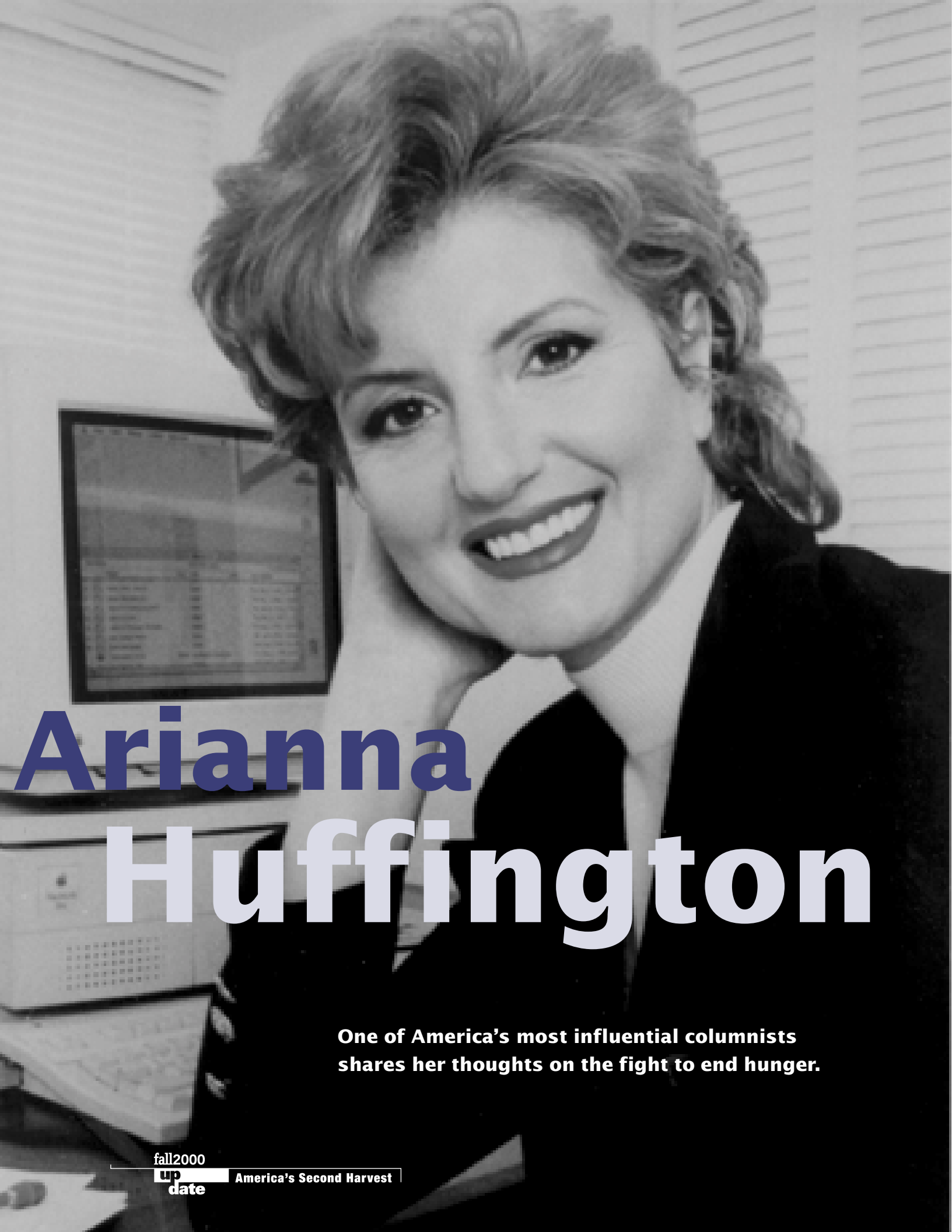


Arianna Huffington

One of America's most influential columnists shares her thoughts on the fight to end hunger.

Arianna Huffington has earned a reputation as one of America's best known and most independent political commentators. She is the author of eight books, and her syndicated column appears twice weekly in newspapers around the country, including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Post*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. She is a frequent guest on television talk shows, and most recently helped to organize the Shadow Conventions that were held during the GOP and DNC Conventions. Her latest book, *How To Overthrow the Government*, urges all Americans to stand up and fight for what they believe in.

You are one the few major columnists who addresses hunger in our country. Why do you think that is?

Well, I think it's a larger question of why our national debate hardly focuses on the issues of hunger and poverty. Especially in the 1990's – these years that have been called the years of unprecedented prosperity. There are many reasons, and I think one of them is that in a kind of unique way both parties have really abandoned those issues. The presidential debate is a case in point. You have both candidates really vying for who is going to inherit the mantle of prosperity. Who is going to convince the public that they can perpetuate it, and as a result they steer away from any facts about the millions of people who are left out of the prosperity, and of course hunger is such a stark manifestation of that. And a lot of writers, a lot of journalists, follow the agenda that's put on the table. If they put on Social Security, we'll all write about Social Security. I think that's one of the problems.

But you don't stick to that agenda. How did you come to the decision to speak out about poverty and the issues that are important to you?

Well, that has been part of my own journey. When my ex-husband was running for office, I made a point of asking to go to places – the homeless shelters, the centers for abused children – and I was, first of all, amazed by how much suffering there was in such an affluent community like Santa Barbara. Then, when Michael ran for the Senate, I started seeing that across the state, and that began to shift my own understanding. During Michael's two campaigns, it became much more concrete because I saw firsthand what was going on in the country. And then I started speaking about it and writing about it in my columns over the last five years. But then I saw that nothing happened, nothing changed. And that's what led to my own recognition that change on these issues wasn't going to come from within the two parties. That there had to be a movement, like the civil rights movement.

What would you say to people who doubt that your concern is sincere?
Well I would say I'm not running for office, so . . . in a sense the question is, if they care about these issues, then I'm another voice added to those talking about them and that, for me, is the end of it.

Actually, if what I read was correct you do more than just talk about the issues. A portion of the proceeds from your new book will be donated to charity and you also donate a set portion of your entire income.
You know I'm a great believer in people being personally involved which is why I particularly love what your organization is doing. Not just lobbying for the government to do more, because I think it's very important for our civic life to involve building bridges and connections with people who are left out of the prosperity. It's so important for me and for my children, whom I often take with me to events. And I do tithe 10 percent of my income to what I call "poverty fighting." What I'm urging people to do, and what I do is make a distinction between that and charitable giving that goes to make the life of the rich a little richer. You know, museums and the opera and even the private schools their kids go to. That's all great, and I'm not saying don't do it, but there's also giving to the greatest need, and as you know most of the charitable giving does not go there. Also, working hands-on. I'm on the board of a place called Home in South Central which deals with at-risk children in an area of the community which is really a desert, where there's nothing for children to do after school.

We're finding that the face of hunger is changing so dramatically and there are so many more children, more working families, and more hunger in the suburbs.
That is so under-reported. It's amazing, isn't it?

It really is. It's interesting because on the same hand we're getting a lot more attention from the media than we were, say, a year ago.
Yes, definitely. I wrote a column about that. I said it is like the first possibility of an economic downturn. That, ironically, people are suddenly looking, when the stock market has begun to go down. There's increased attention to the poor as though people are saying "there but for the grace of God go I." Because if there is an economic downturn, which there's bound to be at some point, it's going to affect first the people you are helping and working with, but then it's going to spread.

Your book talks a lot about the declining number of people voting, especially low-income people. This seems to be evidence that people don't really feel like they have a stake in our government anymore. What would you say to those people?
I would say that they need to vote, but they don't have to vote for either candidate if they don't believe that the candidate of either party represents them. It's very important to vote, but I understand that it's a rational decision to say, "I don't have a stake." Our democracy has been taken over by special interests and big money. So I'd say voting is not the ultimate indicator of participation. We also need to get involved in this movement building that I believe is really the only way that things will change. I mean look at what happened with civil rights. In the end, it wasn't either party that made the civil rights legislation possible. It was the movement to which they had to respond.

We've talked about how the media isn't covering hunger. Are there any other forums you think could be used to change the general perception that hunger doesn't exist in our country?
That's a very valid question because I think there are tools that have to be used that are not being used beyond presenting the statistics. I think one of them is presenting the real people. I mean, introducing the public to the real people who are hungry.

We do find that the statistics, as amazing as they are, can be hard for people to digest.
Yes. And they can just look at them and then look at small trends. For instance, let's say, there's been a slight down turn in this or that statistic, these indicators of poverty, and people focus on the slight downturn – not that there's actually been one here. I just wrote about the *Kids Count* report put out by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Look at teenage pregnancy. Everyone is talking about the downturn, but there are still staggering numbers of children born to teenage mothers who cannot afford to take care of them. There are like 500,000 a year. So we're not focusing on that. Just imagine. Not on the 500,000. We're focusing on the fact that there's been an 'x' percent decline. A sort of unreality creeps into these statistics which is kind of convenient at a time of tremendous callousness and narcissism in our culture. So that's one thing. Making it real. Putting flesh and blood on the statistics through real people's lives and stories. And the other thing is through satire. I am a great believer in the power of satire as a political tool. Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's Magazine*, has been great in chronicling satire as a tool from Jonathon Swift and Mark Twain



Arianna Huffington serves on several boards that promote community solutions to social problems including the Points of Light Foundation; Do Something, an organization that challenges young people to get involved in bringing about social change; and A Place Called Home, an after-school program that works with at-risk children in South Central Los Angeles.

down, and that's not the same as late-night television jokes. Because it's driven by just outrage and it's really another form of advocacy.

I remember the first time I read Jonathon Swift's *A Modest Proposal* how sick I got. I mean, it was an amazing essay.
Yeah, that's it. It makes you sick. It makes you sort of wake up.

At America's Second Harvest we recently changed our mission from "feeding hungry people" to "ending hunger in America." We thought it was important to take a more active stance because we believe hunger is a problem that can be solved. Do think it's something we might see in this generation?
Is it doable? Yes, absolutely. I think it's only a matter of will, or a collective will. If we can capture the public's imagination and galvanize the collective will, absolutely it's doable. It's going to take leadership – I don't just mean political leadership – but leadership in the media, in entertainment even, in all spheres of life. And unfortunately, it may, ironically, take a downturn in the economy so that people stop being lulled into this false sense of general prosperity. I've had a lot of these conversations with people that I'm working with. I'm always saying there's no sense of urgency now about these issues because there's that perception that all is well. So people like you are working against a collective reality at the moment.

Thank you so much for taking time to talk to me.
Oh absolutely, I think the work you are doing is so wonderful.

To find out more information about Arianna Huffington, visit her web site at www.ariannaonline.com.