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SECTION C
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COMMENTARY

That's Connecticut

By H. Paul Sandbeck

A dormant discussion about the suburbs' responsibility for the metropolitan area has re-emerged with fresh vigor in the Capitol Region. The Hartford Vision Project and, most recently, Hartford Mayor Michael P. Peters, have given the idea fresh currency. Academic, business, media and religious leaders have been positing the notion for some time.

Probably this chapter of the discussion will soon subside, however, as have previous ones, as soon as the segregists have had their to-the-anti-hatred-constitutional. In all likelihood, it will soon be business as usual in these parts, a return to a kind of permanent political cold war between the region's suburban and the urban factions.

This debate will probably never be anything more than sporadic if the antagonists, and those of us who listen to them, do not recognize that this controversy is predicated on a fundamental crisis of values in our society.

The deepest issue is not how much wealth suburbanites bring into the city or, how much they carry out. Certainly, it's not whether life in small-town Connecticut can be beautiful, compared with the noise and the grime and the crime of the city. The deepest issue is this value question: how big is our "we"?

Americans have historically given strikingly, even suicidally, narrow answers to this question.

A perennial American narrator rejects the thought of "we" altogether, in favor of "me." This is the image of the heroic individual alone in the wilderness. Classically expressed by Ernest Hemingway in "The Old Man and the Sea" and popularly promulgated by the advertising profile of the Marlboro man, this image more recently has been reborn in films such as Burt Convoy's "Deacon Wiles Waiton."

In that story, the hero rejects "civilization" altogether for a solitary life on the frontier, where he coexists with wolves and the peoples of the wilderness.

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We

The antidote to American individualism

Native Americans. At the end, he rides off into an uncertain future in the mountains, riding with his two Cheyenne, Native American-raised bride. In this instance, the perennial American hero's cry is qualified by an other-ego-central we but only marginally. In the end, "I" all succumb to the same thing: we — and they — alone in the wilds.

Probably the single most popular demonstration of we in American culture has been the full-blown image of frontier family members rallying together against the elements, whether those elements were depicted as Native American warriors or the attack or the capricious acts of nature. Call it the ethos of circling the wagons. This is the "domestic" image of American life.

Sometimes the we that Americans have valued has been larger than the family unit. This larger image of we has most familiarly taken the form of the classic agrarian community.

Closer to home, this image has been nurtured by the romanticism of small-town New England, which exists unchallenged as a kind of collective photograph partly in the minds of many New Englanders. A traditional example of this image would be the barn raising, where all the neighbors rally together to come to the aid of a single family. A contemporary expression of the same rural communitarian ideal would be the image of the new and disappearing small-town volunteer fire company.

By definition, and often by intention, these frontier and agrarian values denigrate larger social collectivities such as the city. This leaves many Americans, especially those of us in the Northeast, living with a preferred irony.

That irony: Americans should want to think of themselves as the heroic men, confronting the wilderness alone, on the one hand, or as members of the heroic community isolated from everyone else, on the other hand, is interesting, given the pronounced urban tradition of life in our region.

In reality, our we is metropolitan — from Washington, D.C., to Boston — one great and sometimes suburban sprawl of phone[illegible] polyglot urbanites, with a

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MacDonald's at every corner.

A recent study counted the number of people in the Northeast who either live in cities or in large metropolitan areas; regional urban ethos and economies are defined and enhanced by urban centers. Surprisingly, perhaps to Connecticut, where these services were new three times more in suburbs than in cities. 61.6 percent of the residents are suburban, according to the study's definition.

But the problem is not merely of families who like to think of themselves as somehow else and isolate themselves from everyone else in their region, particularly those who live in the cities.

The problem is much more urgent. It has to do with the survival of the world — and just because this — on this planet.

If we're unable to think beyond the military "we" and the national "we" of our location or the region we community to the metropolitan "we," how are we going to begin to think of ourselves as fellow passengers on Spaceship Earth, as members of a single global "we"?

Today, when air and forests, land and seas are in environmental crisis, our "we" must be as big as the globe. We must be able to think of the birds and the fish and the trees as our brothers and sisters, not to speak of the countless human millions who dwell in cities around the Earth, often in abject poverty.

Suburbanites and inner-city residents in the Northeast had better practice saying "we" in each other's right now. Otherwise, we're not going to have time to learn how to say "we" in the Arabian and Third World deep shelters before we all perish together. The day when there will be no truly viable "we" situation is not that far away if current global environmental and social trends continue unabated.

That is the urgent crisis of values that confronts us all, even as we endeavor to define our most cherished traditional values to guide us.