

# **Fifth Annual John S. Knight Distinguished Lecture**

**William Greider**  
National Editor, Rolling Stone

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## The John S. Knight Fellowships and Lecture

The 1992-93 academic year marks the 27th year of professional journalism fellowships at Stanford. The John S. Knight Fellowships are named for a distinguished American journalist whose major concern throughout a long career was the editorial quality of newspapers. The Knight Fellowships program each year awards fellowships to 12 professional jour-

nalists from the U.S. and up to seven from other countries. These journalists take a leave of absence from their jobs to spend the year at Stanford studying and attending special seminars. In 1988, with the help of the Knight Foundation, the Knight Fellowships Program began an annual lecture series aimed at bringing distinguished journalists and authors to campus.

### William Greider

William Greider followed the traditional career path of a successful newspaper reporter and editor for quite a number of years and then changed directions rather dramatically.

A graduate of Princeton, he began newspaper work with the Wheaton Daily Journal in Wheaton, Illinois. From there he went to Louisville, Kentucky and wrote for the Louisville Times and Courier Journal, first in Louisville and later in that paper's Washington, D.C., bureau.

In 1968 he went to work for the Washington Post, as a reporter and later as an editor, rising eventually to the position of assistant managing editor. Then in 1982 he left the Post to become a freelance writer and the national editor of Rolling Stone where he does reporting and commentary on national political issues.

Shortly before he left the Post Greider did a much-quoted magazine piece for the Atlantic based on a series of conversations he had

had with David Stockman, President Reagan's budget director. Later that article was expanded into a book which Bill wrote called "The Education of David Stockman and Other Americans."

Subsequently he took a penetrating look at the operations of the Federal Reserve Board, the government body that tries to regulate the economy by controlling the money supply and interest rates, in a book called "Secrets of the Temple."

In 1992 his book, "Who Will Tell the People? The Betrayal of American Democracy," was published. This book examined faults in the American political process and in various national institutions including the news media. It became required reading for political figures, the press, presidential candidates, and it was on the New York Times' best-seller list for nearly half the year, for twenty weeks.

Greider lives and works in Washington.

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# 1993 John S. Knight Distinguished Lecture

By William Greider

Thank you. I'm going to get to Clinton but I want to start more generally and talk about a lot of things I think are happening that I take very seriously. I should say I was at another distinguished university a couple of months ago, sitting in some classes and talking about the economy and politics and everything. And one of these discussions got very serious in terms of the deteriorating American economy. And these young undergraduates began to formulate it as why my generation screwed up American prosperity for their generation. And it got fairly intense and finally I said, "Don't blame me, I was an English major." And I was.

Which is my way of saying I have no credentials whatever for the subjects I discuss so learnedly. I'm not an economist, I'm not a political scientist, I have nothing except an A.B. degree in American studies. What I am is a reporter, and I've done that for a lot of years. The asset I have as a reporter is that I get to talk to lots of different people, and travel around in lots of different venues. I knock on doors and, with surprising generosity, people generally do talk to you: from senators to welfare mothers, people who are in politics, and people who are bankers and so forth, and out of that you get a sense of the country and a perspective on the American reality that's not "more-expert" but I think maybe a little richer than those people who study things more seriously.

After 30 years of that, my own sense—as corny as it sounds — is that I remain awed by this country. It is an incredible place, full of extraordinarily interesting people. We have our quota of scoundrels and fools, but on the whole Americans are pretty smart people. Very open, funny, imaginative, well-disposed toward strangers—even reporters knocking on their door. And that's sort of deep in my guts, and now it's alongside this other feeling, which I also observed, which is this country's in deep trouble.

We all know that. The social pathologies are all around us. Americans go in and out of sort of tempests of bitterness, anger, disillusionment. They're confused about a lot of things, and

they feel betrayed about a lot of things. Sometimes those feelings surface quite tangibly in violence. So I have those two things in my head and I want to talk about them tonight in the context of our politics.

Now I know probably half, maybe more, of this audience are not students but I really am—forgive me—speaking to the students among you because I think you're at a moment in our history not quite like any other before it. This is not "business as usual." This is not even guaranteed "onward and upward" in the American saga. Probably some of you already sense that, just because you know the economic terms that surround your education as opposed to the sort of endless prosperity that surrounded mine 35 years ago.

But I still want to scare you a little bit, and agitate a little bit, and maybe help you at least to think more clearly about what you're going to face. Now talking like this bears a great risk which is that you sound like one more commencement speaker, and I'm aware of that. I'm going to take that risk anyway because I think the conditions of the next generation are going to decide a lot about America. It's a kind of crucible unlike any the country's gone through before. It's partly about limits and barriers in the world but it's also about, "What do we really believe as a people?" Do we believe those words in the civic faith about democracy, equality and freedom, and all that other good stuff? Or do we have to channel the governing of this country into a modified system in which some people have most of the power and make most of the heavy decisions, and the other people are either taken care of or pushed aside. But it ain't the democracy we all grew up believing in.

There are three elements, I think, framing this crucible. All of them, as it happens, came up in the 1992 election. The first one is the obvious one. The Cold War is over. And we are just beginning to grasp how deep that goes into our national character. Because like it or not, the Cold War, the Soviet struggle, was our unifying purpose for 45 years. It came before every other

question. And whether you agreed or disagreed with it, as I did; whether you thought we needed a military establishment consuming \$300 billion a year, or thought that that was wildly bloated as I did, the fact is, the rationale is gone. And you saw—particularly I would say in the Republican party—the confusion of not having that central unifying objective. So politics begins to cast around, to try to find something else. In the crudest terms, new enemies, new threats foreign or domestic.

Stanford, I know, has had some experience with the PC debate. I think the PC debate is kind of a cheap substitute, a displacement from a kind of ethos that existed throughout the Cold War. Suddenly people need something else to be alarmed about.

But the much deeper crisis is economics. Our economy, for 40 or 45 years, was also organized around that purpose. And California knows better than most the pain of trying to unwind that. We will decide, I think probably fairly quickly—like the next five or ten years—whether we want to continue to be mobilized, essentially mobilized for world war. That's where we are now. And the Bush administration's budgets reflected that judgment, and so I must add does the Clinton administration's initial defense budget. Yes, they're cutting some, but they're still leaving the defense establishment at a structure really prepared to fight world war.

My own view is that's not sustainable, but the politics of the status quo go so deep into almost every institution, including universities—and really into our political imagination—that it's very hard to stand back and say, "We could do with a defense budget a half, a third that size, and yes, let us take that capital and put it into some other stuff." But that's one of the questions on the table.

The second fundamental cause is the effects of the global economy, and I won't go through my whole analysis but just say it in a headline—the global economy is splitting this country into two very different classes: one quite large and losing ground, and the other much smaller, in which the best-educated and most-expert actually have a very bright and prosperous future ahead.

While that happens, I would argue, the global economy is really a system running downhill. It's seeking the lowest common denominator. Modernizing as it is in commerce and high technology, and organizing production and markets around the globe in quite fantastic ways, it is literally dismantling sovereignty. And quite naturally the most prosperous and most privileged nations, in terms of independent sovereignty, are nations like our own which are the first to feel that. But bear my words, this is coming to the other industrial nations, and if you look at what is happening in Europe right now, the social welfare state constructed over 50, 60 years in Europe is being unwound by these same forces. And the countries that we looked to just a few years ago as the models, whether it was West Germany or Holland or Sweden, are now being decimated by these same forces themselves.

Wages in this country have been declining for 20 years. Corporations, at a certain level—not out of fecklessness but simply out of necessity, or the necessity they perceive—are abandoning their national loyalty and becoming multi-national, transnational organizations. And, as you can't have missed if you read the newspapers regularly, they are also abandoning loyalty to their own employees. When that was happening to industrial workers in the steel industry or the auto industry it was very easy to evade the meaning of it by saying, "Well, those union people were overpaid and they got greedy and they got lazy and they had all these terrible work rules that made them inefficient." Now it's happening in the front office. To managers. To engineers. To the people who did all of the right things by the usual standard of how one gets to a position of stable income and prosperity in our society.

In my conversations with Wall Street economists—and it's not restricted to them, but ironically I think Wall Street economists tend to be a little more candid about things than other kinds of economists—they expect this to go on for another 20, 25 years. Not falling off a cliff, but just a steady harmonization of wages. They're not suggesting that American wage levels are going to fall to the level of Bangladesh and Indonesia, but there's a kind of stabilizing effect here. They will reach an equilibrium. Well, the

idea that wages are going to continue to decline in this country for another 20, 25 years is a formula for really nasty politics. And I think maybe a violent social order.

The third element in my crisis is that our democracy is failing. And I won't go through all of the elements that I mean when I say that, but the most obvious one is that most Americans no longer feel represented in the process of self-government. And you see that expressed either coherently or incoherently, but you cannot have missed that. It's all around us.

I argue that this is not just seasonal discontent. And certainly not cyclical economic discontent. And not connected to one party or one politician or even one decade. I think it's much deeper; I think it's systemic. The feeling of powerlessness, to brutally oversimplify, is really a function of failed political institutions, and by that principally I mean political parties. They don't connect people. They don't listen to people. They don't articulate for people who are unable to articulate for themselves. They don't discipline the process of government decision-making. They don't discipline the process of law enforcement by government.

When I say that, I'm accused of nostalgia for the old ward bosses, but I think you know that's not the case. The fact is if you take very simple questions like taxation, and ask the broad ranks of Americans whether they feel represented on the question of taxation today better than they were 25 or 30 years ago, the answer is clearly not. There's been a huge shift of tax burdens over the last 15 years, carried out by both political parties, in which nine out of ten families lose. And one out of ten families wins big, leaving aside corporations.

Our new president proposes to partially, and I emphasize partially, reverse that trend. And I hope he succeeds in that. What you have, though, is a political vacuum where there aren't regular channels. And that vacuum gets filled by organized money: mainly corporations, other economic interests, and some other special interests that are not business. And they do our politics for us. Quite literally. They finance the candidates in both parties. They mobilize opinion behind their agendas. They, in a funny, twisted sort of way, speak for us in the arena.

If you go to Washington and listen closely to the debate, these major trade groups and corporations are not just speaking for their bottom line, they don't have to say that, we know that. They're speaking for their workers, for their communities, for their sub-contractors, for fiscal responsibility, for growth in the economy, for a long list of goals which are described as not self-interested. And it's ironic—I describe in my book that the modern political machine is the corporate organization, and some of them are very effective. Some of them are also deeply corrupt, just like the old machines, and I mean corrupt in the sense they do not obey the law. And they have the political power—and the lawyers—to play a kind of political game with the law that goes on for years and years. And that's a power that the rest of us do not have.

Finally the media, which I won't dwell on, are part of this failure as well. And particularly at the concentrated levels of the biggest outlets of both broadcasting and print. They have gravitated away from their audiences. They are distant from the people whom they are speaking to and closer to those in power. I wrote that in the book and described in some detail why I thought that was true and what had changed about newspapers in particular, and I thought, "Well, people my age will sort of know what I am talking about, but younger reporters will just think I'm an old fool who's getting nostalgic for my youth." To my surprise, since the book came out, lots of young reporters have come up to me after a speech and said, "You're so right about my newspaper. We don't know who our readers are, we don't have any way of finding out, and we're not really much interested in finding out who they are."

All of this together threatens what I think is the abstract but essential glue that makes this country work. And that is our civic faith, the idea that democracy, however imperfectly it gets carried out generation after generation, gives almost everybody a kind of transcendent story they can follow and identify with. A story of self-correction and improvement, which fundamentally starts from the premise that we're all in this together, and even if we don't deliver it, we do believe in the idea of political equality. And

we're offended by events that seem to contradict that belief.

That's what's so dangerous now, I think, because the cynicism—which is really a form of inaction—says, “Nobody with any brains believes that anymore.” And I think it's true. There's no way you'd quite quantify this, but if you could peel open everybody's heart and soul you would find that a lot of Americans—maybe most Americans—no longer really quite believe that. They may still wish for it. They may still want it to happen, but they don't see it in the reality, and they're quite cynical about the prospects.

So the burden, literally, facing us in the next 20 years that ties these three crises together in a sense is, “Can you reconstruct democracy?” In the age of mass media? In the age of the global economy? Given all of the other complexities, can you really believe in somehow regenerating that sense of connection that people have? And I'm not a utopian about that but I think it's plausible: I believe it's plausible for Americans to restore a sense in which most of the people, most of the time think, “Yeah, this is a shared enterprise. We're not in Washington before the Congressional committees, but somebody is there speaking on our behalf whom we trust. And we feel like we've got a handle on the process.”

Now if you can't do that, if that idea really is fading in some terminal sense, then I think America can become a very brutish place. I think you would see a lot of random aggression. Less organized than an L.A. riot, but sort of all over the place. And a kind of defensive use of power which won't, perhaps, quite be called repression but will take the form of sort of blocking more and more decisions out of public view. Think of the L.A. riots and then think of David Duke in Louisiana; I think in very different ways both of those events are expressions of the same anger and confusion, and you can generalize that. Some people would say we're already in that future. I don't quite accept that myself, but there's certainly a lot of facts on the table to suggest it.

Now I deliver the good news. The good news is that a lot of what I've already said did get put on the table in 1992. It helped elect Bill Clinton. He tapped into exactly the feelings I'm describing. Believe it or not he is the first presi-

dential nominee to squarely say to the American people, “Wages are declining in this country and they have been declining for a lot of years.” Jesse Jackson brought it up in 1988 as a candidate for the nomination and he was disparaged and marginalized, I mean just dismissed as a radical. And this year the president who got elected was saying, “Yeah, we've got a big, deep problem in our economy.”

That makes me feel good, or at least a lot better. Because I'm one of those people who's been writing about this for 15 years or longer and believe me it was not a popular subject. Politicians didn't want to face it, and the people didn't want to hear it either. It had a kind of feeling of un-American to it. So the history that I see over the last 30 years, really, was this kind of grand evasion, which the Cold War encouraged. If our unifying purpose was standing tall across the globe vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, then questions of “competitiveness” and “distribution of income” and all those other matters are easily rendered secondary or less. When the Cold War disappears, suddenly there's no screen—I'm not a psychologist either, but I think something happened in the minds of a lot of Americans in the last four or five years to allow them to say and think about what they had really known for a lot of years, but didn't want to face. And we saw that expressed in the political system.

The other thing that happened is that people really found channels for their anger. Whether it was breaking out of the regular media and doing a kind of talk-radio, Larry King, new-news kind of politics, or whether it was attaching to Ross Perot who embodied a lot of this discontent—set aside whether he had totally coherent responses to it. I've been soft on Perot since the spring. I didn't vote for him, but I was soft on him partly because his supporters were all buying my books so I couldn't very well be against him. But I think he deserves some credit for giving people a place to go with their anger.

In the spring when he was on television and he was zapping the two-party system, I was sort of, “Yeah, get 'em, Ross!” My wife got more and more nervous about this. She finally said, “You know, all of our friends think Ross Perot is a fascist.” And I said, “Well, not all of our

friends, Nancy likes him.” And she said, “Yes, but Nancy’s a fascist!” And it’s true.

My view, self-interested obviously, was that Ross Perot roughly speaking confirmed the thesis of my book, and I think that’s right. Now I think I’m obliged to say that Bill Clinton will test my thesis, and he is doing that in interesting ways. My thesis summary would be, “Is there a systemic breakdown of the democratic understandings in this country?” Or is it really about who was in power, or which party; I mean the Democrats come back and the tide swings back the other way. And everything doesn’t get perfect but gets cleaned up, the sort of cycles of reform and reaction which a lot of historians think is the story of America. We’ll find out. And I am hopeful and always an optimist, and see lots of encouraging things happening.

Clinton has articulated some new directions; he’s trying to reverse priorities, particularly the last 12 years, but really in some ways of the last 25 or 30 years, at least in what the government cares about. He’s still operating in the same swamp, however. And a lot of what’s happened in the early months I could say, I think fairly, confirm my critique. Especially my critique of the Democratic party.

If you look at his cabinet, it is three-fourths lawyer-lobbyists, not to mention millionaires. In my book I said the Democratic party, because its connections with real people and real communities have atrophied, is now this kind of elite fraternity of lawyers and lobbyists who operate in Washington, and make connections for the party but not real democratic connections. And a lot of those people have gone into the government.

Clinton did another thing—which I describe in the book as central to the sense of distrust and cynicism—and that is he made a very crude, and I think unconvincing shift, from being a candidate who said, “jobs, jobs, jobs,” to being a president who said, “deficits, deficits, deficits.” I won’t go through the economics of that, but those are two very different problems. And if you look at the Clinton economic strategy, except for this little fillip, and really quite phony fillip, of stimulus spending in the first year, it is not a jobs program. It is a fiscal austerity program, and it will put contractionary pressures on the economy for the next four or five years.

Now I know in some churches it is taught that doing that, taking our medicine and getting the deficits down will miraculously produce job growth, and I just say let’s wait and see. I don’t believe it. It’s never happened before. It didn’t happen for Herbert Hoover when he tried it and I fear that Clinton is going to meet that same reality a year or so from now.

But my real point is the political one: That he runs on an appeal which people respond to and then two weeks after the election he begins this maneuvering process by which he changes his priorities because he’s just discovered that the deficits are bigger than he thought they were. Give me a break! The deficits are always bigger than you thought they were. Anyway, he is proposing real reform—it’s not on the table yet, but I’m confident it will be substantial—in health care and campaign finance. And we’ll see a month or two from now whether we’re disappointed or pleased with what he proposes. But, in order to get to those reform proposals, forget the show-and-tell town meetings. The real negotiation that produced those proposals is going on, is being brokered with the interest groups astride the government in Washington. That’s true in health care where he’s made an alliance with the major insurance companies. Some of us think the major insurance companies are the problem in health care, but he’s made an alliance with them. And he’s trying to split the other interest groups enough to be able to get a program passed.

In campaign finance reform, he is negotiating the proposal with the people who most don’t want campaign finance reform and that’s the House of Representatives Democrats. They’re scared to death of it. Now I reserve the right to change my mind about this, but I think the fact that you have to go through that gauntlet is symptomatic of what’s wrong in our political system. And I don’t blame Bill Clinton for that. He may do it more shrewdly than his predecessors. I hope he does. And he may balance that brokering in a way that allows him to be successful and we actually get some change. But that’s not the same as a leader mobilizing the American people to really deal with these things in a straight-forward way.

There is no mechanism that exists—certainly not the Democratic party, or organized

labor, or any of the other secondary mediating organizations—that would enable him to do that if he wanted to do it. I guess my bottom-line point is—and I think I’ve always felt this way, but I especially feel it now—that it is both unfair and irrational to presume, to sort of sit back and say, “Well, we have this new president and he says all of these nice things, now let’s see if he’s going to do it.” And then three months or six months later, cluck over his failure.

In Washington—I don’t know what’s true across the country at this moment—the Clinton presidency, I think it’s fair to say, is already getting a little soggy. And if you judge by the polls, that’s being reflected across the country, too. I mean there is this short attention span in American politics that is ready to write him off fairly quickly if he doesn’t deliver the sort of “kapow, shazam” real change that he promised.

My sense is that that brings us back to you, particularly the young people. If my analysis is correct, America can’t dig out of these problems, and won’t dig out, unless somehow those democratic connections are restored. Then you could imagine the kind of real change that ought to be happening real fast—in the next five, ten years—in a way that gets us prepared for what we’re facing. It’s difficult to look at the status quo, the alignments of power in Washington, and imagine that happening without something first rising up from lots of different places around this country. And I would add, the good news is that a lot of people understand that.

In different ways—some of them kind of flaky and incoherent, and some of them very smart and inventive—people are in motion in politics. It’s usually in an irregular way that’s outside of the two-party system and outside of even the electoral politics. But every time I travel I encounter those people, and every time I come away saying, “Hey, this can happen. This is real. These people are in gear, they are engaged with the big questions. And they’re smart about it.” So I’d say, to particularly students and slightly older, and to older people like myself, the question is, “What’s our position in that? Do we have a capacity to do that? Do we have an obligation?”

I said I identify with the students. My feeling is that at a place like Stanford, or a place

like Princeton, or a place like Washington, D.C., we either are the governing elites, or we’re candidates to join the governing elites. We may not think about ourselves in those terms but that’s the reality in the alignment of who has power and who has access to power in American politics. I also know that at least some people are saying to themselves, “Well, that’s too bad about the global economy and all that, but I’m going to be in the top tier. I’m an engineer,” or “I’m getting a law degree. I’m going to have those skills that make me portable around the world and I’m going to work for a company that will also be portable around the world. And I feel bad about those other people, but I’m okay.”

And I would say, you can build a really high wall around your yard and get a dog and an alarm system and all the rest, but you will be in a society where the decay we already see will have been multiplied many times over. And that ain’t going to be very pleasant, and it may not even be very safe. And I don’t mean to sound apocalyptic about that, but I’ve talked to enough people on the other end who are feeling this pain and getting the pressure. And the wonder to me over the last 10 or 15 years has been how patient and hopeful and resilient they have been while undergoing that stress. And one of the reasons they have had those qualities is because they still believed that this thing was a cyclical event, or something they did wrong, or something their union did wrong, or something that could be fixed by getting their act together and a little bit of political action. And I think increasingly they understand that that’s not the case, that it’s something deeper than what they did or failed to do.

I think you should also, if you engage this question of democracy, not imagine that you are the only ones equipped to do it. I said the nation is alive with politics and I’ve seen so many of those people—I won’t try to describe them, but it’s really exciting to see a community organization and nobody in the room, except maybe the priest, has a college degree, and they have done their own politics and they figured out what it is they need and want. And they are figuring out how to relate to power. That is, how to talk to living politicians in a way that makes those politicians respond to them and so forth. And

when I see that I think, “Gosh, if you could just multiply this. Or if I could get all these people in one big hall somewhere in Washington it would change this country very fast.” Because they really do know what they’re doing.

In my wishful moments, when I say to myself, “This is going to happen. It’s going to happen in the next five, ten, twenty years,” I then also say to myself that the insurgents are already visible. And they’re women, they’re minorities, they’re the immigrants. And if you look at American history it was usually groups of that kind who were excluded from power, who figured out how to get in, who got mad enough and focused enough to force their way in. And that usually produced big swings in the nation’s political agenda. I think the ingredients are there to do that.

What people could do who were not in that insurgent group, who were candidates for the governing elites, what they could do is try to make some connections with those people based on a very simple, but elusive idea, which is mutual respect. One of the things missing in our society today—not just in politics—is a sense of mutual respect. And I know how corny that sounds, but when you think about democracy, that’s implicit in the idea, that at some level or another, everybody counts and everybody will be listened to.

It’s very hard to do, to start that kind of talking, and especially the listening part of people who are different from yourselves. In a sense I do it for a living so I can talk about it with ease, because I get paid to go into strange places—as any reporter does—and you learn, if you’re any good at it, how to do it in a way that allows those people to say something real to you.

But one of those questions unanswered about this country is, “Is there ground where you might all assemble together and then begin to accumulate real power? Is there such a place? Can you even imagine such a place?” I spoke last fall at a little community college in Texas City, Texas, called the College of the Mainland. And it sits right next to all of those big petrochemical plants, and a lot of the people going to the college at night work in those plants. And they had read my book and they wanted to talk about politics, and I just came away really sort of overwhelmed

by their energy, and seriousness, and smarts. A lot of them were women who were working in the day and trying to get as much education as they can at night. They know they aren’t real educated, they know they ain’t going to be Stanford graduates. They also know what is happening to them.

And believe me, talk about powerless, they can talk about it with great tangible detail. But they started their own political organization. They don’t call it that exactly, but that’s what it is. And they’re trying to pull in some labor people and they’re trying to make sure the races are all represented, and they’re just talking and trying to figure out how they can get a handle on some things. Like the pollution and the obvious stuff, but also what’s their economic future in that part of Texas?

I think probably if you asked those people and if they answered you honestly, they would probably see you all as the enemy. Maybe not the enemy, but they would say, “You’re on the other side of this thing. You’re in the system, and you’re winning in this system. We know perfectly well you have no reason to make common cause with us.”

And then I was thinking, wouldn’t it be interesting to take a bunch of students from Stanford and somehow get them in the same room with a bunch of students from the College of the Mainland. Because when you think about it, that’s what I am talking about, that’s what’s missing.

Very hard to do, almost impossible to do. I was thinking about this this afternoon and I thought, “I think you’d have to lock the doors and bring towels and bandages or something.”

It would be very hard. It’s hard for me; I’m not trying to be righteous about this, it’s very hard for any of us to talk across those lines with any honesty.

A lot of you all, I think, quite unintentionally, would be patronizing.

And some of you, quite naturally—it’s what you’ve learned—you would show off your expertise. I mean you would explain things to them, about economics or whatever. That’s what we do, right?

A lot of them would be so angry that they couldn’t talk either. I mean that they would be so

intent on telling you how mad they are that it would be hard for them to get beyond that.

I still think that that's a worthwhile experiment. And you don't have to go to Texas City to do it. Those folks are all around you in California and elsewhere. But it would be interesting to see if you could play around the edges of a dialog like that. And, again, I'm not being utopian. I know how difficult that sort of thing is. But democratic conversations are the core of what's missing from our politics.

It's too bad Stanford doesn't teach social reality and citizenship in those terms. But it's not Stanford's fault; Princeton didn't teach it to me and I don't know any universities that do. Our political parties don't teach it. Our major media certainly do not teach it.

That's the point—that there's no place, there's no institutional basis for people to begin the kind of understandings and to search around through things and say, "Yeah, we hate each other on these three things and we are never going to be alike, but we really actually have the same basic values about some of these large questions." And that's, corny as it sounds, that's what I believe as a reporter who's traveled around among all these different groups, that there is a kind of consensus in this country, unformed and unexpressed, that could address all of those big problems I've described, if it could find a way to coalesce and force its voice into politics.

Now, I said nobody will teach you. That's another way of saying you have to do this for yourselves. Nobody is going to do it for you. And I have to add, you may fail. Doing democracy in these terms is very, very hard. History

spells that out pretty clearly. People try and fail, and people come along later and try again. And the forward motion is not always great.

What I do promise you is that the effort itself, in a way, is its own reward. You will engage the reality of your own time. And in doing that, and I've seen this happen in hundreds, maybe thousands of people, they discover themselves. It's a paradox of politics and democracy which has kind of gotten lost, but it's true. They literally find qualities in themselves that they didn't know existed. And whatever else happens, their lives are changed by that engagement. So that's the payoff.

Now, I know—because I know a lot of young people, including my own kids—that many of you are thinking, "Well, this was a real quaint little sermon, now let's get back to the real world." And I understand that. And I would say to you, with all seriousness, that your cynicism—and also your doubts and your fears—doesn't allow you, yet, to take this message in. So, take that home and think about what that means, and maybe some day you will see that I was right about that.

I also know this: There are some people in this room, a few at least, who are actually listening to me and saying, "Oh my God." They're agitated by what I've said. And I think those people—even if there are only two or three of you—will act on that thought, because it's already in you. Because you've already told yourselves, "Yeah, I have to do that. I feel obliged to do that." I don't know who you are, but I congratulate you whoever you are. Thank you. □