

In Search of America

By Peter Jennings & Todd Brewster (2002)

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Four flights up in a dilapidated building on L Street, Robert S. McIntyre holds a candle for liberal America. Steps up from Stoney's Beef-N-Beer on one side and the Washington headquarters of the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) on the other, McIntyre serves as the director of what is officially described as the nonpartisan, nonprofit Citizens for Tax Justice

A lawyer by training, McIntyre, fifty-two, was among the many young professionals who came to Washington in the early 1970s to work against the Vietnam War, for civil rights, for environmental protection, for consumer rights But unlike the rest of them, he said, "I'm still here plugging." Even without the social upheaval of the 1960s, McIntyre would probably have ended up working in some aspect of public policy. One of eight children in a family devoted to the political life, he has a

brother who works for a Washington consulting firm, another who teaches law at Wayne State University in Detroit, two more who are lawyers in Attleboro, Massachusetts, the family hometown, and a younger sister who teaches at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Elizabeth McIntyre occupies the George Herbert Walker Bush Chair in national intelligence. "Yeah," said McIntyre. "She thinks it's funny, too."

Originally a math major in college (he switched to English before ending up in law school), McIntyre described his role in the tax debate simply, and with modesty. "We do the arithmetic," he said, "and then tell

people about it." In fact, he is one of the principal sources of information for liberal Democrats on matters of tax policy. And by his lights, the Bush tax plan was simply unfair, because that \$1.6 trillion would most benefit the wealthiest 1 percent of the population while 6 million families with 10 million children would get no break. It was a point he has made consistently throughout the first weeks of the Bush presidency, preaching to old-age pensioners, union gatherings, and readers of *The American Prospect*, a biweekly liberal magazine. But in modern Washington, McIntyre felt the political winds blowing against him and, frustrated



Robert McIntyre, above, continues to argue that the federal government can be a worthy agent of social change.

by the growing consensus around conservatism, wondered out loud just what happened to the political ethic that once put value on providing for the public good.

McIntyre pointed to the successes of the last fifty years: an interstate highway system, medical and retirement programs for the elderly, national parks, a cleaner environment. “All that,” he said “would not have happened without the government’s involvement.” Even in the modern climate, when people have grown cynical about government and wary of taxes, the call to reduce the size of Washington went largely unheeded because no right-thinking politician would ever attack the two most popular entitlement programs, Social Security and Medicare. “Does it matter if your wages are lower and your taxes are higher?” he asked. Not if you believe the benefits you are receiving are worthwhile and not if you feel some allegiance to the system that allowed you to earn that money in the first place. “You go out and work for a living and make some money,” he said, incredulously, “and you don’t have any responsibility to support the society that made all that possible?”

Our present government system, said McIntyre, was [in part] a response to the crisis of the Great Depression, when “capitalism stopped working” and the people decided to “soften some of its rough edges.” Indeed, the popular assumption is that the philosophical foundation of modern-day liberalism began with the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal programs of the 1930s. But [as McIntyre pointed out] in fact the antecedent for an active Washington, dedicated to the public good, reigning sovereign over the states, goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century, with a much worse crisis, the Civil War that extinguished 620,000 lives, and the ascendancy of Abraham Lincoln to the pantheon of American greatness. Historians drafting the path of the “colossus” of Washington, are likely to begin with the log-splitting sixteenth president from Illinois. [Indeed, McIntyre added, one could go back to the country’s founding, since the American people ratified the U.S. Constitution in order to give the newly-formed United States the power to tax—and thus to govern.] . . .

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. . . The ever-combative Stephen Moore [of the libertarian, anti-tax Cato Institute and the business-funded, anti-tax Club for Growth] was . . . worried that the instinctive response to the terrorist attacks would be, of all things, to grow the federal government . . . — before asserting, confidently, that the trend away from centralization and the ideas of the Left will prevail. “It’s the end of their world,” he said, a little presumptuously. For Robert McIntyre, the tax cut was hardly that, more like a rough spot in the road from which he believed liberals would soon recover. But, like the rest of the world, he had not expected the terrorist attacks which would prompt calls for a reversal of the tax cuts so soon. “We couldn’t afford the tax cut before,” he said, “and we can afford it a lot less now.”