

March 17, 1997

Mr. Brian Lamb
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Dear Mr. Lamb:

I very much enjoy your Booknotes program. I tape it every Sunday, because each episode is worth watching more than once. I would love to have your job, reading books and interviewing authors!

But I was disturbed during your interview with John Fialka broadcast last Sunday. I am fully in agreement with his thesis, that foreign interests are spying on American companies and ripping off American property, and that foreign students are learning here and going back home to become world-class businessmen or scientists. Of course, higher education is a major "export," if exports are things that the U.S. government ought to promote, as Clinton says.

I was, however, very much disturbed that YOU did not pick up on the problem of "**US** versus **THEM**." The plural pronoun is very treacherous. [I enclose my little essay as an elaboration.]

The real issue as John Fialka expressed it, is whether "our" brilliant scientists, whose ideas are ripped off and developed in Asia, to the ultimate benefit of all mankind in the form of superior products (including all or most Americans — e.g. the VCR), are somehow also part of the "loser" community of lower class Americans from textile-weaving jobs, or stoop-labor tomato-picking jobs in Florida (lost to Mexico due to NAFTA). There is no "us" there!

Industrial espionage is clearly theft, but this is not a "national" issue. The new intellectual property rights regime, and enforcement, under the WTO is the direction to pursue answers — not caricatures, as John Fialka frames it, where one might imagine governments should start [trade] wars over foreign predations.

Thanks for a great program, Booknotes.

Sincerely,
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

O.BK

WHAT DO YOU MEAN "US," MR. PRESIDENT?

"Us" is a treacherous pronoun. Sometimes it means you and me; sometimes it means me and my friends, but not you. Politicians like to use the word both ways at the same time.

When Jefferson wrote, "We hold these Truths to be self evident," he meant you and me: "All men are created equal." He held equal rights and justice as universal concepts that must include all of us. The key idea is the difference between "all of us" and "some of us."

How often is our loyalty fooled by this ambivalent "us"? In foreign affairs, we can't avoid it. The world is divided between them and us. Not just U.S. diplomacy, but even our trade deficit is cited. The government promotes our economic interests, but only some Americans ever sell their products to foreigners. Yet these are "our exports." Our exporters might one day even share some of *our profits* with you and me, but don't count on our government to help.

Political Inequality

We may be all created equal, but some of us are always "more equal" politically. This is a natural, necessary thing. Society and government can only make choices and pursue various alternatives by delegating authority and picking leaders who can produce results.

Results are specific, so the equivocal "us" cloaks an unequal sharing of costs and benefits. People who benefit the most usually don't bear the heaviest costs. Even when our whole society gains, as from a strong national defense, some specific communities with military

My fellow Americans, the test of this plan cannot be what is in it for me. It has got to be what is in it for us.

Bill Clinton, Feb. 17, 1993

bases, career military officers, and defense contractors profit in particular ways. The rest of us pay our taxes, but we get only the indirect benefits of their service, while they get good jobs.

Successful politicians depend on our belief their work can make us all better off, as they persuade us to allow special groups unequal advantages. Sometimes they appeal to need. But the concept of social need, with new things for a helpful government to do, is another example of confounding "us" with some of us. All of us are needy in different, unequal ways — there is no *you and me* there.

Jefferson or Hobbes

In Hobbes' state of nature, the meek never have equal rights since the bold can take whatever they want. A Jeffersonian community, based on equal rights, is undermined when everyone's status depends on surviving a Hobbesian war of all against all. Our basic values are put at risk by using politics to help some of us at the expense of everyone else.

The concept "us" would thus seem to be the fulcrum of political philosophy, the balancing point that separates our shared values from some group's own private ends. Every political issue can be located on a range, from equivocation to equal rights, by the simple question: "What do you mean 'us,' Mr. President?"