

educators to tell their students the truths about Columbus that were left out of traditional textbooks. One student, a girl named Rebecca, had this to say about the traditional teachings:

Of course, the writers of the books probably think it's harmless enough—what does it matter who discovered America, really. . . . But the thought that I have been lied to all my life about this, and who knows what else, really makes me angry.

Rebecca was not the only angry American. As the United States entered the 1990s, the political system was in the control of the very rich. Corporations owned the major media. The country was divided into extreme wealth and extreme poverty, separated by a middle class that felt troubled and insecure. Yet a culture of protest and resistance survived. Some people refused to give up the vision of a more equal, more human society. If there was hope for the future of America, it lay with them.

THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

EACH YEAR SOMEONE WINS THE NOBEL PEACE Prize for seeking a peaceful solution to one of the world's problems. In 1996 the prize went to two men who were working to find a fair way to end a war in East Timor, an Asian country that was fighting for independence from Indonesia.

Before receiving the prize, one of those men, Jose Ramos-Horta, spoke at a church in Brooklyn, New York. He recalled a visit to America almost twenty years earlier:

In the summer of 1977, I was here in New York when I received a message telling me that one of my sisters, Maria, twenty-one years old, had been killed in an aircraft bombing. The aircraft, named Bronco, was supplied by the United States. . . . Within months, a report about a brother, Guy, seventeen years old, killed along with many

other people in his village by Bell helicopters supplied by the United States. Same year, another brother, Nunu, captured and executed with an [American-made] M-16.

Why were American weapons killing people in East Timor, a country on the far side of the world, when the United States was not at war there? Because the United States gave military aid to Indonesia. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the United States became the world's leading provider of weapons to other nations. At the same time, it continued to build up its own military machine.

Military spending took money away from social programs. Dwight Eisenhower, who was president in the middle of the twentieth century, had known that. In one of his best moments, Eisenhower said, "Every gun that is made; every warship launched, every rocket fired, [means] a theft from those who are hungry and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

During the 1990s, under the eight-year presidency of Bill Clinton, the United States continued to be a place where some people were hungry and cold. It remained a nation where one-fourth of all children lived in poverty and homeless people

huddled in the streets of every major city. The country's leaders did not look for bold solutions to the problems of health care, education, child care, unemployment, housing, and the environment.

Moving Toward the Middle

CLINTON WAS A SMART, YOUNG DEMOCRAT in 1992, when Americans elected him to his first term as president. He promised to bring change to the country, and his presidency began with that hope. Upon his reelection in 1996, Clinton declared, "We need a new government for a new century."

But during eight years in office, Clinton failed to live up to his promise of change. Instead, he delivered more of what the country had gotten from the presidents before him.

Like other politicians, Clinton seemed to be more interested in getting votes than in bringing about social change. To win votes, he decided to move the Democratic Party closer to the center—

in other words, to make the party less liberal and more conservative, so that it would not be too different from the Republican Party. To do this, he had to do just enough for the blacks, women, and working people who had traditionally been Democrats to keep their support. At the same time, he tried to win over white conservative voters by coming out in favor of welfare cuts and a strong military.

Even before he was elected, Clinton was eager to show that he took a tough position on matters of "law and order." As governor of Arkansas, he flew back to his home state for the execution of a mentally retarded man on death row.

Soon after he became president, Clinton approved an attack by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on a group of religious extremists who had sealed themselves up, with weapons, inside a group of buildings in Waco, Texas. Instead of waiting to see if the crisis could be solved through talking, the FBI attacked with rifle fire, tanks, and tear gas, killing at least eighty-six men, women, and children.

In 1996, Republicans and Democrats in Congress voted in favor of a new law called a

"Crime Bill." Clinton supported the bill, which made more crimes punishable by death. It also set aside \$8 billion of federal money to build new prisons. Throughout his presidency Clinton chose federal judges whose liberalism was of the mild, middling kind. Often their decisions were just like those of more conservative judges.

Clinton was no different from other people in power, whether Democrats or Republicans. To keep themselves in power, they turned the public's anger toward groups that could not defend themselves. The target could be criminals, immigrants, people on welfare, or certain governments hostile to the United States, such as Iraq or Communist Cuba. By urging people to focus on these sources of possible danger, political leaders drew attention away from the failures of the American system.

Choices

THE UNITED STATES WAS THE RICHEST COUNTRY in the world. With 5 percent of the world's popula-

tion, it used or ate or bought 30 percent of everything that was produced worldwide. But only a tiny fraction of Americans benefited from the country's great wealth.

Starting in the late 1970s, the richest 1 percent of people in the country saw their wealth grow enormously. Changes in the tax laws meant that by 1995, that richest 1 percent had gained more than a trillion dollars. It owned 40 percent of the country's wealth. Between 1982 and 1995, the wealth of the four hundred richest families in the country had jumped from \$92 billion to \$480 billion. In the same time period, the cost of living rose faster than the average wage of ordinary working people.

People earning an average wage could buy about 15 percent less in 1995 than in 1982.

If you looked just at the richest part of the American population, you could say the economy was healthy. Meanwhile, 40 million people had no health insurance. Babies and young children in the United States died of sickness and malnutrition at a higher rate than in any other industrial country. Jobs weren't always the answer. In 1998, a third of all working people in the country didn't earn enough to lift them above the government's

official poverty level. Many people who worked in factories, stores, or restaurants couldn't afford housing, health care, or even enough food.

Two sources of money were available to pay for social programs to attack poverty, joblessness, and other national problems.

The first source was the military budget. One expert on military spending suggested that gradually lowering the country's military budget to \$60 million a year would fit the country's needs, now that the Soviet Union had collapsed and the Cold War had ended.

A big drop in the military budget would have meant closing U.S. military bases around the world. It would have meant that the nation would turn its back on war. The basic human desire of people to live in peace with one another would guide its foreign policy. That was a choice that didn't get made. The military budget kept rising. By the end of Clinton's presidency, military spending was about \$300 billion a year.

The second source of money for social programs was the wealth of the superrich. A "wealth tax" could have added \$100 billion a year to the nation's treasury. Clinton did raise the tax rate on

the superrich and on corporations, but only slightly. It was a pitifully small step compared with the nation's needs.

Together, cuts in the military budget and higher taxes on the superrich could have given the government as much as \$500 billion each year to pay for dramatic changes. This money could have paid for health care for everyone and for programs to create jobs for all. Instead of giving out contracts for companies to build bombers and nuclear submarines, the government could have given contracts to nonprofit agencies to hire people to build homes, clean up rivers, and construct public transportation systems.

Instead, things continued as before. Cities kept falling into disrepair. Farmers were forced off their land by debts. Young people without jobs or hope turned to drugs and crime. The response of the government was to build more jails and lock up more people. By the end of the Clinton years, the United States had more than 2 million people in prison—a higher percentage of the population than any other country in the world, except maybe Communist China.

Visions of Change

CLINTON CLAIMED THAT HIS DECISIONS WERE based on the opinion of the American people. But opinion surveys in the 1980s and 1990s showed that Americans favored health care for everyone. They also were in favor of guaranteed jobs, government help for the poor and homeless, military budget cuts, and taxes on the rich. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats were willing to take these bold steps.

What if the American people acted on the feelings they showed in those surveys? What if citizens organized to demand what the Declaration of Independence promised: a government that protected the equal rights of all to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? This would call for an economic system that distributed wealth in a thoughtful and humane way. It would mean a culture where young people were not taught to seek success as a mask for greed.

Throughout the Clinton years, many Americans did protest government policy. They demanded a more fair and peaceful society. They did not get much attention in the media, though. Even a gathering of half a million children and

adults, of all colors, who came to the nation's capital to "Stand for the Children" was mostly ignored by television and newspapers. Still, activists for peace, women's rights, and racial equality continued their struggle—and won some victories.

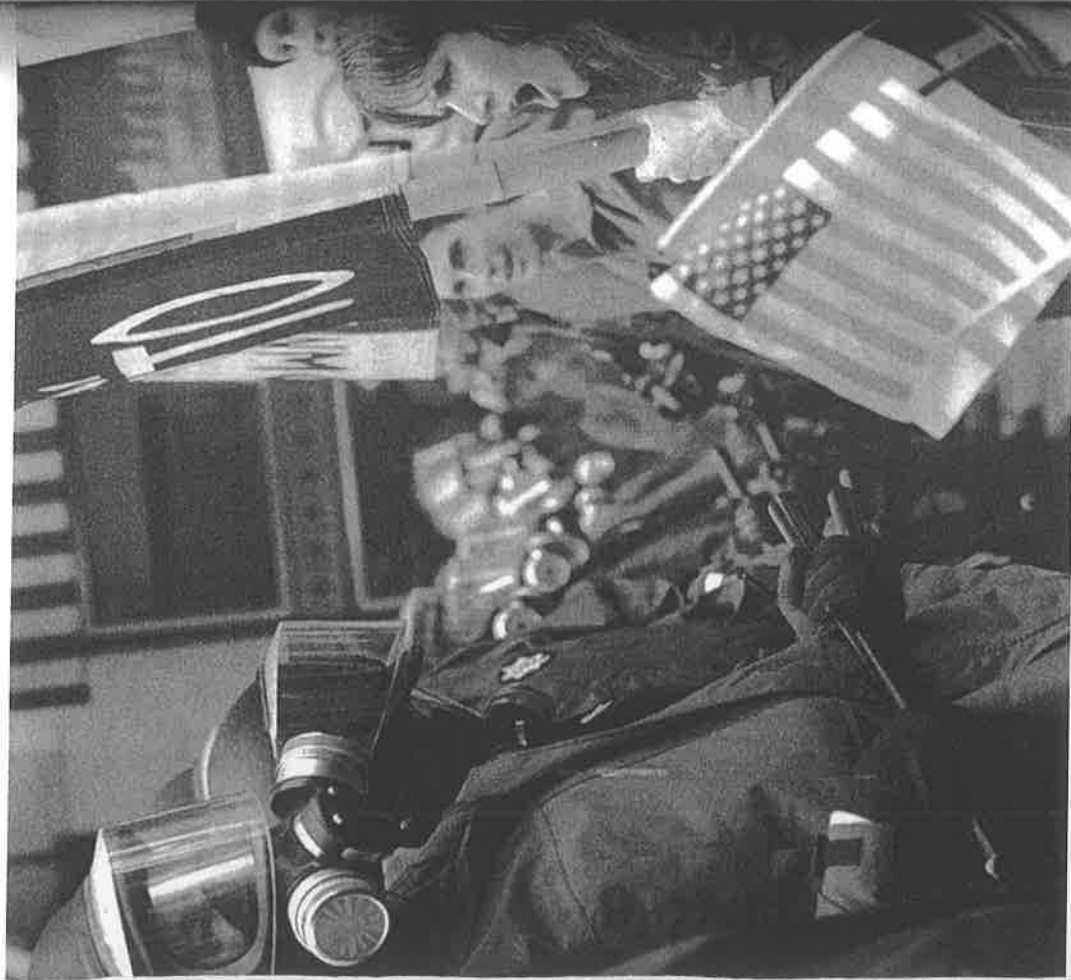
The labor movement was alive, too. A protest at Harvard University in Massachusetts showed how different groups could work together to reach a goal.

Many of Harvard's janitors and other campus workers did not earn enough to support themselves and their families. Some had to work two jobs, as much as eighty hours a week. So students organized to demand that the workers be paid a "living wage."

The students staged rallies to win support for their cause. Local city council members and union leaders took part. Two young movie stars, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, also showed up to speak in favor of a living wage. Damon had attended Harvard before going to Hollywood. Affleck told how his father had worked at a poorly paid service job at Harvard.

When university administrators refused to talk with the campus workers, students took over an administration building and stayed in it day and

(left)
The police confront the anti-WTO demonstrators, 1999.



night for several weeks, supported by hundreds of people outside and by donations from all over the country. Finally the university agreed to raise workers' pay and give them health benefits. Soon students and workers were organizing living wage movements at other schools.

In 1999 a great gathering of demonstrators met in Seattle, Washington. They wanted to show the people of America and the world how the power of giant multinational corporations controls the lives of ordinary people.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) was meeting in Seattle. Representatives of the world's richest and most powerful companies and countries were there to make plans to maintain their wealth and power. Their goal was to bring the principles of capitalism to work everywhere, through free-trade agreements between nations.

Protestors claimed that free-trade agreements would let corporations roam the globe looking for cheap labor and places where they could operate without strict environmental laws. The issues of free trade are complicated, but protestors asked a simple question: Should the health and freedom

of ordinary people all over the world be sacrificed so that corporations can make a profit?

Tens of thousands of demonstrators showed up to march, make speeches, and carry signs. They were labor unionists, women's rights activists, farmers, environmentalists, consumers, religious groups, and more. The media focused on the small number of demonstrators who broke windows and created trouble, but the overwhelming majority of demonstrators were nonviolent.

Hundreds were jailed, but the protests continued. News of them traveled all over the world. The WTO talks collapsed, showing that organized citizens can challenge the most powerful corporations of the world. Mike Brannan, writing for a union newspaper, captured the protestors' mood:

The kind of solidarity that all of us dream of was in the air as people sang, chanted, played music, and stood up to the cops and the WTO. The people owned the streets that day and it was as much a lesson for us as it was for corporate America.

Protestors started showing up wherever meetings of the rich and powerful took place. Large international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund could

not ignore the movement. They started talking about concern for the environment and for working conditions. Would this lead to real change? It was too soon to tell, but at least the voices of protest had been heard.

THE "WAR ON TERRORISM"

"I DON'T THINK THEY CARE ABOUT PEOPLE LIKE us," the woman said. She was a cashier at a filling station. Her husband was a construction worker. She added, "Maybe if they lived in a two-bedroom trailer, it would be different."

Who was she talking about? "They" were the two candidates for president in 2000. The Republican candidate was George W. Bush, son of the man who had been president before Bill Clinton. The Democratic candidate was Al Gore, who had been vice president for eight years.

That cashier wasn't the only person who thought that neither of the two candidates really cared about her and people like her. Many others felt the same way. An African American woman who managed a McDonald's, earning barely more