The Debate Over Linkage Tests Society's Moral Moorings

H. Paul Santmire

The debate about integrating neighborhood improvement and downtown development in the city of Hartford — called linkage — should not be written off as yet another squabble between competing interest groups.

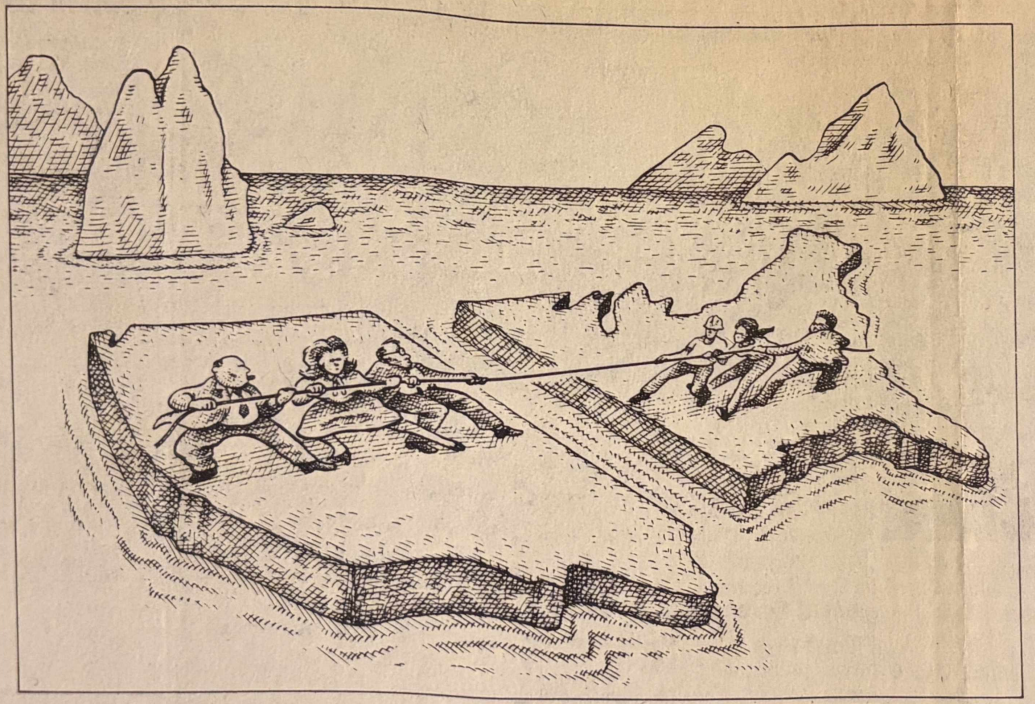
However histrionic it may appear, however parochial it may sound, and however petty it may actually be at times, this debate is in fact a serious, albeit local, testing of the moral moorings of society.

Hartford's linkage debate in the last 18 months has been a typically American phenomenon. At least until recently, all parties in the discussion have been self-consciously committed to the common good — in principle. Members of the Linkage Task Force, established by the City Council in March 1984, and composed of a variety of neighborhood, civic and corporate representatives, took their work with consistent seriousness.

The linkage discussion has presupposed a commitment on the part of the business community to be an integral part of the development of a common strategy for the common good, not just to attempt to maximize profits, oblivious to the needs of the jobless and homeless in Hartford.

This kind of participation by corporate representatives has been welcomed by the other parties in the discussion, especially in light of the recent cutbacks in federal funding for urban development. It has been taken, further, as a concrete sign that the Reagan administration's call for increased private-sector attention to the ills of our cities is more than political posturing.

It is at this point that the local linkage debate is testing the moral moorings of society, at least in our own region. A division appears to be emerging among corporate leaders themselves about whether the business community should seriously participate in the discussion at all.



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Although subsequently disavowed, the now controversial memo by Aetna attorney Malcolm Campbell, which belittled the whole linkage discussion, seems to have been more representative of the corporate mind in Hartford than most of the business community's public representatives would ever like to have admitted. The memo was an expression of that hard-nosed, even mean streak in American corporate life, which owes more, historically speaking, to the survival-of-the-fittest ethos of late 19th-century social Darwinism than to the moral traditions of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln.

The other group of local corporate leaders, those who have been active or behind-the-scenes supporters of corporate participation in the linkage discussion, seems to stand firmly in the mainstream of American moral life, taking commitment to the common good for granted. But some signs of wavering have appeared.

In recent weeks, a number of key business participants have backed off emotionally, even officially, from the discussion. A number of them have taken refuge now behind the smokescreen of "voluntarism." Yes, they say, we *are* committed to linkage, but only on a voluntary basis. Whether that is truly a commitment of any substance remains to be seen.

Are those in the corporate community who stand in the American mainstream of commitment to the common good prepared to work for common — and that means publicly accountable — solutions?

A special city tax on existing and new space available for office use has been proposed. This tax would be a conduit of funds for investment in city programs for employment and housing development. It would allow long-range public planning and regular public scrutiny of the programs being developed.

Will the corporate leaders who have supported the linkage discussion to this point entertain such proposals seriously?

Or will they join their peers who have taken themselves out of the discussion by refusing to countenance anything but voluntary corporate participation in developing jobs and housing?

When the answers to these questions emerge, we will know whether the American moral consensus is holding firm in Hartford.

The Rev. H. Paul Santmire is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford.