I have been intrigued and amused by the steady stream of analyses of the outcome of the recent election, particularly those that try to explain why Democrats lost control of Congress. I was rather intensely involved in one of these contests, being the Democrat who narrowly lost the race in the 22nd District of California to my Republican opponent.

To date, most analysts tend to interpret the election as a decisive repudiation of the Clinton presidency and a dramatic protest against an increasingly ineffective federal government. The data I assembled in talking extensively with voters throughout Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties would confirm this judgment. Though I have not held elective office before, my opponent skilfully depicted me as a probable rubber stamp for profligate Clinton policies. And the questions I always found most difficult to answer persuasively were prefaced with the observation that for the past two years Democrats have held the White House, the Senate, and the House of Representatives. "Why, then, is Washington in such a mess?" I was asked repeatedly. "What makes you think you will be able to do anything to fix it?" The advice I received from official national party sources was well-intended, but not particularly convincing. We candidates were encouraged to stress the under-recognized achievements of the Clinton administration while raising disturbing questions about the viability of the Republican's proposed all-everything "Contract with America". It was a delicate balancing act. I often felt like a reluctant novice trapeze

artist. I was forced at each moment to walk a thin line, under constant fear of falling, recognizing that survival itself (no significant misstep) would be a noteworthy achievement.

And yet, this does not tell the entire story, for the mood of the voters -- and, thus, the spirit of the 1994 election cycle -- was not nearly as partisan-oriented as typical interpretations might indicate. Surprisingly, at no time during my more than 300 meetings with groups of voters did anyone at all suggest a larger, more effective or more constructive role for government. I heard not one proposal or suggestion, say, for a better program for children, seniors, the schools, the homeless population, or new arrivals to our country. In all of these hundreds of hours of conversations with citizens there was scant discussion of racial justice, growing gaps between rich and poor, or the characteristics of moral leadership. Given dramatic demographic shifts and changes throughout the society, one would expect some concern about how communities might find ways to live more harmoniously and equitably together. But I detected little reference to this, in fact, hardly any talk at all about strategies or prospects for the achievement of a common good. Instead, virtually each discussion was dominated by concern about fiscal matters. At every stop I was asked, "What are you going to do to reduce the deficit?" And the second most dominating topic, crime, was the most superficial of all. Here the successful candidate only needed to affirm support for capital punishment, the three-strikes initiative, and to cite the names of prominent law-enforcement officers who had provided endorsements.

From this experience I conclude that ours is an era of profound

discouragement and extensive deconstruction. Anger was decidedly more visible than hope, even though most of it seemed unfocused and expended with no more discipline or accuracy than scatter-fire. Understandably, candidates for political office competed against each other by trying to display more anger than their opponents, to demonstrate that they shared the anti-attitude of the voters -- as in anti-government, anti-crime, and, most decisively, anti-illegal immigrant. It gave me a fresh understanding of the meaning of "negative campaigning," which words are apt not simply because things tend to get mean and dirty, but because the spirit of the undertaking derives its nurture from the powers of negation. Some of my experience attests that the world of anti-everything, wherein scarce little is being proposed or constructed, has become the world of Note, for we are surrounded by a political, ideological and spiritual climate in which Not prevails. It is not surprising then that the appropriate candidate's posture, quite literally, is to be "mad as hell," which is about as far into negation as a human being can fall.

When I was campaigning I continued to want to believe that most voters still wanted it otherwise, and that the deeper reason for voter cynicism (together with relative low voter turnout among the younger generation) is that the world of Not does not sustain aspiration. So I pleaded that we vote our hopes, not our fears, and that our petitions be our ideals and not our frustration and anger. But the prevailing contrary winds are strong and menacing.

So, in these days of post-election reflection, I feel more sadness and sorrow about the nation than I feel about myself, our family's, and

our supporters' experience. Why, at the very time that we need the best that we have to give, have our people become so dispirited? And I've pondered with the writer E. B. de Vito, "and, thinking of things that were, sometimes I wonder if even the angels are on the side of the angels now."