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THE COMING OF THE 'WE' DECADE

By Paul Taylor

THE 1988 PRESIDENTIAL election isn't likely to be about getting the government off our backs, standing tall, cutting taxes or the proposition that we ain't seen nothing yet.

It's probably not going to be about a Republican bumpersticker that says, "More of the Same"; or a Democratic version that offers: "Less of the Same." It might not even be about the pocketbook.

Presidential elections have a way of turning on things no one thought to talk about—or listen to—four years before. They sway to the rhythms of a changing national mood. The candidate who wins is usually the one who best understands or expresses the hopes, fears and yearnings of the American people at a given moment.

This nation may already be at the cusp of a major national mood swing—one that could rearrange the context of political debate by 1988. Listen closely and you can hear the first faint sounds of it in a curious mass participation happening like Hands Across America; in the voices of many of the candidates who are already working the pre-season presidential stump; in the ceaseless temperature-takings of the political pollsters.

Granted, this incipient mood might not take hold until well after the 1988 election, or some turn of history might sidetrack it completely before we elect our next president, but something seems to be stirring that hasn't been part of the national psyche for quite a while.

Instead of Me-Decade materialism and muscular patriotism, the new mood seems to be about things like a national sense of community, moral revival, civic virtue and the imperative of doing good.

One has to look back a full generation—to the New Frontier/Peace Corps/VISTA era of the early 1960s—to find the last time the nation felt knit together by causes larger than ourselves. We may want to "feel that feeling again," as Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) has been saying to misty-eyed audiences all over the country as he makes his early presidential campaign travels.

The president's own pollster, Richard Wirthlin, views the nation's attitude toward a socially-activist government in a Hegelian sweep: "If the New Deal represented the

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thesis and the Reagan presidency has represents the antithesis, I think by 1988 or 1992 we may be ready for a synthesis."

Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.) and former Virginia governor Charles Robb—two Democrats likely to play on the national stage in 1988—have already begun anticipating such a thesis by proposing some forms of national service, civilian and military. Polls show that national service is a popular concept; it quenches a national thirst to participate.

Where's the evidence of such a thirst? Consider that odd event of this past spring, Hands Across America. Five million people gathered on a Sunday afternoon for a brief national service of hand-holding. They did so at the urging of Citibank, the Coca-Cola Co. and a handful of aging rock stars and athletes. (Since when do Americans take moral instruction from big banks?) They were not just responding to televison images of starving children with distended bellies. Instead, this event grew out of the psychic needs of the benefactors to feel a sense of national participation as much as it arose from concern over the material wants of the hungry beneficiaries.

Or consider another bit of evidence: Preachers have worked themselves into both the Democratic and Republican presidential thickets. The candidacies of Jesse Jackson and Marion G. (Pat) Robertson are products of the civic marketplace. When Jackson talks about drugs, or about babies having babies, or about self-help, he reaches nerve endings that no conventional politician can touch. Likewise when Robertson talks about abortion, pornography and family breakup.

These signs of yearning for national community and moral uplift come on the heels of another kind of revival: the restoration of our national self-confidence. After 15 years in which Vietnam, inflation and Iran ate away at the American idea that we can control our national destiny, Reagan has rekindled our optimism.

He has fingered a plausible (debatable, but plausible) cause of our domestic ills—government itself, in the form of the welfare state—and he has set about to dismantle it. He has let white middle-class males stop feeling guilty about being white middle-class males. He has said to all of us: Go out there, raise your families, work hard, make money—it's the essence of patriotism.

Everything from our nationalistic beer commercials ("Millers—Made the American Way," etc.) to our giddy Statue of Liberty bash has been saying back: "Right On, Mr. President."

But something has been missing. The deal is: Reagan gets the government off our backs, we do our own thing; he has given us the symbols of national unity, but he has not asked us to participate, to give.

"The American people may now be of a mind to say: 'I liked the commercials, let me try the real thing,'" says University of Massachusetts professor (and sometime Democratic strategist) Ralph Whitehead.

If this emerging mood is quick to take hold, a presidential candidate in 1988 might want to quote from one of this nation's, and President Reagan's, favorite sermons—but from a particular passage that this president does not usually recite.

"To be a city on the hill," Rev. John Winthrop told the Pilgrims in Boston harbor, ". . . we must bear one another's burdens. We must look not only on our own things, but on the things of our brethren. We must rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together. We must be knit together by a bond of love." That candidate might then want to add: "So may it always be in America. Let us be a community, a family where we care for one another. Let us end this selfishness, this greed, this new championship of caring only for yourself . . . ."

As a matter of fact, a presidential candidate already gave precisely this speech—Walter Mondale, on Oct. 25, 1984, in Cleveland.

It did not resonate. Why? The nation wasn't yet ready for the message, and Mondale wasn't the right messenger. And further, says Whitehead, "He got his civic theology all wrong . . . . Mondale offered sacrifice in the form of a tax increase. He did not articulate how the tax increase would lead to a sense of national purpose. The notion of sacrifice will never be persuasive as long as it is merely a euphemism for pain."

Can another Democrat do better in 1988? The values depicted above seem better suited to a Democratic campaign—not least because the Democrats are so down and out that they have no choice but to stress values over the usual campaign fare of programs and ideology. Otherwise, they're checkmated. Move right and they are the Me-Too Party; move left and they are the Yesteryear Party; stand pat and they are the party that lost 49 states in 1984. What they need is another chess board.

The tricky part would come when the Democrats tried to flesh out their oratory about values with the details of programs. That process tends to lead them towards advocating big government, and "that's where the hangup still comes for Democrats," says Stanley Greenberg, president of the Analysis Group, a New Haven firm that does polling for Democrats.

Further, some of the ascendant values are restrictive, even prudish, about personal behavior, and in this arena, the Democrats are still seen as the party of the counterculture. Anyone who thinks that trait might work in their favor would do well to notice that when the Reagan administration bullied convenience stores into taking Playboy and Penthouse off their shelves, the lack of public outcry was deafening.

In moral areas such as this, the Republicans are already ahead of the Democrats, and they could try to extend their franchise. The Republicans also have enough of a cushion in the geopolitics of the Electoral College map that they can concede an edge in one area to the Democrats and still win.

For the candidates, a shift in the national psyche before 1988 would offer a new menu of risk and opportunity. Consider its potential impact on some of the leaders:

New York Gov. Mario Cuomo has plenty of moral thunder in him, and he already uses the metaphor of the family to describe his view of the proper role of a redistributive government. But Cuomo also possesses an attendant trait—moral vanity—and he hasn't shown that he can tame it.

Gary Hart understands the importance of these values perhaps as well or better than any presidential contender, but his personality may be too self-contained to touch the heart and soul of the matter. A values candidate, says Democratic pollster Peter Hart, "would need poetry."

On the Republican side, no one is likely to accuse Vice President George Bush of being a poet. Nor is anyone quite so locked into running a "more-of-the-same" campaign as he is. Then again, he is the heir apparent, and is associated with all the red, white and blue values that Reagan has revived.

Rep. Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.) has more maneuvering room, and is more of a moral revivalist to begin with. He calls himself a bleeding-heart conservative, and for years he has been talking about taking the "Reagan Revolution into the next stage—into the ghetto." But his programmatic approach is very much in the get-the-government-off-our-backs mode. His passion for slashing tax rates (a passion shared by an overwhelming number of congressmen in both parties these days) speaks to the current mood, not a new one. It asks people to receive, not to give.

National mood changes are products of exceptional historical events (wars, depressions, scandals, failed rescue missions, etc.) or they can be reactions to excesses of whatever mood preceded them. The values speculated upon here would be reactions to a long stretch of rampant individualism and a shorter one of absorption in a self-centered, Rambo-style patriotism.

This mood change could also be a reaction to something else—the spiritual and material carnage of the American underclass. Pollster Hart, who conducts 200 group interviews a year with voters, says that despite attacks in recent years on government welfare programs, the problem of poverty "really gnaws at us. You can be as anti-welfare as anybody, but when you see it on your television screen, or when you see homeless people in the street, it really bothers people. It's bad enough in India or Africa. But here, you say, by God, it's awful. This is America."

If we feel good again about ourselves as a nation, it follows that we can afford to feel bad again about those among us who do not share in the bounty. As with Hands Across America, the issue is more than food, clothing and shelter for the needy. Sociologist Edward Banfield wrote in 1974: "The reformer wants to improve the situation of the poor, the black, the slum dweller, and so on, not so much to make them better off materially as to make himself and the whole society better off morally."

Poverty is only one cause that the nation might be ready to take up once again. Others could include concerns such as family breakup, teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, drug epidemics, pornography, a beggarthy-children deficit and neglect of civic responsibility.

The next two years could alter the national psyche with extremes of war, peace, riches, poverty, corruption or nobility, and even undisturbed the incipient change in our communal mood could be slow to gather force.

But if it does, and soon, then by 1988 what the American people could want, above all else, is a president who makes them feel they are a part of something larger than themselves.