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"Citizenship is about honoring the political process by becoming involved in it. But for citizens to want to participate, they must believe in the integrity of the process (or that it can be made more fair). In other words, they must believe it is possible to make a difference. Otherwise, why try? The widespread feeling among many Americans that their vote and involvement won't make a difference anymore is an alarming situation. It is a crisis of civility."

- Jim Wallis

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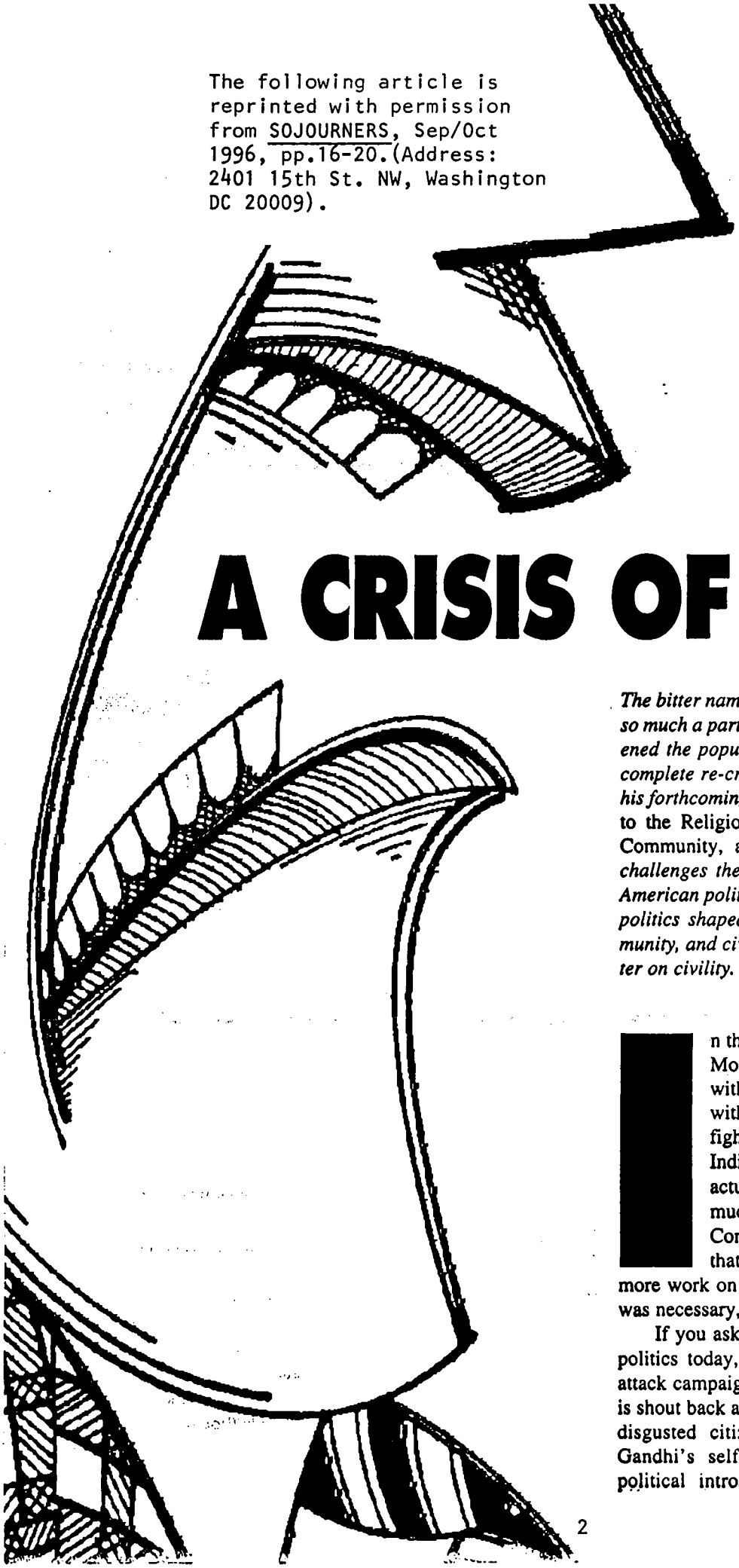

The spiritual challenge of building a new politics.

A CRISIS OF CIVILITY

The bitter name-calling, hostility, and rancor that have been so much a part of recent election campaigns have only deepened the popular hunger for a significant reform—if not a complete re-creation—of the way Americans do politics. In his forthcoming book Who Speaks for God?: An Alternative to the Religious Right—A New Politics of Compassion, Community, and Civility *(Delacorte, 1996), Jim Wallis challenges the role the Religious Right has played on the American political scene and lays the groundwork for a new politics shaped by three spiritual tests: compassion, community, and civility. The following excerpt is from the chapter on civility.* **—The Editors**

In the midst of his fight for India's independence, Mohandas Gandhi remarked, "My first fight is with the demons inside of me, my second fight is with the demons in my people, and only my third fight is with the British." There were times in India's long march to freedom that Gandhi would actually call off the movement for years at a time, much to the frustration of his colleagues in the Congress Party. The great Mahatma would say that they weren't ready for freedom yet and that more work on social, economic, and spiritual development was necessary, often including periods of fasting.

If you ask people what they find most offensive about politics today, they will often cite the bitter rhetoric and attack campaigns of modern political warfare. "All they do is shout back and forth and call each other names," said one disgusted citizen after an early 1996 primary debate. Gandhi's self-examination and political introspection contrasts

BY JIM WALLIS

dramatically with our Democratic and Republican partisans today. Across the political spectrum, we suffer from a loss of civility.

"Civility" is really about two things: the quality and integrity of our public discourse, and the level and depth of citizen participation in the political process. The two are deeply connected.

Politics has always been tough, but the nature of political discussion seems to have reached a new low across America—in the halls of Congress, on the campaign trail, in local communities, and even in the churches! Many veteran political observers are commenting that what we now experience is substantially different from the "rough and tumble" of politics as we have often known it in the past.

The public square has been poisoned by a fundamental disrespect in the political debate. And the political process itself has become more and more closed to genuine citizen democracy.

Being so disrespectful in our political discussion does something to the body politic. Treating opponents and opposing ideas with contempt has consequences that affect us all. It poisons the debate, polarizes the options, and prevents us from finding real solutions to our many problems.

Public discussion *should* be vigorous, sharp, and competitive. All of our often competing interests, values, and constituency needs must be brought to the table for democracy to remain healthy. But disrespect is a different thing altogether.

THE LACK OF CIVILITY actually hurts people and damages the democratic process. To put it spiritually, much of our political discourse today dishonors the image of God in each other and in the fragile process of human beings trying to govern themselves in peace.

The lack of civility makes it almost impossible to find common ground. A political search to find answers to serious problems has been replaced by the politics of warring factions, where winning and losing become the only considerations. We must do more than simply change our language; we must learn to *honor* the process and its participants by treating disagreement with respect.

When political discourse is so "uncivil," it discourages citizen involvement. If politics is characterized mostly by blaming and scapegoating, it creates public cynicism and withdrawal. Every issue that affects the level and the quality of citizen participation in politics is an issue of civility. For example, the dramatically increased power of money over the political process—in the back rooms of Congress or in campaigns of people whose personal fortunes allow them to outspend all their competitors—is a challenge to political civility because it blocks the access and influence of ordinary people in the decisions that govern their lives.

Today few people believe you can get to the top of the political heap without being corrupted, and that is a dangerous development. Honesty, respect, principle, openness, fairness, accessibility, and involvement are all issues of civility.

In the democratic clash of values, there must be some agreement about the values of the public discourse itself. The ways we disagree can sometimes be as important as the things upon which we agree.

Can we differ strongly with our opponents and still value their worth and human dignity? Can we energetically seek to influence public policy and remain committed to the fairness of the political process? Do we ultimately believe in the value of a pluralistic democracy? Can the Religious Right agree to these values? Can the liberal Left? Can the Republicans and Democrats?

Citizenship is about honoring the political process by becoming involved in it. But for citizens to want to participate, they must *believe* in the integrity of the process (or that it can be made more fair). In other words, they must believe it is possible to make a difference. Otherwise, why try? The widespread feeling among many Americans that their vote and involvement won't make a difference anymore is an alarming situation. It is a crisis of civility.

The real issues in our public life today have much more to do with "values" than with ideology. Underneath the surface of political discussion, there is a crisis of values. The false cultural values of materialism, greed, vio-

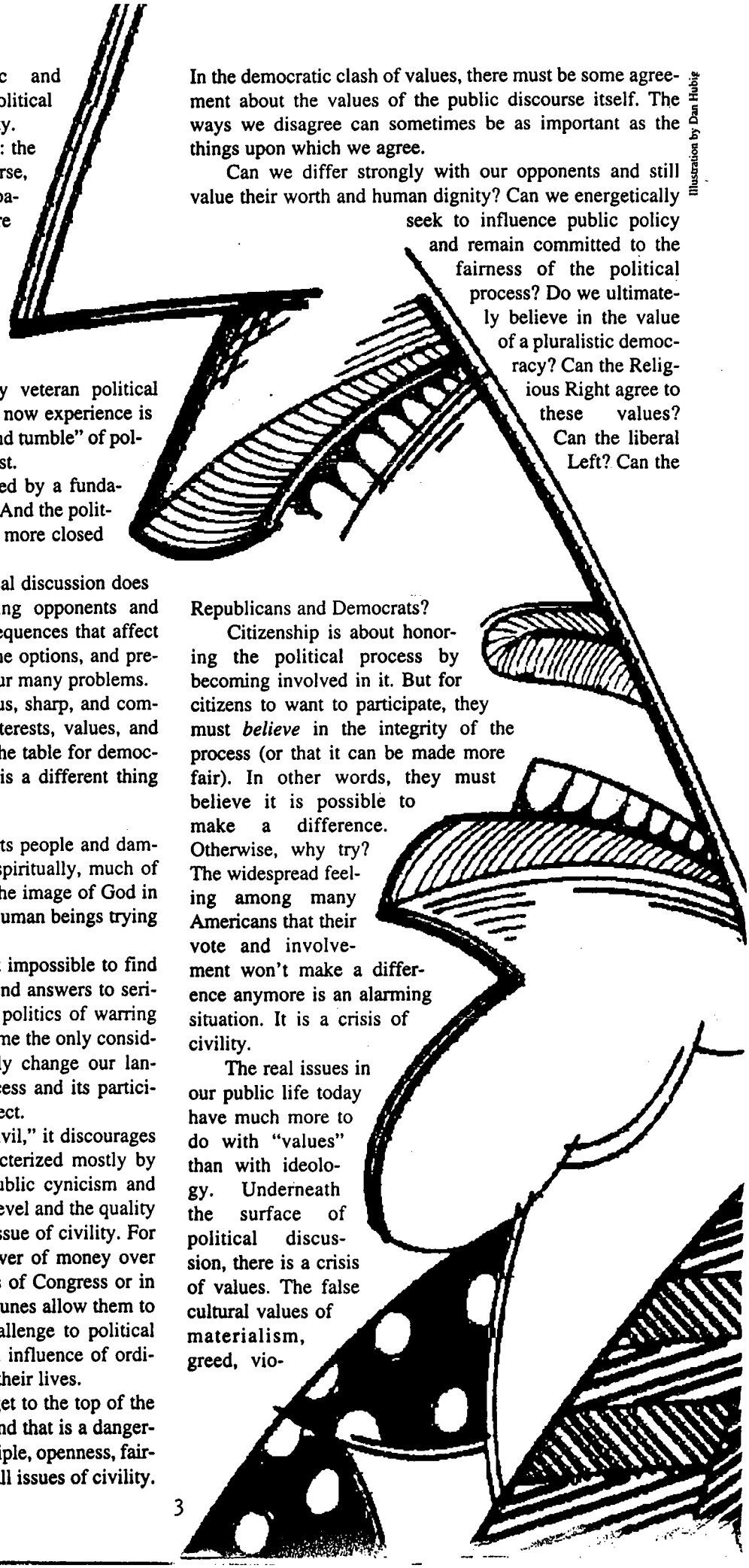

Illustration by Dan Hubig

lence, promiscuity, and selfishness, for example, have an enormous impact upon our public life but are seldom discussed as political issues. The politics of the future will draw its moral heart more from a renewal of positive values than from the agendas of special interest groups.

PRESIDENT FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT is lauded by a broad spectrum of American politicians, from modern-day Democrats to Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich. On the 50th anniversary of his death, journalist David Brinkley commented that before Roosevelt, the hungry were just told to go to a church, charity, or soup line. Roosevelt introduced a new notion of social and public responsibility that has since been widely accepted. Many people now question the role of government in solving social problems. But those who say that the answer is to go back to a total reliance on religious and private charity miss the point.

Government is not the only or, sometimes, the best mechanism by which a nation exercises its social responsibility. But as a *society*, we are responsible for one another. Taking social responsibility is a moral and religious imperative that cannot always be shifted to someone else.

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Indeed, this is *the* inherent problem with the welfare state: We have come to depend too much upon the federal government for solving problems that local communities are often better situated to take on. But neither can we leave those problems to be solved by the private sector alone.

The good news is that people across the country are hungry for new visions and approaches—and the honest political leadership required to find them. Three things will be required to achieve them. First, there must be a recognition that neither the state nor the market can solve the problems we now face. The role of the "civil society"—through the institutions of family, school, neighborhood, voluntary associations, churches, synagogues, etc.—will be critical.

Second, while government cannot solve all of our social problems and is ill-suited to address many of them, the public sector must still play a crucial role. The wall between public and private solutions must be broken down in favor of new "partnerships" and configurations of people and resources in local communities working together. What a catalytic public leadership role might be and how such new partnerships in local communities can be convened should be a central focus of political conversation.

Political columnist E.J. Dionne believes the current political upheaval should be seen as "less a revolt against *big* government than as a rebellion against *bad* government—government that has proven ineffectual in grappling with the political, economic, and moral crises that have shaken the country." In his book *They Only Look Dead*, he predicts the growing influence of "progressives" who take moral and spiritual values seriously. The purpose of good government, Dionne says, should be "to strengthen nongovernmental institutions."

Third, without new moral energy, along with the resources (both human and financial) adequate to the scope of the task, the job will not get done. That pleads for the involvement of the churches and religious community. The business community must play its part as well and follow the lead of those innovative entrepreneurs who now include both the common good and environmental responsibility as part of their bottom line. Marian Wright Edelman, of the Children's Defense Fund, is prophetic when she challenges us to "leave no child behind." Our children are the moral imperative that must become "the measure of our success."

We need a politics of community and a politics of hope that can begin to bring us together. Given the wars of Washington, that kind of politics will most likely emerge first in local communities led by citizens with a moral vision of social transformation. It is a battle not well left to the politicians but one that calls for nothing less than the spiritual renewal of our practice of citizenship.

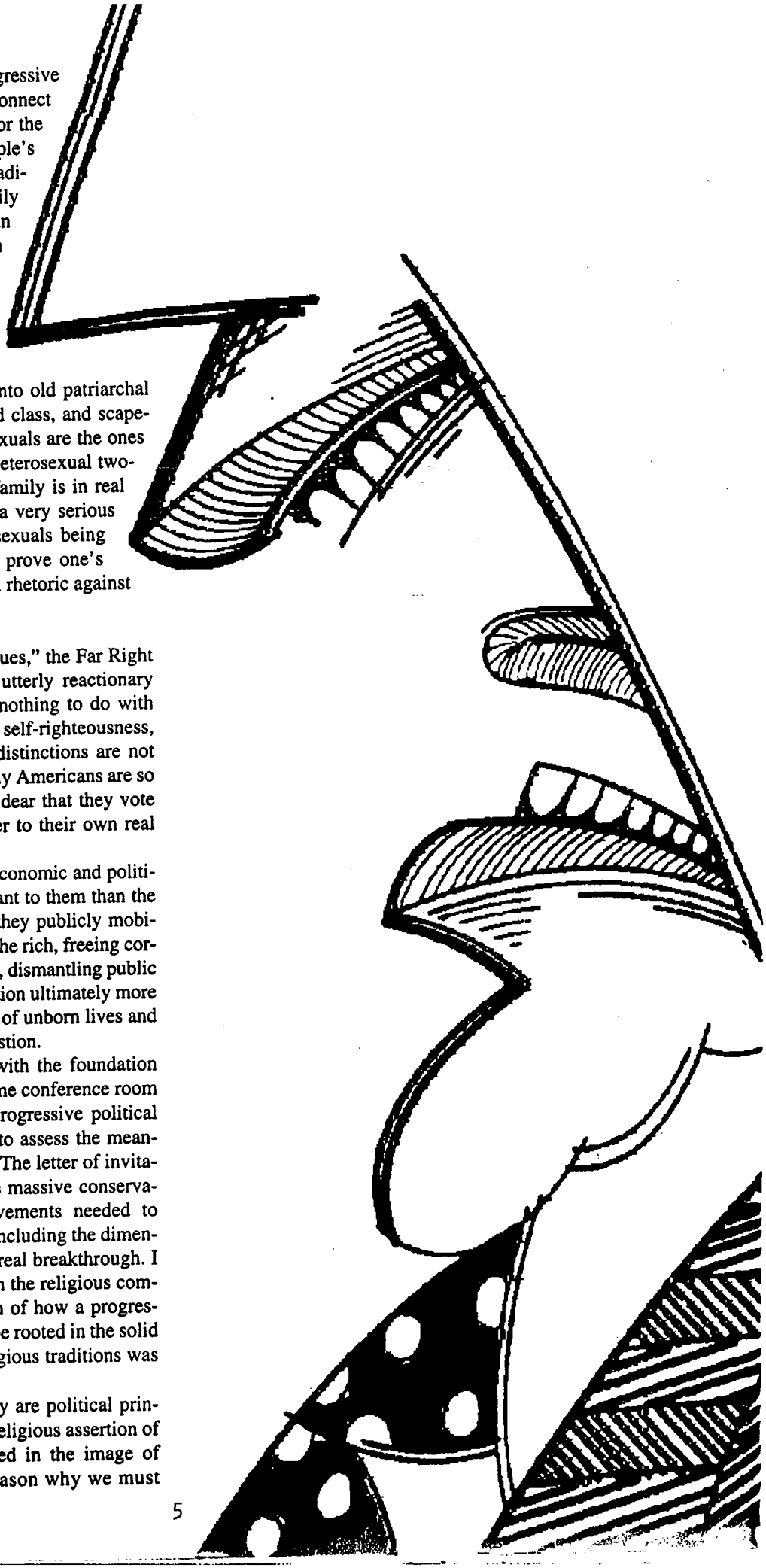
I WAS SPEAKING in New York City not too long ago to a group of foundation executives who were all liberal funders of artistic and social causes. Their immediate concerns that I was asked to address included the "culture wars," the Religious Right, and the Republican takeover of Congress. After I spoke, several people in the audience jumped down my throat. "We will not sell out to racism, homophobia, and right-wing politics," they declared.

I was puzzled. Having never been accused before of even being a "moderate" on issues such as racism, I asked what I had said to have led to such an outburst. "You used the phrase 'moral values,'" one of them replied. "And what do those words mean to you?" I asked. "They mean 'right-wing'!" agreed my accusers. I responded, "If the liberal Left concedes the whole territory of public discourse over moral values to the Religious Right, you will lose the cultural and political wars. And, indeed, you will deserve to lose."

Most Americans believe that we have suffered a decline in moral and religious values in this country. And they are

right. The failure of liberals, the Left, progressive movements, and the Democratic Party to connect with that concern is the principal reason for the rise of the Right. The Right taps into people's longing for a society more respectful of traditional notions of right and wrong, of "family values," and of personal responsibility. In conceding the public conversation of such matters to the zealots of the Republican and Christian Right, progressives have made a costly mistake.

It has allowed terms like "family values" to be turned into a kind of code language that would push women back into old patriarchal molds, defend old hierarchies of race and class, and scapegoat gay and lesbian people as if homosexuals are the ones responsible for the disintegration of the heterosexual two-parent family. The mom, dad, and kids family is in real trouble in America (and that, indeed, is a very serious problem); but it's not because of homosexuals being guaranteed their basic human rights. To prove one's commitment to family values with hateful rhetoric against homosexuals is just plain wrong.



IN TAKING OVER the language of "values," the Far Right has used the opportunity to impose an utterly reactionary political and economic agenda that has nothing to do with moral or religious values. (Intolerance, self-righteousness, sectarianism, social division, and class distinctions are not among our best religious principles.) Many Americans are so hungry for the cultural values they hold dear that they vote for a right-wing agenda that runs counter to their own real interests.

Some even suspect that the Right's economic and political agenda has always been more important to them than the social and cultural issues around which they publicly mobilize their constituencies. Are tax cuts for the rich, freeing corporations from environmental regulations, dismantling public aid to the poor, and ending affirmative action ultimately more a priority to the Right than the protection of unborn lives and the integrity of the family? It's a fair question.

Several weeks after my exchange with the foundation heads in New York, I was back in the same conference room speaking to a group of activists from progressive political organizations. They were also gathered to assess the meaning of the Republican political takeover. The letter of invitation boldly suggested that in light of the massive conservative electoral victory, progressive movements needed to reconsider their entire political agenda "including the dimension of spirituality." The meeting was a real breakthrough. I was one of only two representatives from the religious community present, but the lively discussion of how a progressive economic and political vision must be rooted in the solid ground of moral values and our best religious traditions was a refreshing balm to the soul.

Economic justice and social equality are political principles, but they are deeply rooted in the religious assertion of our common identity as children created in the image of God. Our interconnectedness is the reason why we must

Many people care both about the moral values that have concerned the conservatives *and* the issues of justice and equity that have preoccupied the liberal agenda.

reweave the web of families and communities that has suffered such unraveling. And that very sense of community requires a renewed sense of *both* personal and social responsibility to restore a vision of the "common good" in all of our neighborhoods around the country.

Most Americans want a "civil society" characterized by the values of integrity, honesty, responsibility, fairness, openness, and, above all, genuine citizen involvement. Popular involvement is indeed key. "Civility" means more than the quality of our public discourse—it requires the participation of the citizenry in shaping the political direction of the country.

TODAY, PEOPLE want answers more than ideology. The old solutions of the Left and the Right and the bitter conflict between liberals and conservatives seem increasingly irrelevant and distasteful to people in their own communities. Many people care both about the moral values that have concerned the conservatives *and* the issues of justice and equity that have preoccupied the liberal agenda. As a Republican mayor wrote to me recently, "We need the moral values the conservatives care about, and the social conscience of the Left."

For too long liberals and conservatives have been talking past each other. Anyone who lives in a neighborhood like the one in which our inner-city congregation works knows too well how irrelevant and dysfunctional the liberal and conservative categories have become. Each tends to dwell on some aspects of our social crisis and ignore the others. The truth is that we need to recover both the language of personal moral values and a passion for social justice.

Conservatives nobly stress individual virtue and responsibility, but then forget how real racism still is in American society and how poverty is enforced and perpetuated by unjust social and economic structures. Liberals are right to speak of society's responsibility for the disenfranchised, but they have relied too much on governmental solutions to problems that can only be solved by other means—like reweaving the fabric of family life, restoring the spirit and bonds of local communities, and remaking the social covenant that has broken down between polarized groups.

Neither liberal nor conservative agendas are empowering the poor, creating community, or building bridges between our society's warring factions. Neither big government nor big corporations can be relied upon to serve the common good. And neither endless public subsidies nor alleged trickle-down economics will generate real and lasting solutions to endemic social injustice and the collapse of cultural values. In contrast, it will be community-based strategies that combine personal responsibility, family, work, and social justice that have the best chance of success.

In the end it comes down to a question of values. What are our values? What kind of people and country do we want to be? What sort of political process can find solutions to the vexing problems of our common life? What kind of world are we leaving to our children? And what do we really mean by democracy?

In a variety of local communities, diverse people and groups are beginning to come together seeking a politics with spiritual values that transcends the old options of Left and Right. Religious and non-religious alike, pastors and teachers, neighborhood organizers and parents, mayors and former gang members are forging new relationships around needed moral visions that take seriously both personal and social transformation.

The religious community can play a crucial leadership role in getting other groups to the table and offering the moral vision needed to confront the depth of the crisis we now endure. A change in our social and cultural values is now as important as is marshaling the economic resources and political will to rebuild our disintegrating communities. And that will be a spiritual task. ■

IT has long seemed to us a worthy project to attempt to let the winds out of contemporary political passion, yet how to do this without disregard of the issues with which politics is concerned presents something of a problem. For reasons that are probably not too obscure, political emotions almost invariably turn into self-righteous emotions, so that, in times of crisis, the uglier aspects of religious controversy seem reflected in political differences. For those who are deeply involved in political struggles, this seems a not important resemblance. What fools, they will say, those sixteenth-century Europeans, who would burn at the stake a man who dared to claim that the body of Christ was not in the wafer of Holy Communion; yet if a man of today, surrounded by people of a contrary persuasion, argue against Private Property, he is likely to be punished by whatever legal or illegal devices are available; or, among those of an opposite view, if he insist that Collectivism is a violation of the laws of nature, he may be imprisoned or even liquidated as a counter-revolutionary wrecker.

This excerpt is taken from the article "The Political Virtues", found in VoL.VIII, No. 11, of the journal MANAS, March 16, 1955.

Self-righteousness in politics is natural enough in the ideologues who choose to believe in one or another of the political absolutisms of the day. Among believers in democracy, however, political self-righteousness comes very close to being a contradiction in terms. It is this contradiction, perhaps, which has produced in honest democrats those distinctly uneasy feelings which result when the pressures of present-day political conflict turn the argument for democracy into a kind of absolutism—an argument which, when reason fails to supply the needed support, falls back upon an urgent appeal for actual survival.

The trouble with this development is that, when it occurs, the political virtues which are the chief glory of Democracy weaken and finally disappear altogether. The very qualities of life which seem most precious to us slip through our fingers, and we are left without the prize, yet with almost as much blood on our hands as upon the hands of our enemies.

The following is a transcript of David Gergen's dialogue with David Shaw on "Cynicism in Journalism" , aired April 26, 1996, on The NEWSHOUR with Jim Lehrer. (Permission to reprint granted by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions)

MR. LEHRER: Finally tonight, a Gergen dialogue. David Gergen, editor-at-large of "U.S. News & World Report," engages reporter David Shaw, media critic for the "Los Angeles Times," author of a recent series of articles on the cynicism of the media.

DAVID GERGEN, U.S. News & World Report: David, when you set out to do this series on cynicism in the press, you seemed to get an ear full of criticisms about the media, many coming from journalists, themselves. Now Peter Jennings at ABC told you that the general tendency in the press to treat all public figures as suspect was a greater threat to the republic than even gutter or tabloid journalism. The former head of CBS News, Van Gordon Sauter, said the smug, cynical attitudes of many journalists badly undermined the capacity of our elected leaders to lead and to have moral suasion. How worried did you become about the state of journalism and the role that journalists now play in our democracy?

DAVID SHAW, Los Angeles Times: Well, I was somewhat concerned when I started the story, which was why I started it, but by the time I was through, I was more than worried. I mean, I'm extremely concerned, anxious, frightened, whatever you want to call it, that because the media have become so relentlessly negative, because we've become kind of knee-jerk hostile adversaries to everybody in power, and automatically impute people in leadership with the worst possible motives, that we wind up not only undermining confidence in ourselves as an institution but far more important and far worse undermining confidence in the very institutions that we are supposed to be covering and if we assume that the press is the best source of information for people, if people turn off the press or come to think that the press only provides this kind of cynical look at everything, then people will stop getting the kind of information they need to become informed citizens in a democracy.

MR. GERGEN: I have been disconcerted by the 1996 Presidential campaign. You wrote about that. After the 1992 campaign many in the press promised that 1996 would be different, more, more substance, more balance, less negativity, and yet, according to what you wrote, it's just the same, if not worse.

DAVID SHAW: Well, you may remember that they also promised after the 1988 campaign with the Gary Hart, Donna Rice fiasco that they would be more serious of purpose in the 1992 campaign. Uh, the next thing we knew was Bill Clinton and Gennifer Flowers, and then they pledged anew in 1996. Now, maybe because Bob Dole and Elizabeth are happily married and they've already exhausted Hillary and Bob--or Hillary and Bill--umm, we've been spared sexual talk this time, but certainly the studies that I've seen, particularly in terms of network television news, say that the emphasis has been even more than in 1992 on horse race, who's ahead, tactics, strategy, rather than substance, and that it has been even more negative and cynical than it was in '92, and--

MR. GERGEN: Go ahead. I'm sorry.

DAVID SHAW: --the interesting thing is the press, of course, says, well, all we're doing is covering what's out there. There are negative campaigns, and we're covering them. The fact is that the studies at least through the first three months of the campaign, which is through the California primary, show that the media coverage was much more negative than the candidates' own statements, speeches, and even ads.

MR. GERGEN: And the sound bites which we talked about in the past as shrinking from forty-two seconds down to like nine--

DAVID SHAW: Seven seconds.

MR. GERGEN: Down to seven seconds this year, and the correspondents have gotten more than six times as much air time as candidates, themselves, on the evening news.

DAVID SHAW: Yeah. What winds up happening is it used to be that a network news reporter would say a few things either to introduce a statement from a politician or to summarize what a politician had said. The emphasis, the focus would be on the politician's words. Now it is completely reversed. Now the reporter wants to tell you what he thinks or what she thinks about the issue, and then have a tiny snippet from the politician to illustrate the reporter's point, which is a total reversal of what used to be covered.

MR. GERGEN: Did the change come after Vietnam and Watergate? I was struck by the comments of Meg Greenfield, the editorial page editor of the "Washington Post" in your--one of your pieces. She said, you know, there's been real change since Vietnam and Watergate, and the attitude that journalists have, themselves, about the worst thing that they can do.

DAVID SHAW: You know, I think that Vietnam and Watergate were watershed events. First of all, it did show political leaders lying to us about major substantive issues, and that did change the mind set of most reporters, who then decided that because these two Presidents lied, all politicians were liars, but in particular, the point that Meg

is making--and I agree with you that it's very interesting and valid--is that a basic sense of fair play, as well as the effect of the McCarthy years' experience of unfair, inaccurate accusations made reporters of that era feel that the worst thing that you could do as a reporter would be to falsely accuse somebody of something. What happened after Vietnam and Watergate and the cynicism that developed from it was the sense among many, if not most reporters, that the worst thing you could do would be to be taken, to be too soft on a political figure, to fail to accuse somebody who should be accused.

MR. GERGEN: Right. Well, you identified television as the major cause of the changes that have occurred in journalism overall, and I wondered, is it the nature of television and what it brings into our living room, the violence and the kind of stories that just by sort of nature it has to cover and change the family conversation, or is it the fact that television, itself, has changed, that it's gone down markedly in a more competitive world, it's turned into the more sensational, it's turned into the personalities, and the gossip, and the scandals?

DAVID SHAW: Well, it's not only what television is in and of itself. It's the effect that television then has on the rest of the media. I mean, it used to be that there were, you know, one or two or three gatekeepers in the nation's news media, you know, the executive editor of the "New York Times" and maybe the anchors at ABC, NBC, and CBS. Now, with all the tabloid TV shows and the talk shows and the tabloid newspapers and the speed with which everything happens, there are either 65 gatekeepers or there are no gatekeepers. I mean, remember when Gennifer Flowers sold her story to the Star--

MR. GERGEN: Right.

DAVID SHAW: --if all that happened was that story appeared in the Star, it never would have made the mainstream. We now have CNN. Bill Clinton calls a press conference, denies it. CNN covers it live, and I remember Peter Jennings telling me that he did not want to go with that story that night, but it was made clear to him that the affiliates around the country would say, what the hell is wrong with Jennings, doesn't he know a news story?

MR. GERGEN: Right.

DAVID SHAW: And he couldn't afford to wait to let the ABC reporters check it out for themselves; they had to go live with it that night.

MR. GERGEN: How much of this is the--cynicism you see in the press is a reflection of the culture itself?

DAVID SHAW: One of the studies that I quoted in the piece said that by and large, the general public was even more cynical than newspapers about the motives of the people in power, and there's no question that (a) the news media reflect the views of the larger society, and (b) people who are in the media, after all, are drawn from that larger society. So I don't think that the news media creates the cynicism, but there's no question that we accelerate it, we exacerbate it, and one of the reasons that people are more cynical is because they read what we say, and they hear what we say, and they see what we say in the news media.

MR. GERGEN: So that we, ourselves, are not unrelentingly negative about the subject we're talking about, the press. What do you think the press does well?

DAVID SHAW: I think that when there is a major event, the Gulf War, a Presidential election, an assassination, an earthquake, I think the media do a marvelous job by conveying the full range of experience and emotion and the immediacy and the impact of it. I think the media do a very good job at talking about personality, at bringing people into your living room, and we have a much greater sense of our leaders than people in previous generations ever did. I mean, I don't want to get back to the negative, that does also feed the cynicism, because when you bring somebody on a small screen into your bathroom, it's pretty hard to put that person up on a pedestal, but I do think that--you know, and there are some--the serious--I don't want to condemn everybody--the serious publications, you know, whether it's MacNeil/Lehrer or the "New York Times" or the "LA Times," or, you know, certain intellectual and journals of opinion, certainly do a very good job of discussing the issues and doing so in a meaningful, nuanced way, complete with both sides of it. But in the case of a political campaign in particular, early in the campaign, when nobody's paying attention, the better news organizations do wonderful profiles of the candidates, analyses of the key issues, but then the reporters cover it and they get bored because that doesn't change. And what changes is the strategy, the tactics, and the poll standings, who's up and who's down, and that comes to dominate the coverage even in those news publications and news programs that continue to provide good coverage of the issues.

MR. GERGEN: I have felt in addressing the cynicism and the negativity that the main responsibility ought to be with the editors of these publications and the people who run the television networks. They have to set the tone, and then the reporters, the correspondents, and so forth will, in effect, comply with that.

DAVID SHAW: Well, I agree. I mean, reporters do not put stories in newspapers. Editors put them in. Editors in newspapers and news directors on television make the decisions specifically about what goes in on a given day but more important is your suggestion, they set the tone. If we have an increasingly and glib smart-ass approach to the news, which you see in the chat and shout shows on, on television on the weekend from Washington that look more like journalistic food fights than policy debates and if you have that bleeding into the mainstream print

media, and if you have editors wanting to get their reporters on these shows and, therefore, wanting them to be ever more smart-ass in print and on the air, you're not going to get the kind of serious, sober, substantive, and I'm not saying boring--you can have an edge, you can be provocative, and still be responsible, but there's a tendency when editors create a climate that encourages edge and cynicism, what you wind up getting is cheap edge and cheap cynicism.

MR. GERGEN: Okay. Well, thank you very much. DAVID SHAW: Thank you, David.

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