*In Praise of the “Wobblies”*

By: Ted Gup

For years I really didn't know what I believed. I always seemed to stand in the no-man's land between opposing arguments, yearning to be won over by one side or the other, but finding instead degrees of merit in both.

I remember some 35 years ago, sitting at a table with the editor of The Washington Post and a half dozen Harvard kids. We were all finalists for a Post internship and the editor was there to winnow our numbers down. He asked each of us what we thought about the hot issues of the day — Vietnam, Nixon, the demonstrations. The Harvard kids were dazzling. They knew exactly where they stood. Me, I just stumbled on every issue, sounding so muddled. I was sure I had forever lost my shot at the Post. Why, I wondered, could I not see as clearly as those around me?

When the lunch was over and everyone rose to leave, the editor put his hand on my arm and asked me to stay. We talked again about the war and how it was dividing the country. A month later he wrote me a rejection letter. He said I was too young for the job but he liked my attitude. He told me that he "hunched I had a hell of a future" and to keep bugging him. I did.

Seven years later he hired me.

But that first letter, now framed in my office, had already given me an invaluable license. It had let me know that it was OK to be perplexed, to be torn by issues, to look at the world and not feel inadequate because it would not sort itself out cleanly. In the company of the confident, I had always envied their certainty. I imagined myself like some tiny sailboat, aimlessly tacking in whatever wind prevailed at the moment.

But in time, I came to accept, even embrace, what I called "my confusion," and to recognize it as a friend and ally, no apologies needed. I preferred to listen rather than to speak; to inquire, not crusade. As a noncombatant, I was welcomed at the tables of even bitterly divided foes. I came to recognize that I had my own compass and my own convictions and if, at times, they took me in circles, at least they expanded outward. I had no wish for converts — where would I lead them?

An editor and mentor at the Post once told me I was "Wobbly." I asked who else was in that category and drew comfort from its quirky ranks. They were good people all — open-minded, inquisitive, and yes, confused. We shared a common creed. Our articles of faith all ended with a question mark. I wouldn't want a whole newsroom, hospital, platoon or — God forbid — a nation of us. But in periods of crisis, when passions are high and certainty runs rabid, it's good to have a few of us on hand. In such times, I believe it falls to us Wobblies to try and hold the shrinking common ground.