



REFLECTIONS ON THE UNITED STATES *

*Mr. Jeffrey Simpson
Columnist, The Globe & Mail
Ottawa
March 25, 1995*

Biographical Note: Canada's pre-eminent political journalist, Jeffrey Simpson received his education at Queen's University and LSE before joining *The Globe & Mail* in 1973. The recipient of numerous honours including the National Newspaper Award for column writing, the National Magazine Award for political writing, and the Governor General's Award for non-fiction, Mr. Simpson has authored several central books on the state of Canada and its future, including *Discipline of Power: The Conservative Interlude and the Liberal Restoration*, *Spoils of Power: The Politics of Patronage*, and *Faultlines: Struggling for a Canadian Vision*.

It is an observable irony of American life that so many of the country's historical heroes -- men and women after whom cities have been named and monuments erected -- contributed in the sphere of government, and yet Americans have always been decidedly ambivalent about the appropriate role of government in their national life. The Constitution of the United States, which was argued over from the Continental Congress of 1776 to the Bill of Rights of 1792, and thereafter in an important sense until the Northern victory in the Civil War, established a system of divided government. It did so because a large number of eighteenth-century Americans worried about the concentration of political power which they felt had corrupted the politics of the mother country. Strong government, in their eyes, was the enemy of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Of course, there were Founding Fathers such as Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, who despaired of the untidiness, indeed the unruliness, of the early American governments. They distrusted so-called "states' rights" and believed that only a strong central government could turn the United States into a powerful country. Madison even preferred that the national government possess an

unlimited veto over all state laws.

These were the so-called Federalists, and they were bitterly opposed at the founding conventions and for decades thereafter by the so-called Anti-Federalists who perceived the United States as a confederation of powerful states which would delegate certain restricted powers to the central government. The Anti-Federalists, at the risk of excessive generalization, represented a combination of those who distrusted government power *per se* and those who distrusted centralized power in Washington.

The Civil War decided the issue of secession. It did not quell the debate about the appropriate powers exercised by Washington and the states. Indeed, after the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, “states’ rights” became a dogma in the South which, among other consequences, allowed Southern states to pass laws and enforce by other means segregation.

The role of the central government expanded slowly under the New Deal, then quite dramatically with the United States’ entry into the Second World War. Washington reached the apogee of its power in the 1960s with the civil rights movements, the Vietnam War, and continuing strong economic growth.

Now, of course, a strong movement is afoot to curb Washington’s power *vis-a-vis* the states. This movement is being driven by the old American suspicions both of centralized government and of government power in general. It is being accelerated by economic forces that include the massive federal government debt and deficit, and by a visceral antipathy to taxation that is everywhere apparent in the United States. There is no observable constituency, or set of constituencies, that could be shaped into a political coalition in favour of higher taxes, the revenues from which in turn might be used by government to lead a collective effort to grapple with the country’s growing social problems.

The Republican Party’s “Contract With America,” acted upon by the Republican-dominated House of Representatives under the leadership of Speaker Newt Gingrich, reflects this antipathy to taxes and, more profoundly, to government itself. Indeed, so powerful is the anti-government message in the Contract that many Democrats

entered a political bidding war with the Republicans to offer tax cuts and spending reductions. The partisan debates were therefore about the modalities of reducing the size of government in Washington. The 1996 presidential campaign, coupled with the House and Senate races, will undoubtedly feature fierce debates about the means for reducing the size of government.

It is worth asking, given the centrality of antipathy to government, what has brought about this widespread attitude. Some of the antipathy merely reflects the old and ongoing discussion about American federalism and the enduring American suspicion about government. But more recent factors have highlighted these suspicions.

As has been widely noted by both political parties and commentators, the American middle class is struggling to keep family incomes rising in real terms. Huge swaths of the American economy have been decimated by foreign competition and recession, eliminating hundreds of thousands of blue-collar jobs. As Kevin Phillips argued in his book, *Boiling Point*, "Despite unprecedented prosperity at the top, the proportion of people whose purchasing power or defined incomes made them 'middle class' was certainly five to ten percentage points smaller than it had been ten or twenty years earlier."

As families struggled to maintain their real incomes, even after the massive entry of women into the workforce produced millions of two-paycheque households, they asked themselves why they did not seem to be making economic progress commensurate with their hard work. The ready answer for many was "taxes," although a great number of Americans did not realize that the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan featured a shifting of the overall tax burden from the wealthy to the middle class. Not only did many white Americans resent government taxation at a time of declining real incomes, they did not see either an improvement in existing government services or the introduction of new services of benefit to them. Instead, many white Americans have come to believe that tax dollars are being spent disproportionately on minority groups and special interests whose members do not deserve the help governments provide. At

the same time, middle-income whites do not believe that such programs as welfare and the public education system are delivering value for money. And while resentment of perceived “slackers” has been simmering since the introduction of the welfare state, in recent years it has been aggravated by demographic change on a huge scale.

Americans have always been a mobile people, and they remain so today. Recent decades have featured four mass migrations with profound consequences for American life.

There was what the author Nicholas Lehman in his brilliant book, *The Promised Land*, called “The Great Migration” of blacks from the South to the cities of the North, and from the rural South to the urban South. This migration fundamentally altered the demography, and subsequently the politics, of large American cities.

There was the equally huge, and in many cases related, movement of whites (and, more recently, middle-class blacks) from the inner cities to the suburbs. The last U.S. census recorded that for the first time the largest residential classification of Americans -- 46.2 per cent overall -- was made up of those living in census districts described as suburban. In 1989 and 1990, central cities lost 2 million residents, while suburbs gained 3.5 million. During the 1980s, 15 states recorded a decline in the population of their central cities. Only 4 of 39 cities with a population of more than 1 million gained residents: New York because of immigration; Portland, Charlotte, and Columbus because they annexed adjacent suburbs. This population shift has kept right on going, past the suburbs into what is called “ex-urbia,” sprawling suburban areas of largely single-family homes and shopping centres with clusters of commercial offices and light-industrial factories beyond the postwar suburbs.

There has also been the widely noted migration towards the West and South. If you think of the United States as a plate, the central point from a population point of view is now 95 miles southwest of St Louis. The fastest growing states from 1980 to 1989 were, in order: Nevada, Florida, Arizona, New Hampshire (an exception caused presumably by low taxes), California, Georgia, Alaska, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. To put matters another way, the cities with the fastest growing rates of population from 1980 to 1990 were:

Fresno, Sacramento, Austin, San Diego, San Jose, Phoenix, Tucson, Los Angeles, El Paso, San Antonio, Jacksonville, and Fort Worth.

There are two other demographic migrations worth noting. The lesser of these relates to the more important, and can best be seen by the demography of California, the most populous state. For more than a decade, a sizeable number of whites have been migrating from California, many heading north to Washington and Oregon; in recent years they have migrated to all the other western states in search of new opportunities, but also to flee from increasingly violent and difficult California cities.

And yet California's population, despite this exodus, continues to increase, largely because of immigration. White non-Hispanics now account for about 17 million of California's nearly 30 million people. If anything like current trends continue, California in the first decade of the next century will become the first state outside of the Deep South in the last century with a white, non-Hispanic minority.

More than 800,000 people arrive as legal immigrants to the U.S. every year, and these represent our fourth great migration. The number of illegal immigrants can only be estimated, but some credible observers suggest 700,000 - 800,000. Not since the first two decades of this century has the United States seen these levels of emigration. Demographic change is most apparent in communities along the Mexican border and in the big cities of the Northeast and the Pacific Coast, but its impact is being felt in almost every urban centre. For example, in the summer of 1993 Hispanic gangs, apparently from southern California, appeared in Salt Lake City, shocking the city's Mormon inhabitants. In the 1980s, the number of Asians in Minneapolis tripled to 77,000, while thousands of Vietnamese arrived in the old Massachusetts mill cities of Quincy and Lowell. In Fresno, in California's Central Valley, the phone book now lists as many Vangs -- Hmong refugees from Laos — as Joneses. Streetcars in San Jose carry signs in both English and Vietnamese.

In the 1980s, the white population of the U.S. grew by 6 per cent, the black population by 13 per cent, the Hispanic by 53 per cent, and the Asian by 108 per cent. In California, blacks are now

outnumbered slightly by Asians and hugely by Hispanics. Hispanics are more numerous than blacks in Texas, Massachusetts, and most of the states of the Southwest. Hispanics will soon be more numerous than blacks in Florida, New York, and New Jersey. And, by the turn of the century, blacks will be outnumbered by Hispanics in the U.S. as a whole.

“Hispanics,” of course, vary enormously. Of the 13.5 million Americans of Mexican ancestry, 4.5 million were born in Mexico. Of the more than 1 million Cuban-Americans, almost three-quarters were born in Cuba. There are 2.7 million people from Puerto Rico, and 5 million others from various Spanish-speaking countries. Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans -- they may all have spoken, or still speak, Spanish as their native language, but their political outlooks differ, as do the customs of their native countries. To speak, then, of Hispanics is misleading, since they do not form a homogeneous block.

The same can certainly be said of so called Asian-Americans, who come from dozens of countries. Neither Hispanics nor Asian-Americans have yet achieved political power commensurate with their growing numbers. But it is inevitable that they will achieve greater prominence in public life, heightening the competition for public positions, just as they now jostle for positions in the private sector and universities. Although some people on what remains of the American left speak of a “rainbow coalition” of oppressed minorities, my own sense is that an uneasy truce at best exists among these groups.

These fresh waves of immigrants, largely from non-European sources, arrived during and after the blacks’ civil rights movement, which changed the laws and challenged the political culture of the United States. That movement’s aims slowly shifted from the elimination of barriers, racial integration, and emphasis on individual rights to include affirmative action, racial separation, and emphasis on group rights. That shift, which divides the black community today, now divides the new ethnic communities.

Historically, blacks have had two claims on the American conscience -- a moral one based on the legacy of slavery, Recon-

struction, Jim Crow, segregation, and systemic discrimination; and a demographic one based on numbers. Previous immigrants may have arrived by the millions, but no single group was sufficiently numerous to eclipse the blacks' demographic claim. Now, however, blacks find both moral and demographic claims contested by new immigrants, not by direct refutation so much as by imitation. Some of the new immigrants are seizing upon the very tools crafted in the later days of the civil rights movement to advance their own purposes. Affirmative action must now apply to Asian-Americans, Hispanics, Chicanos (not to be confused with Hispanics), American Indians, gays -- and, of course, women.

Political representation, university curricula, civil services, apportionment of public monies, practices of private corporations -- these elements of American life are now scrutinized from a variety of sources for their "representativeness," not just by the original civil rights crusaders, the blacks, but by a plethora of groups. Often American public discourse is much less the classic debate between those who favour redistribution of society's rewards on an income basis -- that is, the traditional left-right distinction -- than what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has called the "politics of recognition" among competing minority groups. At the lower end of the income scale, it is noticeable that tensions between blacks and Asians erupted in Los Angeles, New York City, Miami, and several other urban hot spots after the acquittal of the police officers charged with beating Rodney King. And some Asian-American parents whose children have done well in school have been among the most vocal opponents of mandated affirmative action by universities and other public bodies. The backlash against affirmative action began in a political sense in California, and has now swept across the entire nation.

The blacks' moral claim is weakening as the years accumulate between the present and the days of slavery, Jim Crow, and official segregation. There is a widespread feeling outside the black community that the debt of past discrimination has been paid, that the moral claim so powerfully advanced by the civil rights movement, and subsequently enshrined in various preferential policies, has worn thin.

The age-old “American Dilemma,” then, still plagues American society; indeed, it remains one of the pivots around which American society and politics move. Since the civil rights movements, blacks have both done better and done seriously worse than before, at least in terms of income and social breakdown. Everywhere in the U.S., stunning examples testify to the progress that blacks have made in the short space of one generation, and not just in sports and entertainment. A black middle-class exists; universities compete with each other to recruit academically talented blacks; public services often mirror, when they do not actually exceed, the number of blacks in the taxpaying population.

And yet, while many blacks have moved up the income ladder -- often moving away from the inner cities in quest of better neighbourhoods -- many others are trapped in vicious cycles of poverty, violence, and family breakdown. Blacks have suffered terribly from the economic hollowing out of blue-collar employment, as the sociologist William Julius Wilson has convincingly demonstrated. For example, the black unemployment rate was a multiple of 2.09 higher than that for whites during the 1960s; 2.02 higher during the 1970s, but 2.37 higher in the 1980s. In 1993, black unemployment was 12.9 per cent compared to 6 per cent for whites. (Two caveats here. First, American unemployment numbers would be higher if they used Canadian methods of calculation. Second, more blacks are missed in official statistics.) Blacks are now likely to suffer again as public services are reduced, both because blacks depend more upon those services than whites and because blacks rely more on public sector employment than whites. Blacks are three times more likely to live below the poverty line than whites across America, except in the West, where they are twice as likely to be in poverty.

The breakdown of black families has been widely noted, much analyzed, frequently argued over, endlessly rationalized, incessantly moralized and sermonized about, but increasingly accepted by black leaders themselves as a contributing factor to the black community’s difficulties. More black women than men are in the labour force; the gap between black and white family income would be 22 per cent instead of 44 per cent if the percentage of two-adult families was the

same between blacks and whites; two-thirds of black children live in one-parent families, compared to a national average of one in four. Sixty-eight per cent of black births are out of wedlock, compared to 36.6 per cent for Mexicans and 18.5 per cent for whites. That compares to 37.6 per cent of black births out of wedlock in 1970, and 5.7 per cent for whites. Here are pregnancy rates for every 1,000 teenagers: Sweden 35, France 43, Canada 44, England and Wales 45, white Americans 93, black Americans 186. Fifty-five per cent of black households are headed by women who have never married, up from only 11 per cent in 1960 and compared to 16.5 per cent of white women today.

Crime is now rampant in the inner cities (although rates have marginally declined for certain serious crimes in recent years). The fastest growing category of housing in the U.S. during the 1980s was prisons, where more than 1 in 250 Americans reside -- and the political momentum to build more prisons is relentless. There are 1.5 million inmates in federal and state prisons and local jails, and another 3.5 million criminals on probation or parole, according to the Justice Department. Very soon, if current trends continue, there will be more Americans behind bars, on probation, or on parole than there are people enrolled in four-year programs in colleges and universities.

Blacks account for about 12 per cent of the U.S. population; but 45 per cent of the prison population. Almost half of America's murders are committed by blacks against blacks. Seventy-one per cent of assailants in robbery cases are black. Huge swaths of American cities are now plagued by drugs, gangs, and violence, not all involving blacks, to be sure, but nonetheless preying upon black communities with a special vengeance.

When I refer to Americans' "flight" from the inner cities, I mean this in two senses: physical and psychological. I also mentioned the aversion to tax and the stagnation of family income. These can be tied together in this way: millions of white Americans have given up on the inner cities and on the people who remain there. They do not go to the inner cities often; they resent their tax money being drained towards the inner cities; they do not want their children educated there; they do not want their place of employment to

be located there. There is nothing new or startling in these observations; they have been made and chronicled countless times. I mean only to suggest that this flight has intensified. Attitudes have hardened; political reaction has deepened. And frustration has intensified because no matter how hard many Americans try to flee, the problems from which they have fled do not seem to remain far away.

There are now older suburban areas where some of the social pathologies and problems of the inner cities are manifest -- the so-called bedroom communities around New York and Los Angeles, for example. Denver, Minneapolis, and the cities of California's Central Valley (Fresno, Bakersfield, Modesto, Sacramento) are experiencing for the first time some of these afflictions. And whether Americans are right in objective terms to feel less physically safe, every evening newscast in urban areas reinforces the perception of rampant crime and violence. Middle-class flight and the frustrating sense that it is apparently impossible to flee fully from these problems have fused popular resentments around the themes of race, taxes, and rights. Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall in their book, *Chain Reaction*, come very close to the mark when they write about taxes:

No longer the resource with which to create a beneficent federal government, taxes had come for many voters to signify the forcible transfer of hard-earned money away from those who worked, to those who did not. Taxes had come to be seen as the resource funding a liberal federal judiciary, granting expanded rights to criminal defendants, to convicted felons, and, in education and employment, to 'less qualified' minorities. Federal taxation had become, in the new coded language of politics, a forced levy underwriting liberal policies that granted enlarged rights to members of society who excited the most negative feelings in the minds of other, often angry voters....

Fairness ... no longer symbolized Democratic struggle

to achieve tax equity for 'average' working men and women, to provide access to middle-class homes and incomes, or to insure the rights to bargain with management for just compensation; 'fairness' now meant, to many voters, federal action to tilt the playing field in favour of minorities, government unions, feminists, criminal defendants, the long-term jobless, never-wed mothers, drug addicts and gays.

The country's newspapers, properly read, provide weekly evidence of the phenomenon described by the Edsalls. The *New York Times* reported earlier this year that a federal judge, citing what he called a "crisis," took the extraordinary action of placing the entire 70,000-student Cleveland school system under the direct control of the superintendent of schools. The system had exhausted its \$500 million budget halfway through the school year and was more than \$125 million in debt. The fiscal crisis reflected, in large part, the fact that Cleveland voters have not approved an increase in school spending in more than a decade. They rejected two ballot proposals last year that would have increased taxes for schools. The reasons for this rejection lie in demography. The total population of Cleveland proper declined from 800,000 in the 1950s to about 500,000 today. More than twice as many whites left the city as blacks, so that today the inner-city schools are 70 per cent black. Black voter turnout has been low, while that of whites who send their children to Catholic schools has been high, and the tax increases have been defeated.

In San Jose, near where I lived last year, about half the students are out of school at 1:30 p.m. because there is insufficient money to provide more than five periods of daily education. There, too, voters reject tax increases, because those with money have taken their children out of the public system, or placed them in "charter" or "magnet" schools.

Another example of this reaction is the revolt against welfare. A campaigning Bill Clinton promised to end "welfare as we know it." Nothing has yet been done about the promise, but Congress has been awash with proposals to curtail programs for welfare,

or to turn federal programs over to the states in exchange for block grants. Middle-class entitlements such as social security and mortgage and property tax deductibility are sacrosanct, but welfare is politically vulnerable, since it seems to be expensive, counter-productive in getting people back to work and, of course, disproportionately used by blacks.

The political reaction analyzed by the Edsalls began in the 1970s following the turbulence of the 1960s. Under presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush -- and now under Speaker Gingrich and his Republican congressional majority -- this reaction has dominated presidential politics and heavily influenced policies in Washington and increasingly in the states. It has been heavily overlaid with a kind of *kulturkampf*; or cultural war, led by conservatives who see so-called traditional American values of patriotism, family unity, hard work, and individual rights threatened or eroded by a variety of forces -- minority groups, guilty liberals, craven politicians, compliant courts, insensitive and swollen bureaucracies, and a hedonistic media. It is among the supreme ironies of contemporary America that the young and self-confident conservative "intellectuals" -- many of whom reside in New York and Washington after being educated at Ivy League and other "establishment" institutions -- cottoned on to this heartland dissatisfaction and made it their own, although they themselves would never be caught dead in the heartland, unless it is to give a paid speech on a university campus in Des Moines on a Thursday night.

It is curious, the virulence of this *kulturkampf* since the end of the Cold War meant that democracy emerged triumphant and left America militarily unchallenged. *Kulturkampf* elsewhere has often occurred in the aftermath of military defeat or domestic upheaval, neither of which has taken place in the United States. What the Cold War did produce was an increasing introspection in the United States, which seems to me entirely appropriate, since it should have allowed the United States to focus on urgent domestic priorities.

The American contribution to maintaining a global balance of power during the Cold War was invaluable for the country's allies, but it inevitably influenced U.S. spending priorities. It is diffi-

cult for those who have not lived in the United States to appreciate the degree to which the Cold War — the first sustained international peacetime engagement of the United States in its entire history — commanded commitment in that country. It was the axis around which the country's foreign policy turned; it was the prism — albeit sometimes distorted with tragic results — through which Americans viewed the world; it was the priority that enabled presidents to mobilize public resources. Harry Truman used the communist threat to gather congressional support for the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine; Dwight Eisenhower used it to secure congressional funding for the interstate highway system; John Kennedy launched the American space effort to compete with the Soviet challenge; Lyndon Johnson pushed the country into Vietnam but also urged an end to segregation because of the adverse publicity it gave the U.S. abroad, and so on.

In the Cold War years, America's economy, research efforts, and technological advances were bent to the needs of military preparedness. And now, with the threat gone, the considerable constriction of the military infrastructure is putting tremendous pressure on many communities and states across the country as they witness the closing of military bases, the end of lucrative defence contracts, and the disruption of thousands of lives. This constriction began at a time when the economy was already experiencing the effects of a profound global restructuring, as corporations sought to do more work with fewer employees, and as millions of American families were losing control over their economic future and that of their children.

The Cold War effort had allowed presidents from time to time to mobilize a national constituency to override isolationism, or at least scepticism about international commitments. It also enabled them periodically to mobilize domestic constituencies to cut through the labyrinthine domestic political process, although the Vietnam morass led to many charges about the "imperial presidency." At the heart of the American system is the division of powers, but increasingly this system should be described as the "division of power within divisions of power within divisions of power." When George Bush, mouthing speechwriter Peggy Noonan's words, called for "a thou-

sand points of light” to encourage Americans’ philanthropic spirit, he might have been referring to the political system.

With so many points of influence in the U.S. system, a president must forge a fresh coalition on every issue, and of course this coalition-building is exceptionally difficult when different parties control the presidency and Congress. Since party discipline is weak (although lately the House Republicans are showing considerable unity) a president must cajole, threaten, and politically bribe even members of his own party as he attempts to assemble majorities. For example, although the Democrats controlled the House at the time, Mr. Clinton’s first budget was passed by only one vote, and this after a “full-court press” by the chief executive and vice president (American politics revels in sports metaphors).

One of the enduring ironies of U.S. politics is that presidents, who sit atop the national government, are frequently driven to campaign against the very government they wish to run. Even in office, they seem to complain endlessly about the “system.” No one mastered this art better than Ronald Reagan. As an outsider, he spent decades lambasting government; when in the White House, he continued to portray himself as a tireless champion of the people against government, especially the “big spenders” in Congress.

But for all the complaints about government, Americans overwhelmingly admire their political institutions. What makes a mess of these institutions, according to the common refrain, is not their inherent nature or structural flaws, but those who operate them. The reforms much debated these days are not about fundamental overhaul of the institutions, but rather about preventing politicians from allegedly abusing these institutions by overspending or staying too long in office. Hence the movement for term limits. Fifteen states have now adopted laws capping terms; action in other states is pending.

But there has been no real reform aimed at the tremendous costs of politics. It is true that there are spending limits for presidential candidates who want to be partly reimbursed from the public treasury, but those who eschew reimbursement can spend what they wish, as Americans witnessed during billionaire Ross Perot’s cam-

paign in 1992. There are no limits for Senate and House races, and senators and congressmen must literally spend time each week raising money. With the costs of political entry and survival so high, it is little wonder that politicians are dependent upon political action committees (PACs) set up by lobby and special interest groups to get around limits on individual contributions. The influence of lobbyists is also related to their ability to mobilize constituencies. Direct mail, media outlets, satellite communications -- the entire technology revolution in communications -- has enabled lobbyists to direct their message to specific groups more adroitly than ever. The latest development in political communication is the explosion of talk radio, which is disproportionately controlled by conservative voices. Hot-line shows, usually hosted by right-wing zealots such as Rush Limbaugh, former Watergate felon G. Gordon Liddy, and most recently Oliver North, crackle with venom against liberals of all kinds. All these developments have made a divided and complex government more difficult to work than ever.

Conservatives, and white Americans of many stripes, are now mobilizing to contest the affirmative action policies that have been developed in the last quarter-century. This debate has the potential to be among the nastiest in recent memory, pitting racial and ethnic groups against each other in an increasingly diverse society. As so often happens, the conservative battle plan is taking shape in California, and events in that state are now eagerly watched across the country by opponents of liberal policy.

At issue is a proposed plebiscite -- to be held either next March with the California presidential primary or in November with the 1996 presidential election -- that would ban state-sponsored affirmative action. The plebiscite question, the brainchild of two university professors, asks whether the state shall use "race, color, ethnicity or national origin as a criterion for either discriminating against or granting preferential treatment to any individual or group in the operation of the state system of public employment, public education or public contracting." Public opinion polls suggest the measure will win easily. Governor Pete Wilson has endorsed the plebiscite, as have all the Republican presidential contenders. Presi-

dent Clinton, while not abandoning affirmative action, has stepped up his disclaimers about quotas and has ordered a review of federal policies to ensure their “fairness.” Republicans are correct in believing that attacking affirmative action will drive multiple wedges into the Democratic Party.

Public agencies in California and elsewhere have been roiled for years by affirmative action. Universities, police forces, and civil service departments have been riven by particularistic disputes. This latest plebiscite, which comes at a time of economic uncertainty for millions of Americans despite a booming economy, reflects anger among whites at what they feel is preferential treatment for those they consider less qualified. It offends their sense of individual rights and merit, and of course it threatens their sense of self-interest. The great unknown in this debate is how women will react, since they have benefited from many of the policies now under attack. But since this issue goes to the heart of racial and ethnic issues and speaks to conflicting definitions and perceptions of past history and defence of rights, it has a potential for political explosiveness that we have not seen since the issue of court ordered busing of school children in the 1970s.

These scattered reflections about some of the divisions in American society, and some of the forces that are at work changing American society, should not be read as a cry of despair for the United States, for there is a sturdy and impressive overall unity about the country, and it has always benefited from extremely vigorous public debate. Voter turnout in elections is far lower than in any other Western democracy, but the vibrancy of American democracy remains something to behold, whatever its excesses, twists, and turns. Americans may not respect their politicians, but they admire their political institutions, which have stood the test of time in the world’s oldest federation.

The American model of government, American culture, American ideas, American universities, and American industries continue to fascinate others around the world. The United States remains, for all its faults, a magnet for millions outside its borders, people who would leave everything behind for a chance to live there.

It is a country that provides a high standard of living for the majority of its people, a country with an abiding sense of individual rights, a country whose participation in world affairs is eagerly sought by dozens of other nations. Some in Asia, Latin America, Europe, or the Middle East may on occasion complain about American influence -- until they face the prospect of U.S. withdrawal from their part of the world. It is a testament to the international commitment of the United States that, despite the end of the Cold War and pressing domestic problems, it has remained engaged in the world, resisting the old siren songs of isolation.

As for Canadians -- whose birth certificates seem to entitle them to complain about the Americans and admire them at the same time -- perhaps Prime Minister Lester Pearson said it best when he quipped: "Americans are our best friends, whether we like it or not." Their problems are not always ours, but their ideas and their society cannot leave us indifferent, nor should our predisposition to believe that we know more about the United States than vice versa blind us to the need to understand more deeply still the country whose influence upon us overshadows that of all other countries combined.

* This address to The Vancouver Institute has also appeared as an article entitled "A Visitor's Guide to the American Century," *Queen's Quarterly*, 102/3 (Fall 1995) pp. 577-595.