into custody by the FBI in northern Oklahoma. The stunning realization sank in that Americans had done this to Americans. Kathleen Treanor, whose daughter Ashley died in the blast, uttered the disbelief of so many, "We live in Oklahoma, for God's sake. What could happen to my precious baby?"[2]

Indeed, what happened to Ashley—and what has happened to our precious land? In the first days after the bombing, most in the media asked this same question, but, to their credit, refused to spread generalizations and suspicion. Americans were justified in the unity they felt in denouncing an atrocity that could claim no political home...the mindless act of a deranged few.

As my family and I watched the people of Oklahoma City and the surrounding communities, the volunteer rescue workers, doctors and others who traveled cross-country to offer aid and comfort, we couldn't help but notice the deep spiritual bonds that held people together through the crisis. The same core values that are so often derided at other times and in other places—deep religious faith, prayer in public, true voluntarism—became the very symbols and substance of Oklahoma's hope for recovery.

The whole nation joined in a national day of mourning. The First Christian Church of Oklahoma City, and others, opened their doors to the rescuers and the waiting families, gathering food and supplies that quickly outstripped the immediate need. Feed the Children, the Christian relief agency headquartered just miles away from "ground zero," was flooded with donations and offers of help. As the week ended, and while scores of the dead still lay inside the building's shattered hulk, the President flew to Oklahoma City where he delivered words of solace and endurance.

In their unity against this assault upon them—and in the faith that God would not allow us to be shaken—Americans could believe that this, too, would pass.

But then, suddenly, President Clinton seemed to radically change course. Two days after the blast, he declined a reporter's request for comment and said he would not "speculate about the motives or atmosphere until the investigation is complete."[3] But there he was—the day after his return from Oklahoma City, while the investigation was still in progress—delivering a speech in which he suggested that the roots of this vicious crime could be found in hatred spread across the "airwaves."

Time's Michael Kramer blamed conservative political rhetoric, and attacked Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. "The gulf between hyperbolic words and last week's despicable treachery is not all that great,"[4] he wrote. Another zeroed in on supporters of first- term Republican Congressman George Nethercutt of Washington state (who defeated former House Speaker Tom Foley), and Congresswoman Helen Chenoweth of Idaho. "Their coalition," he wrote, included such "well-known elements of far-right thought" as "tax protesters" and "Christian home-schoolers."[5]

How outrageous! What do the hundreds of thousands of parents who have sacrificed to educate their children at home, or the millions of Americans who oppose high taxes, have to do with the thugs who bombed the federal building?

The White House did make some move at conciliation after the President's first remarks, but for days his advisers let conservative spokesmen—anyone who had spoken even remotely of the need to curb excessive federal power—twist in the wind. Several stations that carried radio host Rush Limbaugh dropped his program. And in Congress there was heavy pressure to pass anti-terrorism measures that come very close to violating our Constitutional freedoms.

What madness this was and is. To introduce polarization into a freshly wounded society where none exists—where Americans are Americans first and only secondarily Republicans, Democrats, independents, or non-voters—was senseless. Was the murder of innocent children "conservative"? Do Americans who want a return to traditional values destroy government buildings? Where does anarchy fit on the political spectrum?

Strong rhetoric has always been a part of American public debate. In fact, some of the strongest rhetoric in recent months has come from those who oppose conservative and family values. But, how could anyone ignore and dismiss the words of one liberal senator who called conservative reforms of the school lunch program (reforms which called for a budget increase of 4.5 percent and state management of the program) an "assault on America's children"[6]? Or the words of a nationally known liberal columnist, who called Justice Clarence Thomas "absolutely reprehensible" and expressed the wish that he die "early...of heart disease."[7] Or the veteran Congressman from Georgia, John Lewis (D), who, in a speech, compared the GOP Contract with America, the work of Republicans, to Nazi Germany, "They're coming for our children, they're coming for the poor, they're coming for the sick, the elderly, the disabled."[8]

Moreover, consider the target of the bombing. It was perpetrated against the people of one of the most conservative communities in the country—a city with 1,500 churches. Oklahoma City's Liberty bank building was illuminated with crosses after the disaster, to symbolize the community's deposit of faith. Even The New York Times, which delights in using its editorial pages to attack those it calls Bible-thumping "fundamentalists," was forced to acknowledge "the faith that has held Oklahoma City together after the bombing."[9] The Family Research Council took out a full-page ad in the *Daily Oklahoman* to praise the people of that good city and to commend their reliance on faith.

Faith is written throughout the geography and the history of the heartland. Nelda Chapman of the local Chamber of Commerce put it best, saying, "There's a spirit that bonds people together that's not a human spirit, but the Holy Spirit. You have to depend on a spiritual background to conquer the frontier, and in the tough times we faced in the Dust Bowl days, there was no strength but the Lord."[10] Cathy Hickman, friend of one victim, Teresa Alexander, went even further, saying Teresa, who "organized Bible studies for her coworkers, would forgive the people who did this awful thing—that's how she is."[11]

Yes, impossible as it seems, that's how people of faith are. They forgive because they believe in the One who has forgiven the "awful things" of all humanity.

I said above that it was inappropriate for President Clinton to make comments which divided Americans on matters about which they profoundly agree. I have no desire to do the same. But this much I must say. If we are looking for factors that make an Oklahoma City possible, we must look to the withering of the "permanent things" in our society. The collapse of timeless standards of right and wrong. The rise of the ethic that says, "Just do it." The local theaters that once showed movies about heroes like Abe Lincoln of Illinois and Lewis & Clark, but are now home to "Lethal Weapon," "Pulp Fiction" and "Hasta la vista, baby!"

We should ponder the glaring inconsistency of *Time* magazine, which has urged the "right and the left to lower their voices,"[12] but whose parent company, Time-Warner, purveys "gangsta rap" and the sado-masochistic images of Madonna's *Erotica*. Time-Warner wrings profits from pouring toxic waste into the souls of the young. We should ponder the incongruity of the President for denouncing militants in an address to the patrons of Emily's List, a political action group dedicated to preserving the right to rob unborn children of their lives.