

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

People and Places

Summer Days with the Changing American Dream: The USA Revisited

by S. Bari

In New York, it was Gay Pride Week. Central Park, on a bright June Sunday, looked harmless and inviting, as if it had never been witness to such horrors as the female jogger case a few years ago. At the southern end of the park, a parade was cavorting down Fifth Avenue, bright with balloons and men in string bikinis. All very puzzling, till we spotted a sign that proclaimed, "Out loud and proud." Gay men and women, holding hands, thronged the avenue. A beleaguered minority, in a troubled land, but they knew how to celebrate. We knew we were back in America.

Excess has always been the second American Word of Gold (the first, of course, is Success). A parade that spent several hundred thousand dollars in order to celebrate homosexuality; in a country where your sexual preferences can cost you your job. A real estate tycoon is the darling of high society for a brief time; a few months later, no one remembers his name. Hype is a favorite national pastime. But in the past decade, the USA has out-hyped itself.

As anyone who reads the papers knows, "Recession" has made a reappearance on the country's vocabulary list. Soup kitchens and layoffs, economic riots and inflation: the long slide is leading to a showdown (the Democrats hope) in the November elections, when a disillusioned electorate may decide to shake off the shackles of Reaganomics (definition: eat, drink, and be merry, and let the next administration foot the bill). This month, when headlines blared, "Unemployment hits 7.8 per cent," a shudder went through the halls of power: another blow for the Bush campaign.

This campaign should be quite black and blue by now, with all the blows coming its way. Jason is a 23-year old who graduated third in his class from an Ivy League college. After a fruitless two-year search for work, he is heading back to graduate school. "At least I can afford it," he said this summer in Texas, "but there are people out there who are settling for anything they can get."

And they can't get a whole lot. Businesses that splurged merrily during the 80's are discovering the price of over-extension. In one fell swoop, telecommunications giant AT&T dismissed 15,000 employees. A computer firm handed notice to 60 per cent of its workforce in one day, including the company's founder. It's not just the small fry who are being shown the door: the vice-president of one of the largest oil companies in the South arrived at work one day to find himself unemployed.

Houston, sweltering in the cruel Texas sun, was gripped



The gay community takes to the streets with a vengeance. Week-long festivities typify the American motto of "Whatever you do, go overboard."

with pessimism. "Perot for President" signs littered the lawns of middle class neighborhoods with no faith in "intellectuals" like Clinton and disappointed by Bush's inaction. The disenchantment of the populace with the establishment is extra-partisan; it

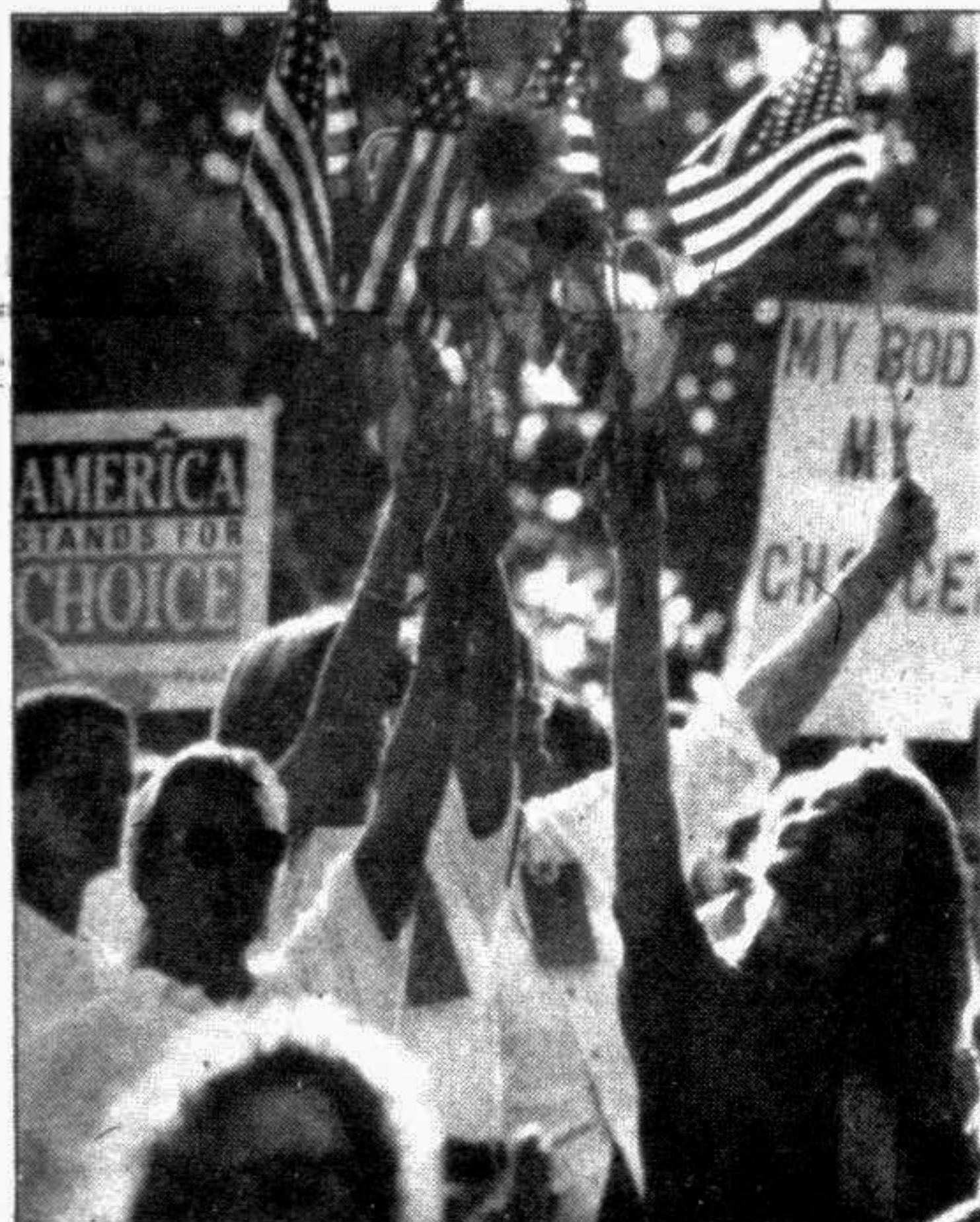
extends to Democrats and Republicans alike. Though Perot has since dropped out of the race, his very success points to a problem. "Perot had this following despite being pretty much unversed in anything except how to make a profit because people thought the two other parties weren't offering anything new," com-

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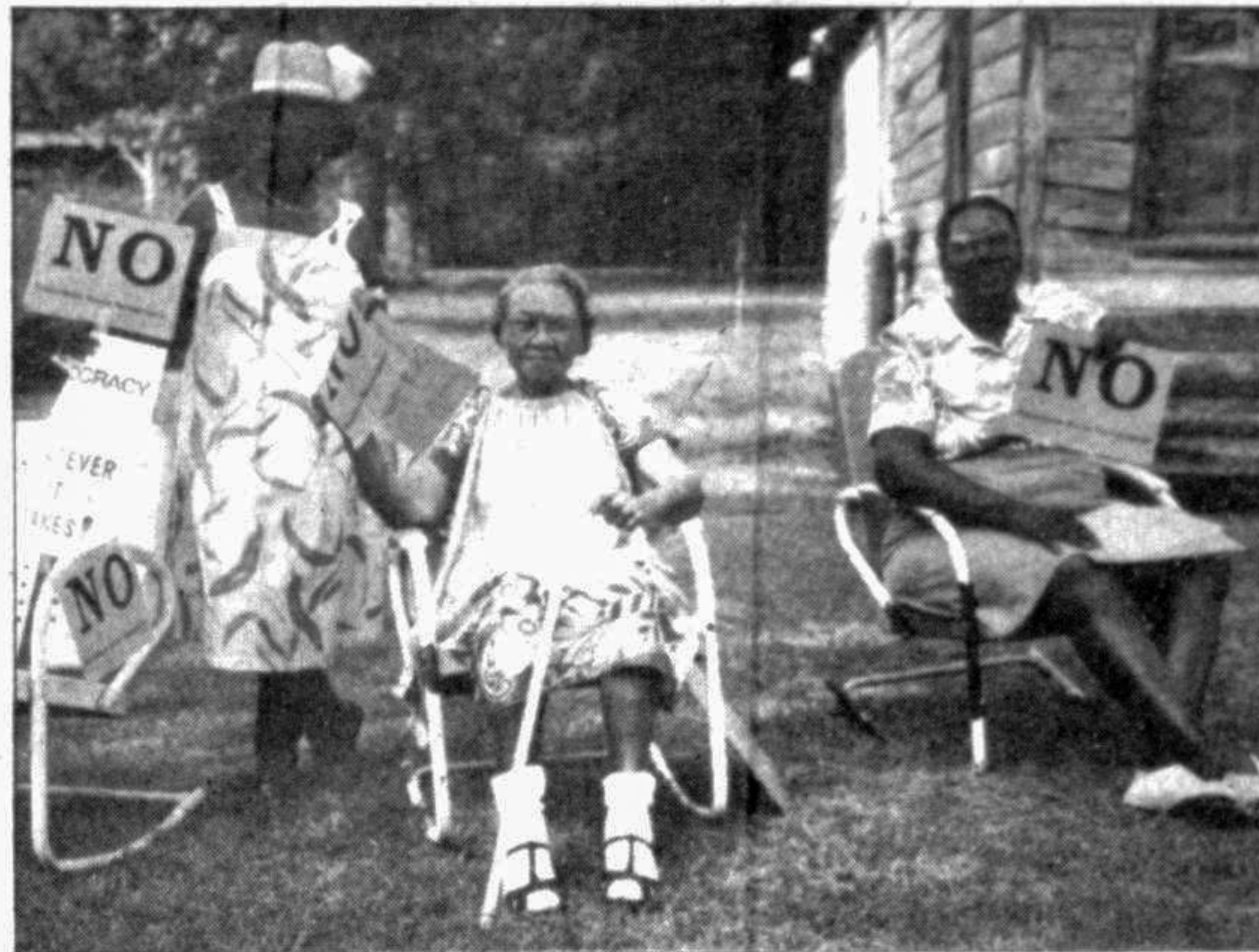
mented a Texas doctor. "Republican or Democrat, they're just playing their power politics."

After the Los Angeles riots, a plague of commentary in the media lasted about three weeks. By late June, the riots were a pale memory. This amnesia is frightening for many Americans, who feel they need to address the root of the clashes. "It goes beyond race: people are sick of police harassment, they're sick of unequal economic opportunities," said Tilottama Tharoor, a student at the City University of New York. That showed in the pattern of the riots.

In all the fighting and looting, not a single McDonald's restaurant was harmed. Time Magazine discovered the reason why. McDonald's has a corporate policy of investing in the community, with education plans, aid for the handicapped and ways of ploughing money back into the area. Many rioters looted small Korean-owned shops because they felt those businesses were sucking money out of the community without giving anything. Big



"My body, my choice," say pro-choice Americans. But abortion is a bubbling cauldron that will not simmer down easily.



The American people have taken the green movement into their own hands. Residents of North Carolina vest their opinion of a proposed toxic incinerator in their area.

chain stores were looted out of anger and envy. McDonald's escaped the same fate by virtue of having won the trust of the locals.

While many businesses escape to the suburbs, inner-cities fall into growing neglect. And seeping out of them is the disease that is eating away at the social fabric of America: drugs. On a 36-hour train ride through the American mid-west, my dinner companion was a Federal Agent posted in the Caribbean. "You can catch the planes bringing in the loot any day, but they grin and dump it. There is no way short of shooting them down that you can stop this," he mourned. The children of a colleague of his, "middle class people just like you and me," are in jail for drug dealing. "Either we're going to run out of kids or we're going to run out of drugs," he predicted.

When we got to Washington, the capital was pre-occupied with preparations for the Fourth of July, but there was a most un-American cynicism in the air. The Supreme Court had turned in a ruling that basically still supported a woman's right to an abortion, the key word being "basically." The chapter is by no means closed. Of the few Supreme Court justices who had voted to curb the right to abortion, Clarence Thomas was one. His nomination last year had been riddled with allegations that he had once sexually harassed a colleague. Progressives find this apt but awful, especially in an evolving climate where even some Republican party representatives are supporting

abortion and going against the party stand. Needless to say, most of those who had the guts to do this were women.

Comic relief in this grim election year is, as unflinching as always, provided by Vice-President Dan Quayle. When the lead character in a popular television series decided to have the baby she had conceived out-of-wedlock, Quayle took this moral outrage personally; and the media had a field day reminding him that it was just a story, and anyway we were in a country where thousands of children are born illegitimate, not to mention addicted to cocaine, or HIV-positive. Then one day Quayle made an ill-fated trip to a primary school, an institution he has presumably not attended before, and informed the confused pupils that "potato" was

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spelt with an "e" at the end. The press was ecstatic. Presidential hopeful Bill Clinton is not only patently

that will protect them from homelessness. New York was strewn with ever-increasing bodies lying in corners and sleeping on sidewalks. For the first time, I saw homeless people bringing up children in these conditions. More and more Americans were volunteering for social service, feeling that "this could happen to any of us." The American dream is increasingly haunted by the American nightmare.

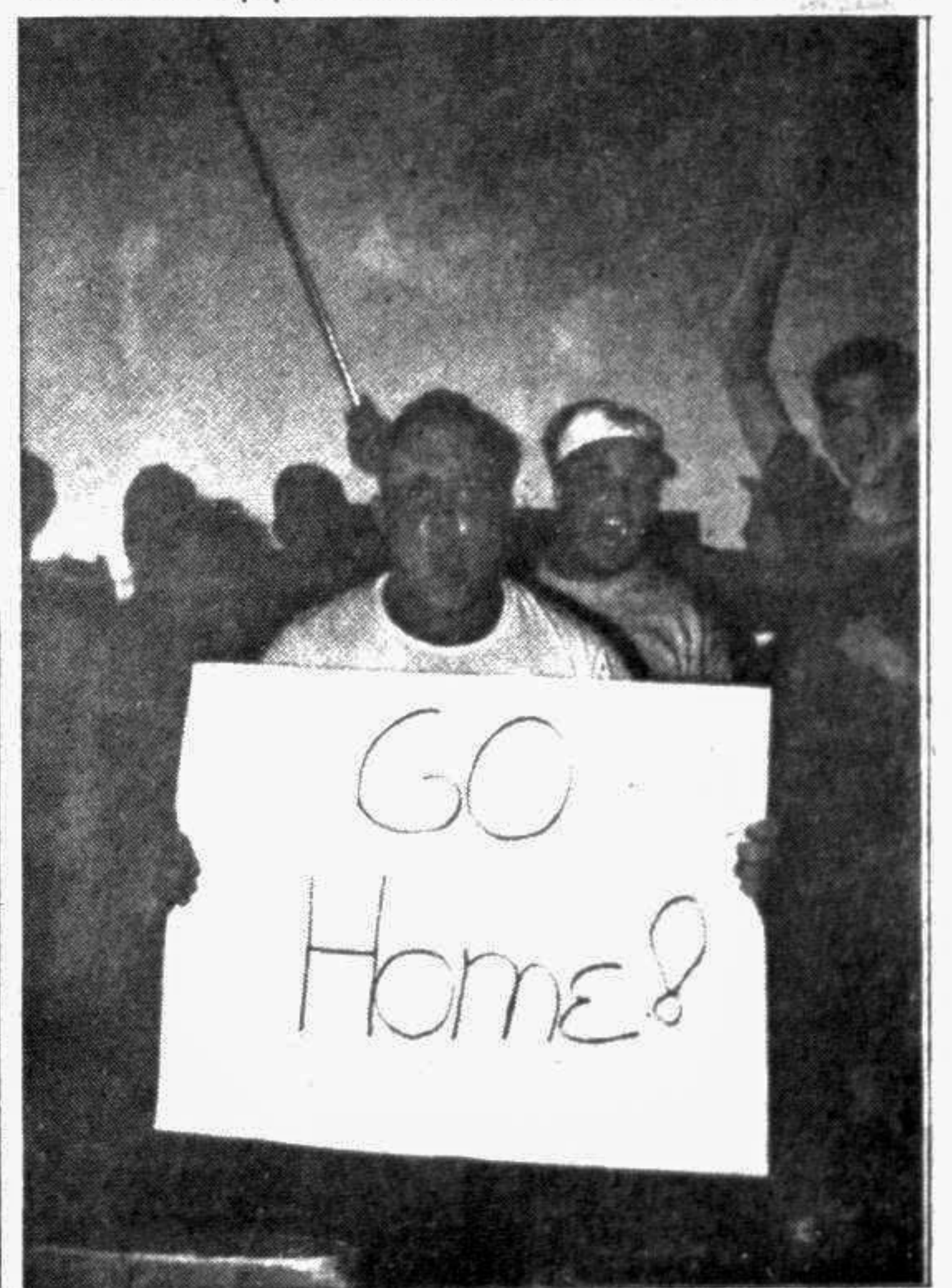
For immigrants, the going will get tougher. The shrinking job market led to what many Asian Americans consider discriminatory hiring and firing. Certainly resentment among the white establishment is fuelling, if not actually the popularity, then at least the acceptance of extremist white groups. Asians, especially subcontinentals, are often successful professionals. A New York medical assistant who is Bengali felt "this is an advantage because we are cushioned from a lot of hardships, but it also causes a great deal of envy."

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"The bad news is that Japan is in recession; the good news is that we have finally exported something to Japan," so goes the joke on Main Street, USA.



Economic tension is the catalyst for racist aggression. Asians may increasingly find they are the target of someone's envy.

show, the host quipped about the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere leading to overheating. "This is known as the greenhouse effect," he said, "and not doing anything about it is known as the White House effect."

Americans, nothing if not whole-hearted, have turned environmentalism into a cult: one "green" store, "The Nature Shop," features taped rainforest noises and lush green carpeting to mimic the jungle. A candidate who is well-versed in ozone and deforestation stands a better chance in the elections; and Al Gore literally wrote the book on the subject.

Being green will not be enough, though. The laid-off auto worker and the illiterate nightguard need strong education funding and a security net

If there wasn't something slipshod in all of this, we wouldn't be in America. Amidst the collapsing businesses, the Mall of America is still going up in Minneapolis. Its miles of shops and restaurants will fill the largest shopping mall on the continent.

Looking at the gleaming facade, we wondered if the recession was a hoax. "No," said our host, "there's no doubt about the recession. But it's not all that hopeless. Our city is just economically stable, so this is going to work. It's a pocket of comparative stability." Such still-successes dot the States, reminders that the American dream is not dead, just different. They encourage a nation groping for a way to find its old self in the falling summer light of the Midwest.

HER brother was tortured and killed. Her father was burnt alive. Her mother was hung out to die in her village while the army waited for her to appear.

These gruesome tragedies do not make Rigoberto Menchu's story remarkable in a country where some 150,000 people, mostly indigenous Guatemalans, have been killed in the last 35 years. But for her years of work, as a spokesperson for hundreds of thousands of repressed and exploited Guatemalan Indians and non-Indians, Menchu has emerged as one of the most powerful candidates for this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

"An indigenous woman who knows about grief and suffering but despite everything has not wavered. She shows the world the meaning of dignity and the struggle for the freedom of her people," wrote former Nobel Peace Laureate Argentinian Adolfo Perez Esquivel, who is proposing Menchu for this year's prize.

Menchu is a Quiche Indian from the highlands of Guatemala, but since 1981 she has lived in Mexico in exile.

In 1982 she was the first Guatemalan Indian to participate at the United Nations, lobbying for indigenous rights and for pressure on the dictatorial regime of General Efraim Rios Montt for its abysmal human rights record.

For the last decade she has been a formidable, constant presence at the UN Human Rights Commission's annual meeting in Geneva. But she is perhaps best

Guatemalan Activist May Win Nobel Peace Prize

Edward Orlebar writes from San Jose

Rigoberto Menchu, a Quiche Indian from the highlands of Guatemala, has brought new hope to her people. For more than a decade she has lived in Mexico in exile. Menchu was the first Guatemalan Indian to participate in the UN, lobbying for indigenous rights. Gemini News Service profiles the formidable fighter who has been nominated for this year's Nobel Peace Prize.



My Name is Rigoberto Menchu

known for her book "My Name is Rigoberto Menchu," the result of days of interviews in Paris with Franco-Uruguayan journalist Elizabeth Burgos in 1982. It has been translated into 11 languages.

It recounts the story of her life from her childhood in the western highlands to her exile.

The book is the most vivid insight to date not only of the horrendous repression of the late-1970s and early-1980s, but also of the Indians' deep-felt respect and symbiotic relationship with the land and their reverence for elders and traditional rites, both of which have suffered as a result of the conflict. It is a window into a culture that has put up barriers for outsiders as a means of survival.

Menchu was in San Jose, Costa Rica, recently to address an audience of university students on the current situation in Guatemala, and the struggle of the mainly indigenous and mixed-race poor in Latin America in the light of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival on the continent.

Menchu said she is concerned that Guatemala is becoming increasingly unstable, with the growing risk of a coup similar to that instigated re-

cently by president Alberto Fujimori in Peru.

During May, Guatemala City has witnessed almost daily bomb explosions. Many observers believe that this is part of a campaign by right-wing extremists who wish to undermine the climate for negotiations between the guerrillas of the Guatemalan National

revolutionary Unity and the

government.

A plan to repatriate 5,000 refugees from camps in southern Mexico in late June will probably be postponed because of the lack of security.

There are currently 43,000 recognised Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, and an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 unrecognised. The refugees fled the high-

lands of Guatemala in the early 1980s to escape the so-called "scorched earth campaign" by the military against leftist guerrillas, which razed 440 villages in an attempt to wipe out their grassroots support.

But fighting continues, and refugees would "return in the same conditions in which they left," Menchu says.

Guatemala is a society that has been traumatised by inequality and war. Thousands of street children have been deprived of their childhood, she says.

Instead of telling children's tales, they recount the violence they have suffered or the brutality meted out against their young friends by the police. "For Guatemala," Menchu says, "they are a very deep wound."

However, she believes some progress has been made. Last year the UN recognised the existence of several thousand internally displaced Guatemalans who had fled deep into the mountains, away from the army and their forced integration into Civil Patrols.

The Civil Patrols are mostly formed by peasants who are forced to patrol in search of the guerrillas and often are used as the first line of attack.