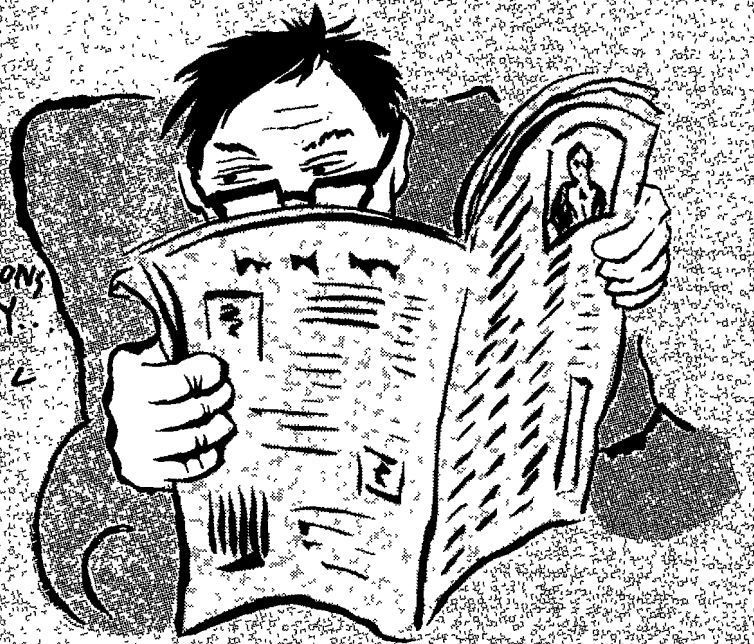


I N T H E E N D



Cynical and proud

By Chris Lehmann

We media professionals

are most at ease when the public, spurred by our urgings and exhortations, rallies to public-spirited causes with the brisk reliability of a well-oiled weathervane. But now something is definitely out of whack. In the latest in a series of surveys bearing bad news for sober tribunes of the Fourth Estate, a *New York Times*/CBS News poll released on April 8 disclosed that the American people understand the current batch of Clinton campaign finance scandals all too well, but they have astonishingly little faith that anything can, or even should, be done about them.

In the poll, some 75 percent of respondents agreed that "many public officials make or change policy decisions as a direct result of money received from major contributors," and a combined 89 percent responded that the campaign finance system needs either "fundamental changes" or "to be completely rebuilt." But one of the most promising measures to curb the influence of money in politics, publicly

financed national campaigns, was scotched by a resounding 79 percent of respondents, who saw it as too expensive. And our cherubic chief executive, who all but drips greenbacks these days, commanded a 56 percent approval rating, down only a little from his post-inaugural high of 60 percent.

We in the media have a glib explanation for this sagging public interest in public virtue: We're to blame for making Americans cynical. Over the last year or so, spurred in part by the publication of James Fallows' "issues"-minded critique of media attitudes, *Breaking the News*, reporters and pundits have embarked on a delicious bout of anxious self-examination. Over and over again, hapless news readers and viewers hear that the fabric of American democracy has been coarsened by the reflexive "gotcha" coverage that governs political reporting—the procedure of catching candidates, leaders and other public figures in small, ostensible hypocrisies.

In fact, all press protestations to the contrary, the Ameri-

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