

BLAMING 'BUREAUCRATS'

The political roots of hating government

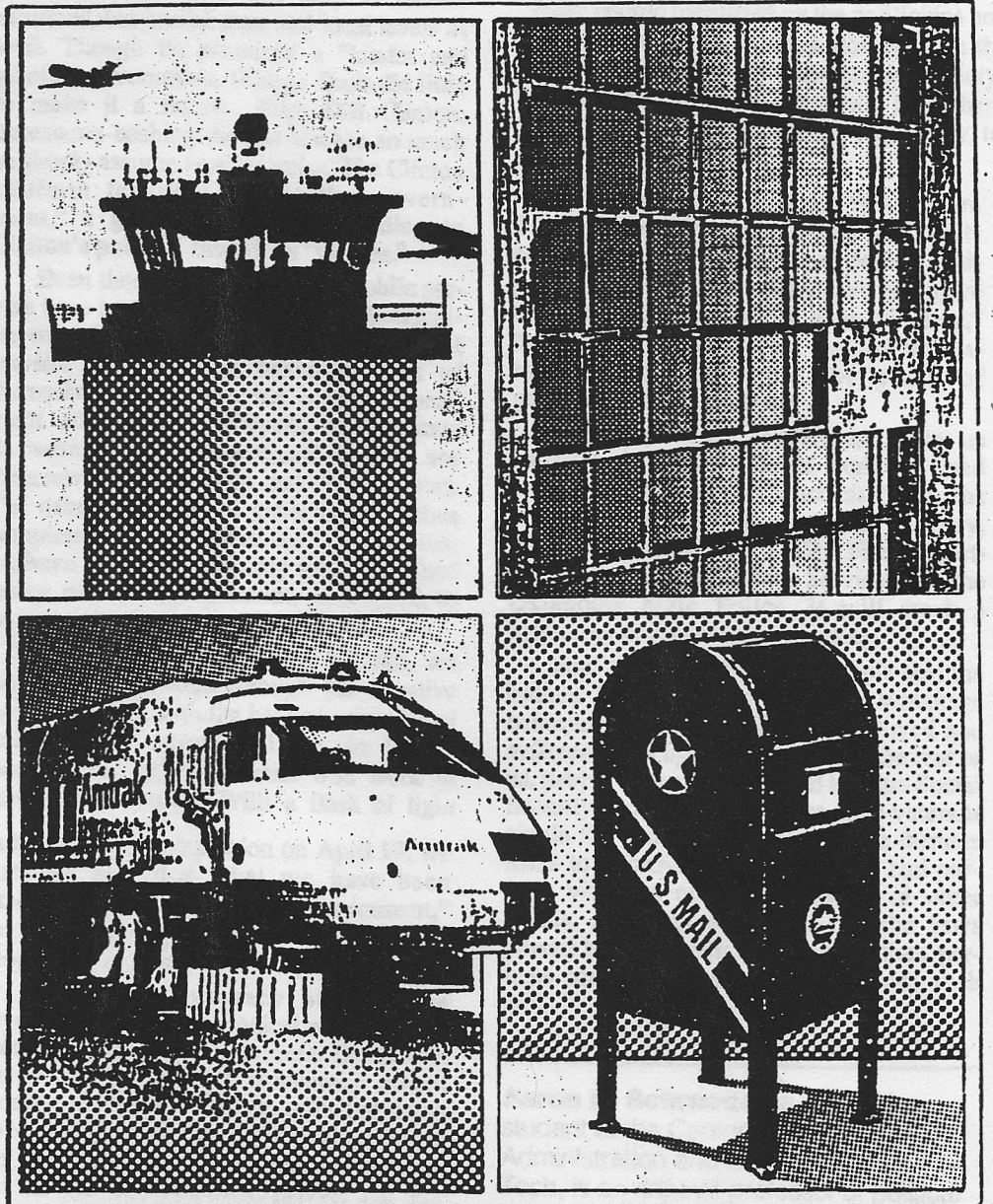
By AARON D. SCHROEDER
and GARY L. WAMSLEY

AS RESCUE workers toiled in the remains of the Oklahoma City federal building, our political leaders once again took the field seeking to place blame, ready to help us focus our fear and anger in any direction but their own.

Feeling our pain, political leaders moved quickly to help channel our anger. Liberals are using the kind of attack language against the "radical right" that conservatives once directed at the "radical left." Though President Clinton has avoided mentioning persons or parties, he has pointed a finger at the incendiary anti-government rhetoric of the conservative-dominated talk shows. Sen. Robert Kerrey, D-Neb., minced no words in accusing conservatives of fostering an environment of hatred and distrust. Republicans have been quick to cry foul and to accuse the Democrats of seeking to gain political advantage from the tragedy.

The media have fostered this climate of finger-pointing, looking for simple solutions by focusing on paramilitary groups like the Michigan militia. Although such groups have been around for some time, the media have offered little in the way of explaining what forces have driven these groups to such a level of paranoia.

The belief that this intense hatred was incubated around the campfires of sociopathic survivalists, who then stealthily used media sources outside the mainstream to spread their poison, is akin to the dubious logic used in the late '60s and '70s to suggest that anti-war sentiment was hatched by college hippies and disseminated via sympathetic leftist professors to the raw and vulnerable minds of college freshman. Both, of course, are wrong.



NED LEVINE/Newsday

The bombing in Oklahoma leaves us all with an anxiety that we can only seem to ease if we feel we understand what happened, and especially if we can point a finger at the culprits. This reaction is natural, but provides only temporary relief at long-run cost to our democracy. We must ask difficult, more important questions:

What has happened to the respect and legitimacy we used to accord our public institutions? When did civil servants become "bureaucrats?" When did "our government" become "the damn government?" When did taxes become only repressive burdens and not the means to finance schools, streets, sewers, police, care for the elderly, help to earthquake victims, the national defense?

For two decades, we have been told by both parties that government is wasteful, a burden on the economy and a drag on the market. We have been told by both parties, without reference to any facts, that we are overtaxed, underserved and rudely treated by the same government in which our trust has been steadily eroded. We have been told that the nonelected officers of government, whom we used to call civil servants and in whom polls showed we once placed a great deal of trust, are overpaid rejects from the business world, concerned only with their "turf," "perks" and pensions. While assaults by conservatives have certainly been the more severe (Virginia Gov. George Allen's inaugural comments about lifting the oppressive boot of bureaucracy off the necks of Virginians comes to mind), so-called "liberal" rhetoric has been only a few degrees less so.

Given our continued angst, our growing distrust and the identification of objects (no longer seen as fellow citizens or even human beings) to blame for our condition, the only thing surprising about the Oklahoma bombing is that it was so long in coming.

Among people of the political fringes, this loss of trust in public institutions has crossed a threshold into paranoia. But this problem concerns much more than just those fringe groups. Over the past two decades, most public discussions on the role of government in our society have degenerated into unthinking ideological rantings. This erosion of civil political discourse began in the late '60s to early '70s. Following the Vietnam conflict and the first-time resignation of a U.S. president, the public's confidence levels as shown by Gallup Poll data dropped to an all-time low. Previous levels have never been regained.

Not coincidentally, the next person elected president ran an anti-Washington campaign. Jimmy Carter made reorganization of government a major campaign thrust, only to allow the effort to founder in the face of congressional and interest-group opposition. But the lesson was not lost on politicians of both parties that "it's good to run against government."

Few learned it better than Ronald Reagan. On a campaign vehemently anti-government, he was swept into office. Carter had set the precedent; a disastrous recession accompanied by rapidly climbing inflation seemed to prove the point that government was indeed as bad as Reagan said. We seemed to stop thinking about a "public service" made up of real people, and instead began referring to "the government," a dark, monstrous, faceless "thing," and the "bureaucrats," its servants.

Through the '80s, the popularity of this political theme grew not only in federal elections, but on the state and local levels as well. Though he promised a "kinder and gentler" government, George Bush did little to make it a reality. With Bill Clinton, bureaucrat-bashing did not slacken so much as simply assume another guise. The Clinton platform featured "reinventing government," a government that according to Clinton's political rhetoric is "broken."

Even those who work in the public service have begun to unconsciously disassociate what they do every day with government service. Lawyers have begun to think of themselves as lawyers, not Justice Department attorneys. Employees of the state Department of Environmental Quality see themselves as biologists, not civil servants. The dehumanization of government is thus complete. With the fall of the Soviet Union, we have been left with only one demonized entity, our own government, onto which to project our anxieties and hostilities.

For the first time in two decades, we may be able to look through the negative mirage that we, with the help of our political leaders, have created and see the human faces of our fellow citizens who work in government service. With a flash of light and a thunderous explosion on April 19, we instantly saw that what we have been attacking is not simply "the government," but instead men, women and their children, people like you and me.

A mature democracy ought to be beyond the kind of ideological nonsense that preoccupies us and our leaders. Obviously, our democracy, or any democracy cannot prosper, or indeed survive, with too much government, or too little. We ought to spend our time and political imagination figuring out the best mix of public, private and not-for-profit initiatives to address our festering societal problems. Instead, we and our political leaders have been trying to outdo one another in the vehemence of our anti-government rhetoric.

We have to find our way back to a more civil form of political discourse. Each of us must assume responsibility for lowering the stridency and volume of our language so that we may once again accord one another a level of respect due another citizen in a democracy. Our political leaders must refrain from blaming one another or depicting the tragedy as a consequence of ideology, left or right, and we as citizens must hold them to it.

If we and our leaders can recognize the consequences of overheated rhetoric, blaming and stereotyping, there may yet be a chance for healing and growth.

If our political leaders can begin to recognize and help us recognize that most of those people identified by the politicians and the press as "heroic rescue workers" are the same people they have derided as "pointy-headed bureaucratic jackasses," then there may yet be hope to restore legitimacy to government.

If we can grasp that those rescuers are the same people whose raises and cost-of-living allowances have been denied, budgets cut and ranks downsized, and who have been told repeatedly to "do more with less," then it will be a significant step toward reasoned discourse about the place of government in our society.

If our political leaders can help us understand that the rescuers work (we used to say "serve") in "bureaucracies" like the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the FBI, the Oklahoma City Fire Department, the U.S. Marshals Service and the Oklahoma State Police, it will mark a beginning of a new understanding.

And if they will remind people that the broken bodies pulled from the wreckage belonged to people who worked, loved and suffered life's ups and downs like the rest of us, people who also happened to issue Social Security and disability checks, help veterans obtain the benefits due them, make farmers loans to improve soil conservation and pursue violators of federal law — in other words, serve us and carry out the laws passed by our political leaders — then perhaps some good can yet come from such evil.

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