

NORTH COAST

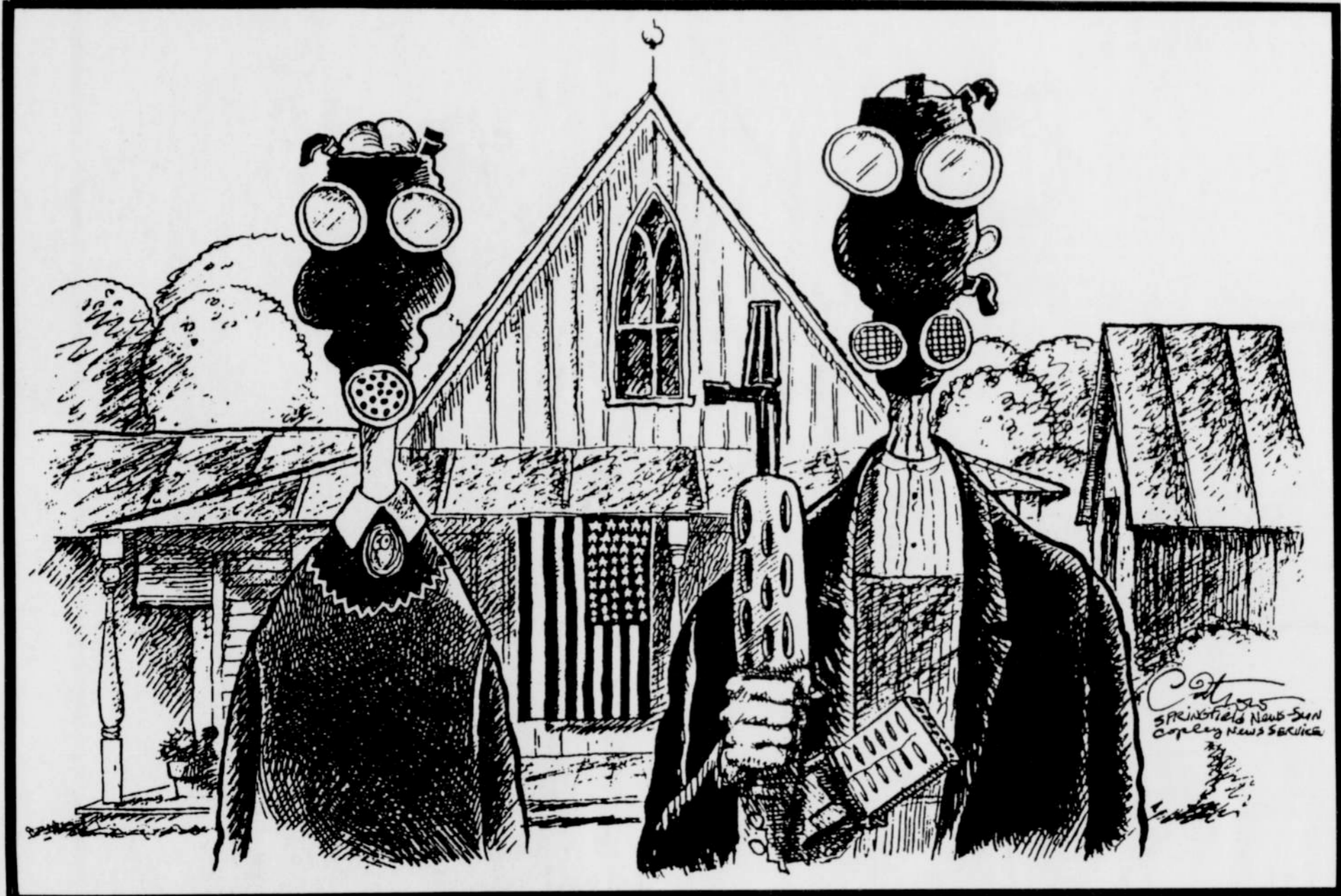


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In a dark time the eye begins to see
~Theodore Roethke

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REAL COMMUNITY ACTION ESSENTIAL

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"Every time we are in a national crisis someone always says as sure as night follows day, 'The problem is because we are too free.'"

~DANIEL SCHORR

"Even in a democracy, there are a lot of little Hitlers running around."

~ARMIN LEHMANN,
former courier to Adolf Hitler,
speaking at Seaside High School

Democracy begins at home. First in the heart; from there it radiates through the house into the neighborhood and community. It is found in smaller places rather than in massive standardized illusions of popular culture that reflect mind manipulation and mendacity as well as gross distortions of constitutional purposes and interpretations.

Democracy is after all a compromise between the yearning for freedom and the urge to frustrate it. It is an elaborate though inherently fragile system of concessions between diverse and disparate ambitions and ideologies represented by a variety of economic and political classes despite an enshrined myth that a democracy is a classless society. The only possible survival for democracy is to establish and sustain balance between conflicting factions so that none gain such power as to be capable of suppressing or ravaging the rest. In that sense, no debate or problem can be fully or finally resolved without its solution becoming repressive.

The true extent of the variety and depth of American politics was expressed by Edwin O'Connor in his famous 1956 book, *The Last Hurrah*: "Each (campaign expedition through the voting public) was aimed at a special group of the electorate. What (was) astonishing was not that such special groups existed but that they existed in such numbers. They were divided not only along the broad lines one might have anticipated: race, religion, national background, sex, capital and labor; inside whichever category one chose, it seemed there were limitless special cells, each of whose concerns seemed to be in direct opposition to those of every other cell... (a staggering) multiplicity of minority interests, (a) chaotic diversity of the democratic process."

Diversity is democracy, and vice versa.

Unfortunately, the country is rapidly retrogressing from a diversely construed democracy centered on the rule of common folk to an aristo/plutocracy of billionaires and immense multinational corporations. The USA is at a crossroads as severe and consequential as the Civil War: a crisis that will determine its future as a nation and society — either as a corporate oligarchy administered by questionably elected figureheads; or an open society as envisioned in its most fundamental beliefs and laws as well as a leading member of a world confederacy of presumably eventual democracies.

Periods of national crisis reveal the real impotency of average citizens who have very little input other than letters or e-mail to elected representatives whose interests are at the very least distracted by powerfully unelected elites who more often than not initiated the crises.

9/11 precipitated a crisis of democracy that might well be more momentous and more prolonged than the war on terrorism. Civil liberties are dramatically threatened and average citizens have little say about it. Ordinary people are rendered impotent. Most citizens are at the bottom of the crisis and are affected every day by the consequences — social services are withdrawn as well as public health because tax money is being diverted toward war, and of course to the corporations of the military/industrial mafia who unabashedly profit from making war possible. The USA Patriot Act that was rapidly cobbled together with hardly a whimper of protest by Congress in the wake of 9/11 circumvents and erodes Constitutional rights and liberties.

The country is at war yet not at war — but the U.S. is shifting from a defensive democracy to first-strike attacker. Pre-emptive war implies perpetual war for attainment of a post-modern *pax Americana*. The President ardently desires to invade another nation, claiming only through war will the nation have peace and security. Dissent is inhibited, treated as unpatriotic and possibly a form of terrorism. Huey Long said, "Fascism will come to the United States wrapped in the American flag."

The prospect of war and decline of civil liberties only exacerbates the malign neglect of the huge and growing underclass that lives virtually abandoned and without hope in our crumbling inner cities and impoverished rural areas. Surging disparities in wealth and living standards that undermine our society and threaten civil disorder on a massive scale are also the death knell of real democracy. Ambrose Bierce in his *The Devil's Dictionary* cynically but pertinently defined politics as "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles."

Attorney General Ashcroft's determination to overrule Oregon's Death With Dignity law is an ominous indication that individuals have no rights except those government allows, contrary to the intent of the Bill of Rights; denied the right to make essential decisions over their lives that the state demands as its own prerogative — such as the choice to die, which the state permits only through war or execution aside from natural or accidental causes.

We in our small cities are as vulnerable as the people of Iraq who are being held implicitly accountable for the excesses of Saddam Hussein which our President is using to justify the very real possibility that hundreds of thousands of them will be killed, injured and displaced by an American invasion.* But such a war will also set up American citizens as targets and casualties even though we go about our daily lives hardly involved in a war except we are as guilty and innocent, and as vulnerable, as the "collateral casualties" inflicted in our name with or without our consent or approval.

A city like Astoria is just the sort of place ripe for a terrorist attack. They've gone after the big symbols of American power, now to really terrorize us they might do something really

bad to an average small community that represents any and all Americans.

Because Astoria is a vulnerable target at the mouth of the Columbia River, the city must as a community, as should every community, have the right and perseverance to help guide the nation's policies rather than simply allow loftier echelons of government determine its present and future without the input of those most directly affected.

The impending war with Iraq is an example of small communities denied any voice in decisions that will directly affect them to the point not only will public services be cut but many neighborhood kids will be swept up into the military machine whether the draft is reinstated or not.

The societal ceiling is cracking over our heads and it is up to us — common ordinary citizens who live in neighborhoods and communities who are ultimately responsible to prevent the sky from falling down around us. Individual voices are not nearly enough; they are lost, diluted, neglected — certainly diffused. Only through groups, associations and political parties is there any sense of personal influence, yet with each successive level even that is diluted and essentially marginalized to evaporation. A level to reflect the personal voice must be closer to home, a community voice.

Cities and communities are not simply parochial entities concerned only with schools, sewers, streets and strip malls. They are also integral parts of a political whole and represent the American citizen at home and work.

Cities such as Astoria must be actively engaged in the critical and urgent national dialogue of terrorism, war and the dangerous abrogation of civil liberties in the name of national emergency. Astoria certainly has a myriad of local issues and problems that demand attention and resolution, but they are secondary to the current assault upon the nation's fundamental freedoms and constitutional rights by avaricious national leaders transgressing their sworn duty to uphold them. It is vital that small communities question and influence state and national policies that ultimately affect the lives, liberties and fortunes of their citizens.

As everybody knows, "All politics are local."

*Iraq is a nation of 20 million people being personified as one person, Saddam Hussein who is demonized as evil — so all Iraqis are evil by implication and the slaughter of them to get at Saddam is justified.

An error by the opposition to invading Iraq has been to use the Bush terminology to describe it, such as "regime change" rather than the more accurate terms "invasion" or "aggression." The word "imperialism" is considerably overplayed after decades of misuse, and "colonialism" seems quaint and old fashioned — but they clearly define the intent of invading a sovereign nation and setting up a puppet government (another stale antiquity) favorable to the Bushies, which would be occupied and policed by American troops who will, of course, be the real law of Iraq.