

War or peace? Boom or bust? Boxers or briefs? What will the big issues be in this fall's election? Is there any substance at all in today's consultant-driven elections? The American Enterprise convened John DiIulio of the University of Pennsylvania, Michael Barone of U.S. News and World Report, and Christopher Hitchens of Vanity Fair and The Nation to talk about that. Karlyn Bowman again moderated.

DiIULIO: The track record of pollsters and pundits and political scientists in anticipating and interpreting the crucial ideas shaping national elections does not inspire much confidence. Start with the Clinton-Gore victory of 1992. At the time, we were told that in ending 12 years of Republican control of the White House, the election was a bellwether of a post-Reagan, New Democrat era whose sensible mandate for change would be evidenced in a new wave of electorate-pleasing policies in areas like health care particularly.

Inside of two years and one sunken health care plan later, talk of New Democrat idea dominance was out. Talk of Republican-friendly, angry white males was in.

The '94 midterm congressional elections were widely interpreted at the time as a near-total repudiation of any pro-government ideas and anything having to do with Washington. This was the interpretation even of President Clinton himself. The era of Big Government was said to be over. Yet, in fact, if a total of just 19,500 votes had switched from Democrat to Republican in just 13 congressional districts, the name of the Speaker of the 104th Congress would have been Foley, not Gingrich.

BOWMAN: Provided that Foley's loss was one of the results getting reversed.

DiIULIO: That's right. But instead, Gingrich became Czar Gingrich overnight, riding a wave of popular dissatisfaction with all things Washington, with the most dissatisfied of all being the angry white males. And supposedly what the angry white males were most angry about was affirmative action. Never mind that between '86 and '94 women as well as men, and blacks as well as whites, and Democrats, independents, and Republicans *all* became less supportive of affirmative action. And never mind that by 1994 the so-called gender gap between males and females had actually shrunk. The claim was, The white guys are angry.

Yet despite this earthquake election, within two years this supposedly new, cohesive, powerful block of angry white male voters had disappeared. They were gone.

In 1996 their wives, the soccer moms, replaced them as the big, important, powerful, all-purpose voting bloc. Never mind that the decisive vote of white suburban women for Clinton over Dole almost exactly mirrored the percentages among the electorate as a whole—about 49 to 42 percent.

The election analysts said the soccer moms were pushed into Clinton's arms—maybe that's a bad choice of

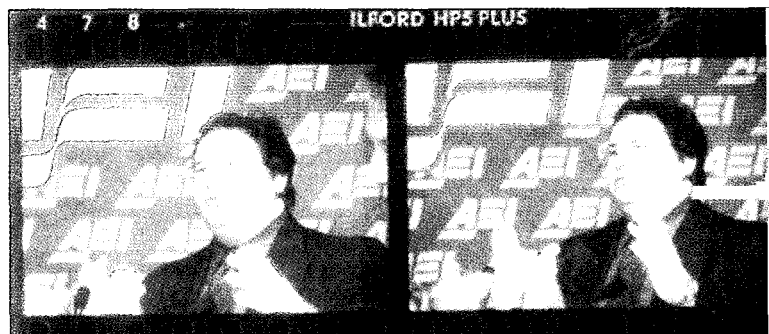
words—over the abortion issue. We were told the soccer moms favored essentially what Clinton favored: abortion on demand, for Clinton wouldn't regulate even partial birth abortions. Actually, only 27 percent of Americans who voted in the '96 presidential election favored abortion on demand. You may recall that many pro-choice Republicans lost seats in that election. But never mind.

Come 1998, Congress remained Republican, the President remained a Democrat. It was a status quo election. We were now to understand that the New Democrats, angry white males, and soccer moms had all suddenly been transformed into happy campers.

The last refuge of academic scoundrels who cannot explain or predict is to taxonomize; so let me conclude by taxonomizing and suggesting that there are basically two types of ideas or issues that will matter in this election. One is the so-called "position issue." A position issue is one on which rival parties or candidates reach out for support from various parts of the electorate by staking out different positions on policy questions in ways that divide the electorate.

But many of the issues employed in political campaigns today do not powerfully divide the electorate in this way. Instead of running on substantive differences in ideas and policies, candidates now often run by trying to link themselves in voters' minds to broad symbols that are almost universally approved or disapproved. Political scientists call these "valence issues," a term they borrowed from science—where valence refers to a chemical bonding process.

"Corruption" is a valence issue with a deep historical resonance in American politics, and it is now front and center in the form of the campaign finance debate. Obviously no one is



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in favor of bribery (except maybe in my native Philadelphia).

Candidates manipulate valence issues to link themselves in the public mind with warm and fuzzy values: honesty, honor, whatever. Negative symbols are also often staples of valence campaigns—weak leadership; unpatriotic beliefs; weak national defense; waste, fraud, and abuse.

Elections have always turned on a mix of valence issues and position issues. But the relative importance of symbolic valence issues over substantive position issues has risen sharply in recent elections. As image-making technologies like television have become all-important, this shift has accelerated.

The Clinton campaign of 1996 was almost pure valence politics. Every day there was a new symbol. School uniforms today, 100,000 cops tomorrow. (It started out as 50,000 cops in a bull session in Little Rock, and then the focus group found that 100,000 played better than 50,000.) As a result, substantive issues are no longer being used to mobilize the electorate. The presence of real campaign ideas is virtually nil today. Politics has been disconnected from governance.

So anyone who expects genuinely detailed recitations by the candidates on ideas such as education reform, or crime control, or good things happening in inner-city neighborhoods, or even taxes, will be disappointed. Instead, symbols and negative ads will define and drive the races, as well as much of the governing that follows.

BARONE: I think you can almost make the case that there are no issues at all in this year's election. The *Washington Post* recently ran an article with the headline, "Major Issues Favor Democrats." Now most reporters are Democrats, and so most reporters are quite alert to evidence of things helping the Democrats. They tend to be not very alert about things that help the Republicans.

What they were looking at in this case was a poll that showed things like education and Social Security—traditional Democratic issues—to be the top concerns of voters, coming out higher than issues that favor the Republicans, like moral values and cutting taxes. But if you look at the actual numbers in these polls, you find that education is cited as a concern by something like 13 percent of the electorate, Social Security is at 10 percent, moral values may be 8 percent, perhaps cutting taxes is at 7 percent.

I spent seven years in the polling business, and I know that for opinion purposes, the number 13 is the same as the number 7. There's no significant difference when responses are clustered at these low levels. You have a big issue in this country when you have 30, 40, or 60 percent of people volunteering that they're concerned about it. There simply isn't any issue or idea today that engenders that kind of response. So we're looking at an election in which there are no decisive issues, as John has suggested.

There are no major controversies this year on which every candidate must come up with a program or solution, as was the case back when, say, the war in Vietnam was raging, or the economy was collapsing, or there were U.S. hostages in Iran. The nation is not in obvious crisis. We are, some people might say, fat, dumb, and happy. We're not feeling threatened.

2000 gives all the signs of being a status quo election. If there were an incumbent President of either party eligible to run for re-election, he or she would be an overwhelming favorite.

The main reason Al Gore—the Vice President who is supported by the incumbent President as no Vice President has ever been supported before—is not an overwhelming favorite is the unfavorable personal feelings toward Bill Clinton that voters show even in the Democratic electorates. In New Hampshire, a solid majority of Democratic primary voters said they were *unfavorable* to Clinton.

My second point is that there are some very good reasons for this calm, and the disappearance of sharp political issues. I would contrast the 1990s with the period of 1965 to '75. Between 1965 and 1975, crime tripled in the United States. That's not up 3 percent or 30 percent—I mean up 200 percent, an astonishing change in social behavior. Between 1965 and '75, welfare rolls also tripled, despite there being no depression.

I think what happened was the civil rights revolution brought a sense of guilt to large numbers of Americans. Not just liberal academics but a broad swath of people started to ask, "Shouldn't we just give money to people who lack it?" and "Are we really entitled to punish people who commit crimes?" Remember, although one is not supposed to say so out loud, about half the crime in the United States is committed by blacks.

Hubert Humphrey, as Vice President, said, "If I were born in a ghetto, I would riot too. I might commit crimes too." The fact is, Hubert Humphrey wouldn't have committed crimes, nor would he have rioted. But that was the thinking of the liberal establishment: the law firms, the university presidents, the corporate execs. We expected people to commit crimes, go on welfare, not work, and not get married. As a result, we got some policy initiatives that today make no sense at all.

After a generation of this, the nation changed its mind in the '90s. Crime and the welfare rolls were pushed down beginning about 1993, on as sharp a curve as they increased in that dreadful decade between 1965 and '75.

The Clinton administration has claimed credit for this, but obviously much more credit is due to the state and local officials who actually took the initiative, the most prominent being Mayor Giuliani of New York and Governor Thompson of Wisconsin.

Sometimes I say to myself, Wouldn't it have been great if we had adopted the policies of Giuliani and Thompson two decades earlier? But if we had adopted those policies in the mid-1970s they wouldn't have worked—because the na-



tional mind hadn't changed. We needed that generation of experience with the negative results.

My third point is that substantive political issues could return to our national campaigns rather suddenly. There's fascinating evidence that some of that may be happening already, though we haven't yet focused on it.

Take Social Security and Medicare, where the Democrats have taken the position of, as columnist Charles Krauthammer puts it, reactionary liberals: There will be no changes. We know for a fact that payroll taxes are not going to be able to pay for Social Security and Medicare by around 2014. Both George W. Bush and John McCain have called for personal investment accounts to supplement Social Security with earnings coming from the market. This is a big reform that could catch on.

Or take education. Real differences of position exist on vouchers, private schools, and so forth, because the Democrats are tethered to the education establishment that has been running our schools for a generation, and they can't get very far away from the teachers' unions.

Or take faith-based social work. Gore and Bush have both talked about this, but in different tones and in ways that may provoke controversy. So I think we may see some interesting, substantive debates here.

Recent polls like those by Ed Goetas and Celinda Lake present tantalizing evidence that some of these issues may play out with unexpected winners and losers. On Social Security, for instance, the basic assumption has long been that arguments over Social Security favor the Democrats overwhelmingly. But asked who would do a better job of handling Social Security, 40 percent of the public now says Gore, and 40 percent says Bush. Likewise, on education, it was 40 percent Bush, 42 percent Gore.

What this suggests is that the national mind may be changing on some issues of overwhelming social importance. We may be ready to see these issues in different ways from the way we've seen them over the last couple of decades.

So the final story on 2000, I think, is yet to be written.

HITCHENS: One troubling political reality that has recently been exposed in this country is that it isn't possible to remove a President from office by impeachment. Not if he's lucky with the Dow Jones, or with manipulation of the polls.

Nor in this country can an election be called or forced as it can be in Europe. It's become painfully obvious how much of

an advantage this is to the powerful. Politicians can have their arrangements going, knowing exactly when they're going to need resources. The importance of that in influencing this year's primaries is very great.

Also troubling is the growing manipulation of public opinion. It's not very long since newspapers would debate whether they should print opinion poll findings at all; whether they should commission polls of their own; whether they should pay for them. Now it's impossible to remember such scruples. If you want to create a news story, you can do so simply by commissioning an opinion poll. It happens all the time. In these circumstances, I think one of the issues in the election should be the electoral process itself.

It would be interesting to see international observers sent to monitor the United States' 2000 elections to see whether it was free and fair. Things that would be examined would include the role of off-the-record money; the restriction of access to the ballot by independent candidates or third parties; and the rigging of presidential debates, as took place last time, with the exclusion of all other candidates by the two-party monopoly.

The dirty secret of the media is that we are the main recipients of all the slush-fund money that's raised and then spent for campaign ads. Thus there is little incentive for journalists to investigate the role of money in politics or the manipulation of candidates and issues.

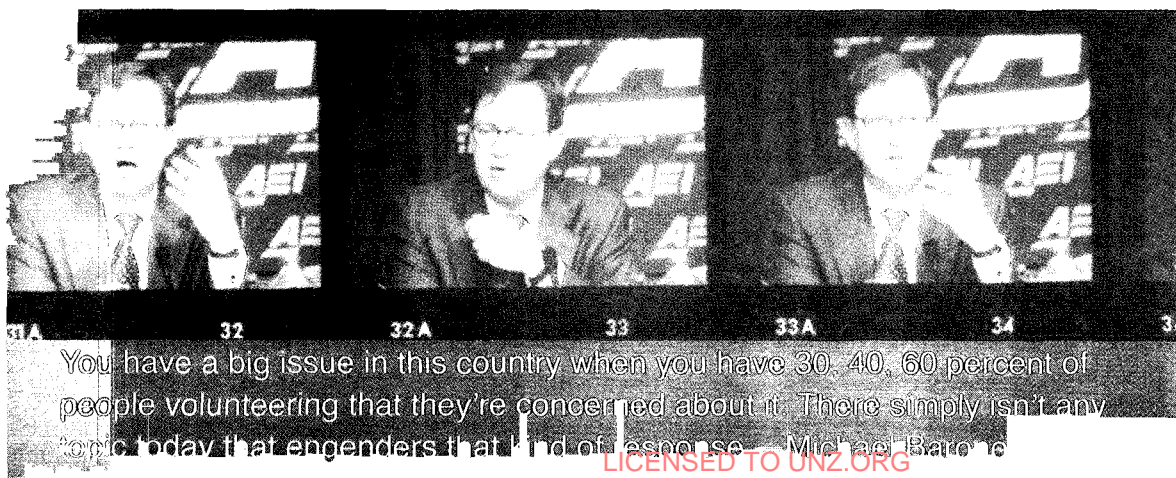
Today's electoral process is designed to interest least of all those whose principal interest is politics. All our candidates are pre-selected, old-shoe, club members. What we're watching is the exclusion of politics from the electoral process.

If I were to list some important issues that might be contested in the 2000 election, I would include:

- the pending decision on ballistic missile defense
- the war on drugs and its constitutional implications
- our commitment to the Balkans and the link that has to our relationship with Russia
- impending crises between China and Korea, and in Cuba
- capital punishment
- health care
- abortion
- tax reform

Of these, health care is currently mentioned as a kind of mantra, and abortion comes up in a symbolic manner. None of the other issues have a chance of surfacing in the election at all.

The only non-fringe candidate who campaigned boldly on a clear issue proposal was Steve Forbes and his late proposal for a flat tax. I don't think



we are likely to find another candidate and issue coming together clearly in that way between now and November.

BARONE: To Christopher's complaint that our system of plebiscitary democracy has great defects, I guess one has to respond with Churchill's statement that democracy is the worst system you can conceive of, except for all the others that have been tried over the course of history.

The Founding Fathers gave us a system of elections by state elites, which produced some good results, but it didn't last. The political party system invented by Martin Van Buren has. There are a lot of absurdities in the American political process, but I'm not sure how you could do it better. Iowa and New Hampshire are where candidates are able to talk to actual voters, which ensures some contact and vetting by local people.

As for big national fundraising, these campaigns can't be run for free. The broadcast companies can't have their property—i.e., ad time—seized. The government could simply pay for it all, but that has never been popular with the public, because political ads strike most viewers as garbage, and they want as few of them as possible.

Candidates have to raise money from somewhere, and today they raise it from large numbers of people. George W. Bush has already raised money from 175,000 people. That's beginning to be a fairly broad constituency right there.

DI IULIO: The political parties as institutions—as opposed to fundraising consultancies—don't mediate very much anymore. Hubert Humphrey would not be able to gain his party's nomination today the way he did in '68. Party professionals at the state and local levels used to have a role in expressing to the candidates the concerns of the people they represented. That injected a reality principle.

There is a surreal character to a lot of what are being pawned off as the crucial ideas of Election 2000 so far. Not because the ideas are necessarily bad ones, but because no one is looking beneath the sheets and considering the precise consequences of the various proposals for faraway communities. Instead, candidates get away with making completely airy, abstract, and impractical claims.

BARONE: But you've got to use shorthand to interest even the half of the American people who are motivated enough to come out and vote in general elections. And some issues just have to be decided by elites in ways that ordinary people are not much engaged in.

Take one of Christopher's examples: missile defense. Our national policy on missile defense was changed by the Rumsfeld Commission in July 1998. An unelected group with access to secret U.S. intelligence, the commission produced a unanimous bipartisan report saying that rogue states have the potential of attacking the U.S. with nuclear weapons. That changed the policy of the Clinton administration, which had been adamantly against missile defense, to the point where Vice President Gore now says he will abrogate the ABM Treaty. The American people have not been much involved in this.

HITCHENS: Michael, wouldn't you accept that—impressive though the findings of the Rumsfeld Commission no doubt were—it's extremely probable that Gore adopted his current position on the ABM Treaty mostly so Republicans can't accuse him of not doing so? What he's done is stolen an issue.

BARONE: He's covering up part of his anatomy. It's politics as a futures market. You're running for election in 2004. The North Koreans have incinerated Los Angeles. What do you do against the charge that you could have had a missile defense system that would have prevented the thing from coming in and killing Michael Jackson and 14 million other people?

BOWMAN: To ask a naive question, if there are no major issues, what are we going to hear about in October and November?

DI IULIO: I think you're going to hear about issues, but I think you're going to hear about them in the way a car salesperson tells you about a sale: They'll hang up pretty banners.

BARONE: Politicians have always used shorthand. And even a political cartoon can make a serious argument.

DI IULIO: That's right, on the one hand. On the other hand, the shorthand is no longer, in most cases, backed up by the long letter that they've written to themselves about what they might actually do if they get a chance to govern, and, heaven forbid, politics becomes something other than a permanent campaign.

BARONE: I remember a political consultant telling people, If you don't want to be identified with any one issue, send out a couple dozen, and people will say, "Well, he's busy and active."

BOWMAN: The tax issue is one on which the parties are deeply divided. What will we hear about that this fall?

HITCHENS: Most people don't understand the tax code anyway, and they don't believe in the good faith of the person making the promise. That's why I singled out Mr. Forbes' flat tax proposal as more significant than most. What he tried to say



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with the flat tax is that we need to reconsider the relationship of the citizen to the state.

BARONE: We are moving toward a society in which more than 40 percent of the revenue is produced by 5 percent of the taxpayers. Let's plunder the rich to give to everybody else.

HITCHENS: Worse, people often don't know whether they are breaking the law or not; so they live in a state of fear about the IRS.

DiIULIO: On taxes, an issue once owned by Republicans, there has been a convergence, with voters less likely to prefer GOP to Democratic treatments. And the Republican advantage has narrowed because they have been less specific and substantive in their proposals. Surveys show that the overwhelming majority of Americans have believed for quite some time that no one, regardless of income, should pay more than a total of 25 percent of his income in all taxes.

Despite that opening, the two parties are communicating bland and ever-more homogeneous tax policies.

BOWMAN: What is the effect of Clinton on this election?

BARONE: If Bill Clinton's truthfulness and reliability were not as poorly regarded as they are by most voters, Al Gore would be blazing ahead.

People are looking for character; typically, they look in the next President for what they've failed to get from the previous one. With Bill Clinton, that is truth and veracity. So one of the big things that all of the candidates are trying to do is to show their character. Bush says at the end of every speech, "I swear on that Bible to uphold the laws of the land. I also swear to uphold the dignity and honor of the presidency."

John McCain says very movingly, "No matter what, I'll tell you the truth."

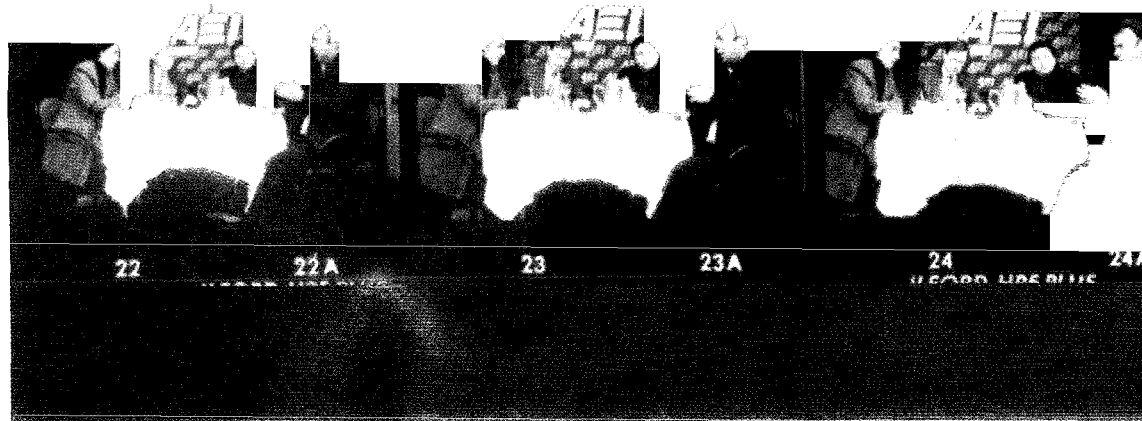
Bill Bradley says, "We have to do things out of the goodness of our character," sounding like a secular version of a Christian conservative.

You've got to demonstrate that you are an anti-Clinton if you're going to win this election, and that's a handicap to Gore.

HITCHENS: I wish that was truer, but I see little evidence of a massive flight from Clinton. I had expected by now to see regularly replayed clips of the Vice President's speech on the White House lawn on the day after that banana-republic vote: the post-impeachment speech where Gore said this would be remembered as one of the great presidencies. I had expected that by now, if not from Senator Bradley then from the Republicans. I think the Republicans are still very gun-shy.

BOWMAN: Is today's press easy and non-probing compared to reporting in earlier eras?

BARONE: Few people know the name Garrett D. Horner. He was the White House reporter for the *Washington Star* who never thought there was much to the story of Watergate. I



don't know where he is now, but Bob Woodward lives on Q Street and has a house in Nantucket, a place on the Chesapeake Bay, and so forth. The press is not immune to economic incentives.

DiIULIO: Political journalists, by and large, are extremely lazy and take what they're given and add a little opinion. Take the Christian Coalition story coming off the '94 election. We heard for two to three years that the Christian Coalition was this powerful, decisive force controlling the Republican Party. In fact, the Christian Coalition's main electoral impact was to increase the winning margin of candidates who would have won anyway.

HITCHENS: The Christian Coalition's role is to act as a Medusa's head for Democrats. It's what the Democrats use to keep their people in line. That's all.

Scandalously, the media often collaborate in trying to tamp down organized protests of the sort represented by the Christian Coalition. The year before last, Tom Brokaw came to the University of California-Berkeley to give a lecture, and he ended by saying that he considered it his job to ensure that every night the Great American Viewing Public went to bed believing that the country was in good hands.

BARONE: I observe a lot of elections abroad, and one of the things that fascinates me is that some of the defects of the American political process resemble the problems in places like Mexico and Russia. In Mexico, for instance, you hear people say, "A few insiders determine the outcome." In the United States, many more people are involved in the democratic process, yet it's still a small percentage of the national population.

HITCHENS: But in the United States you wouldn't wind up a corpse on the side of the road if you tried to open the process up further, whereas you still have a good chance of that happening in Mexico.

I love it when Americans say they are "disillusioned" with politics. Some say this is a cause for alarm. Actually, I would be alarmed if large percentages of people felt they had to get involved in the political process. I think it's to the credit of the United States that people here can live a large part of their lives without reference to politics.



Political Lessons for

The electoral victories of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and the 1994 House Republicans led to enormous change. Reagan decisively pointed the nation in a different direction, and his economic reforms launched an entrepreneurial revolution. Margaret Thatcher changed British government and British economics in a similar way. Ironically, Thatcher and Reagan made possible the victories of their opponents and eventual successors Tony Blair and Bill Clinton—because they handed off much healthier societies and economies than Labour leader Callaghan or Democrat Jimmy Carter had been able to produce.

The Reagan-Thatcher team defeated the Soviet empire without violence—an enormous historic achievement that changed the future of the human race. And in 1994 the House Republicans'

Contract with America produced welfare reform, tax cuts, and the saving of Medicare without a tax increase.

These conservative victories were fueled partly by liberal disasters. In 1979 Britain, in the "Winter of Discontent," the Callaghan government was disintegrating, the unions were stopping hospital work, people were freezing. Margaret Thatcher ran in an environment of unbelievable opportunity for conservatives with a simple message: Liberalism is not working. This was not a complex argument, so the news media could not distort it too much. Even the most liberal reporter could not persuade the average Briton that he was better off under the Labour Party.

Governor Reagan ran at a time when President Carter was presiding over tremendous inflation, dramatically rising interest rates, and a decaying economy. The Russians were in Afghanistan, and Americans were held hostage in Iran. Reagan was elected because he had a set of ideas and there was a disaster on the other side, including Teddy Kennedy's civil war against Jimmy Carter.

Reagan and Thatcher had a very consistent message. Both had a stubborn commitment to their principles. They articulated those principles in a common-sense way that the average person understood. They knew that they had to reach beyond the elites or the elites would destroy them. As Lady Thatcher said to me, "Never read the newspapers; it will simply confuse you. Keep doing what you think is right and allow the country to follow your leadership." She was right: Paying atten-

