuss its powerful implications—namely, Roosevelt's demand that Randolph mobilize the necessary political force so that the president would have no choice but to act—it is time we bring the story full circle by picking up where Smiley left off because the rest, as they say, is history.

On June 18, 1941, at the First Lady's prompting, Randolph, accompanied by NAACP president Walter White, returned to the White House. Presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, in her book *No Ordinary Time*, notes that Roosevelt tried to set a lighthearted tone for the meeting, offering charming stories, but was interrupted by Randolph. "Mr. President, time is running out," the focused organizer said. "What we want to talk about is the problem of jobs for Negroes in defense industries." Randolph, as recorded by the White House Historical Association, continued, "We want something concrete, something tangible, positive and affirmative." He

then gave the president an ultimatum: either introduce an executive order to desegregate the defense industry, or 100,000 black workers would march on Washington.

Alarmed by the prospect of a Negro march on the capital, Roosevelt agreed to draft an executive order desegregating the noncombat areas of the defense industry. A relentless Randolph helped draft and edit the order until he was satisfied with its wording. Goodwin notes that Joseph Rauh, a young lawyer assigned to work on the executive order, once quipped, "Who is this guy Randolph? What the hell has he got over the President of the United States?"

Executive Order 8802 was signed into law on June 25, 1941. It declared that "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin."

Despite his own socialist leanings, Randolph understood the concept of an active democracy. No matter how sensitive or charitable the president was personally, he was a public official who had to be held accountable. As the primary representative of a government "of the people, by the people, for the people," Roosevelt was obliged to account to the masses of citizens and taxpayers over whom he presided. Randolph in turn could be successful in his efforts to affect the actions of the occupant of the highest office in the land only if he first held himself accountable and believed that, as a private citizen, he had the power to do so.

*ACCOUNTABLE: Making America as Good as Its Promise* celebrates and invites readers to exercise the power of the private citizen. It is the logical successor to two bestsellers: the *Covenant with Black America* (Third World Press, 2006), which sets forth 10 issues critical to our democracy and challenges our public officials to address them, and *THE COVENANT In Action* (Smiley-Books, 2007), which offers a tool kit to help everyday citizens effect change.

The *Covenant* was a groundbreaking effort that drew the focus and energies of the African American and larger community toward critical areas affecting black life—from health to housing, from crime reduction to criminal justice, from education to economic parity. It combined information from six years of symposia and research that empowered African



Americans by explaining how individuals and households could make concrete changes to improve their circumstances. The *Covenant* brought experts and professionals in varied fields together at the annual State of the Black Union and at regional symposia to collaborate on its issues. It galvanized community members across the nation—from pulpits to boardrooms—around the major issues affecting their daily lives.

THE COVENANT *In Action* capitalized on the success and direction of its predecessor by prompting the African American community to act on the goals outlined in *The Covenant*. It encouraged readers to become agents of change in their respective communities and outlined steps they could take to organize, connect, and act to effect change.

The *Covenant* is the “what”; THE COVENANT *In Action* is the “how”; and *ACCOUNTABLE* is the “whether”—the yardstick for measuring whether elected officials and citizens have fulfilled or are satisfying their respective duties in our democracy. Building on these first two installments, *ACCOUNTABLE* serves as a timely report card, one holding public officials accountable for what they have promised to date; too often politicians talk and promise but do not deliver. It also holds the community responsible for its actions . . . or the lack thereof.

*ACCOUNTABLE* informs citizens how they can help politicians deliver and make democracy active. It tells ordinary people how they can track the performances and promises of their elected leaders, maintaining that these public figures actually represent their interests and ensuring that they, as private citizens, civically engage with government in ways that improve their communities. It is a tool that provides one of the most precious commodities in a democracy: information.

A critical goal of *ACCOUNTABLE* is to identify how citizens together can plant a flag in that land we know as Common Ground. We flesh out that goal by opening each chapter with stories of individual citizens facing the challenges our country is grappling with as a whole. Too often we talk abstractly about health care, the environment, education, and criminal justice. Stories remind us that we are not alone in the world, that we should not consider the problems facing our nation without trying to understand and empathize with the people dealing with these problems.

Another goal of *ACCOUNTABLE*: to help readers answer, “What obligations do we, as citizens, have to—and for—each other?” Author Peter Block defines accountability as the “willingness to care for the whole,” one that “flows out of the kind of conversations we have about the new story we want to take our identity from. It means we have conversations of what we can do to create the future.”<sup>1</sup> In *ACCOUNTABLE*, we use stories to illustrate the struggles of our neighbors and others, to generate empathy for their difficulties, and to challenge us to *do* something to resolve these difficulties. Equally valuable, these stories—ours and theirs—melt into an active and collective American narrative, reflective of the underpinnings of America’s promise.

A final goal is to help readers connect between their individual lives and their political institutions. We commonly speak about government in the abstract. We feel isolated from the larger political process, repeatedly electing the same representatives and expecting a different result. The timely and actionable information in *ACCOUNTABLE* will empower us as citizens to evaluate and have an impact on the politicians and institutions that shape all our lives.

*ACCOUNTABLE* asks: “How can we create an America as good as its promise?” It strives to set a new standard for those who lead and those who follow by holding our elected officials accountable for what they’ve promised, and ensuring that they’ve lived up to the aspirations enshrined in *The Covenant* and acted on in *THE COVENANT In Action*. It also endeavors to hold the entire American community accountable for our own actions within this process.

Each chapter of *ACCOUNTABLE* addresses one or more of the original 10 issue areas outlined in *The Covenant*. Chapter 1 analyzes health care and well-being, presenting a number of reflective cases, both tragic and triumphant, from the field of health. It sketches the development and current status of American health care, highlighting its disparities, its accomplishments, and its potential.

Chapter 2 considers America’s system of public education by assessing the impact of standardization efforts, to see if they actually represent an effective method of scholastic accountability. It also considers the ra-