Robin Wright delivers the 19th annual Ralph McGill Lecture at the University of Georgia.

I'm especially honored to be asked to deliver the Ralph McGill lecture. Among journalists throughout this country, McGill is widely recognized as an extraordinary columnist, editor and publisher.

But more than a quarter century after McGill's death it's easy to use superlatives to describe him. It's easy to recognize that what he did was right because the majority of Americans now approve of what he wrote and what he did.

But what really made McGill special is that decades ago he did what is still tough to do today. He went against the tide; he challenged the conventional wisdom and popular attitudes of his time. And in so doing, he redefined journalism — not only in the South — and he reshaped something as fundamental as the way we look at each other. What made him special were not just his skills, but an unusual blend of morality, vision and courage. What he did altered the generation around him and inspired the professionals who followed.

But the challenge taken on by McGill has not ended. Indeed, at the end of the 20th century, it looms ever larger.

Today the world is on one of history's front lines — an era of change so sweeping, so all-encompassing that virtually every major issue of everyday life — from the way we are governed to the way we prevent disease — will be affected. My lifetime will be noteworthy because it coincided with the end of an era — not just of the Cold War, but of the Modern era, a 500-year period that featured many of humankind's most important feats: charting the globe and linking a single world through everything from philosophy to fashion; consolidating city-states into nation-states as the basis of governance, trade, diplomacy and warfare; and the development of ideas in religion, art and politics that spawned individualism and equality.

In contrast, the lifetime of the students in this auditorium will be noteworthy because it coincides with the birth of a period that as yet — since we don't yet know its shape or thrust — is known simply as the post-Modern era. What an
extraordinary time it already promises to be. And what an advantage journalists working in the decades ahead will have. Because of technology, they will be able to see events in the earth's farthest corners as they happen, not just because CNN's cameras and correspondents jet around the world. Someday in the not-too-distant future, news organizations will also be able to direct their own satellites from space - circumventing governments and armies - to capture news.

But as technology alters our business, we too have to shift. We have to some degree already. Indeed, journalism has probably changed in my lifetime more than all earlier times combined - although less because of new outlets such as television than because of function. We no longer simply inform or entertain readers and viewers. Today, we also educate, enlighten, expose and sometimes even identify solutions in documentaries, investigative reports, specialty columns or networks in justice, medicine, culture or science, and an array of talk shows from The Newshour with Jim Lehrer to Larry King Live and The Oprah Winfrey Show.

But that's still not enough. The globalizing impact of the information and technology revolutions will demand more of us - not less. Kenneth Kaunda, one of the founding fathers of independent Africa and the president of Zambia for more than a quarter century, explained why. In theory, he explained, the ability to see a demonstration in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, a war in Bosnia or starvation in Somalia should bring us closer. But because of physical differences and cultural gaps that we in the audience too often don't understand, the visual image or the written description often instead accentuates the differences. It actually widens the divide. Technology gives us capabilities that supersede human knowledge.

As this new era emerges, our mission as journalists increasingly will be to add four mandates to the traditional who, what, where, when and why. First, we need to ask "where an event is coming from" and "what are its roots" to offer context and to close those gaps. Second, we need to add the "so what" in explaining the meaning of events. Third, we need to project the "where's it going" to explain the potential and future implications. In other words, we have to make sense of all the information dispensed through satellites and cyberspace. And we need to do all three in whole stories, not just in a few lines buried in the middle.

But fourth and most of all, we need to play an active role in helping define the new era that lies ahead and in charting its course. We can do that by identifying the new issues and problems and needs and by exploring the options in dealing with them. Because we are the fastest and most direct medium of information, we can have an extraordinary impact in helping give this new era - and its many aspects - direction. Nothing is - as yet - set in stone.

In this context, the issue that both troubled and inspired Ralph McGill again deserves special attention. So allow me to provoke you and - in his name - to challenge conventional wisdom on a subject particularly appropriate on the eve of a presidential election in the world's most powerful democracy.

Today it's widely assumed that conditions and rights in human life are steadily improving. After all, an unprecedented explosion of political freedoms has felled more than 40 of the world's most notorious regimes just since 1989.

But look closer.

The raw energy that inspired political upheaval across five continents in the late 1980s - symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall - has been replaced by anger, frustration and alienation in the mid-1990s. Whatever the ongoing commitment to pluralist ideals, the practice of democracy is now jeopardized from the forested mountains of Albania to Zambia's equatorial copper belt. And the United States is not exempt.

The latest wave of democratic change - widely accepted as the third in modern history - may even be over. The world may witness the emergence of a few new electoral democracies in the near future. But a major increase seems now unlikely, in part because democratization has already occurred in the countries where conditions are most favorable.

In several large, strategic or resource-rich countries, democracy has little hope of easily or imminently toppling despots who have already held on more than a quarter century: Zaire's manipulative Mobutu; Indonesia's ruthless Gen. Suharto; Syria's wily Assad; Cuba's stubborn Castro; and the ever-mercurial Qaddafi of Libya.

Even more alarming, however, is the declining quality of freedom within dozens of democracies. From banning opposition parties in Armenia to limiting freedom of association in Bangladesh, and from ignoring Supreme Court decisions in Belarus to restricting the media in Cambodia, democracy is slowly being smothered.

Unfortunately, attempting democracy is infinitely easier than succeeding at it. Many countries are having a much more difficult time getting beyond tentative first steps.

India, the world's most populous democracy, has been struggling for a half century to stabilize. Yet its long-standing battle with bribery and political corruption - a pervasive danger in new democracies - has only grown worse lately.

P.V. Narasimha Rao, India's prime minister from 1991 until last May, has been charged or is now under investigation for forging secret foreign bank accounts to tarnish an opposition leader, buying votes to win a no-confidence motion and
accepting money in exchange for a government contract on newsprint. A separate scandal this year implicates 115 other politicians for accepting large bribes.

India is far from unusual. In the mid-1990s, corruption has tainted or contributed to the downfall of the democratically elected presidents of Venezuela, Brazil and Mexico, prime ministers in Spain, Italy, Turkey and Bangladesh, and the chief of NATO, the military alliance of Western democracies.

A second pervasive danger in new democracies is abuse by the very law-enforcement outlets designed to preserve democracy. Brazil, Latin America's largest state and a democracy for a decade, last year elected the largest number of federal and state officials in its history. Yet, extrajudicial killings, torture and oppression of squatters, street children and others considered marginal remain rampant. Brazilians call it "social cleansing" — and it has widespread support.

Although 117 of the world's 191 countries are today in varying states of democratic rule — or 61 percent are up from 41 percent a decade ago — most in Asia, the former East bloc, South America and many in Africa have serious problems with abuse or brutality by law-and-order officials, according to Human Rights Watch. They include key states such as Russia, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Mexico, India, Peru, Colombia — and England and the United States.

But problems are not limited to political stagnation, mediocrity or misuse of the system. Democracy is also being hijacked.

In the Andean nation of Peru, democracy was undone by outright manipulation at the top. Peru's third democratically elected president Alberto Fujimori suspended the constitution and parliament, instituted press censorship and changed electoral laws to allow himself to run for a second term last year.

The unraveling of Zambia's democracy has been more subtle. The 1991 victory of diminutive labor leader Frederick Chiluba, who unseated Kenneth Kaunda, was heralded as the new African model. But the young democracy in dusty and sprawling Lusaka has instead become synonymous with scandals, corruption, drugs and economic decline, including collapse of the national airline and one of Zambia's largest banks.

In other words, in critical corners of the earth, democracy is gradually being hollowed, undermined or undone by dozens of subtractions.

Democracy's steady erosion is reflected in figures from Freedom House, an independent human-rights monitoring group in New York that annually ranks the ups and downs of democracy. In 1993, the quality of freedom improved in 18 countries, but declined in 43. And among democracies, the number that qualify as liberal democracies dropped from 85 percent in 1990 to 65 percent in 1996.

The danger is in the next step — and the possibility that the erosion of young democracy is a precursor to the actual suspension or overthrow of democracy.

In Niger, the military dumped a democratically elected government last January, ending four years of one of West Africa's boldest political experiments.

Algeria did not even get that far. After a first round of parliamentary elections contested by 54 parties, Algeria's military so feared the outcome that it ousted the president overseeing democratization, aborted the second round of elections — and then assumed power itself in 1992.

The trend fits past precedents. In previous waves of democratic change in the 19th and 20th centuries, many countries failed to consolidate democracy on their first try.

But democracy's future will not depend only on its newest adherents. The future depends as much on well-established democracies — where political pluralism is not fading too well either.

In the United States especially, democracy is becoming increasingly exclusive. Politicians now need such money to run that the millionaire, even billionaire, candidate is no longer unusual. High-paid strategists and pollsters rather than volunteers now run campaigns. Politics has increasingly been taken out of the neighborhoods, as conventions become pre-choreographed theater — with both delegates and TV viewers in the audience. Politics generally have gone professional. And democracy, supposedly the mandate of the majority, is less of the people or by the people than by an elite on behalf of the people — a kind of oligarchic democracy that deprives citizens of participation and even of their civic rights.

The impact in the world's most powerful democracy is evident in disillusionment, alienation, frustration — and voter turnouts. Among democracies, U.S. voter participation generally ranks 19th — far lower than fragmented Turkey or divided Italy.

California's presidential primary hit a new low this year, with less than 39 percent of registered voters showing up at the polls. In an L.A. County contest in April, less than 9 percent of voters turned out, while only less than 6 percent of voters in Newport Beach showed up at the polls for a state senate race last year.

California is not unique. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, an up-market white-collar city with a major university, less than 14 percent voted in big state and local elections last year. In the United States, democracy is increasingly by the minority.

In some ways, democracy is the most vulnerable ideology. As Alexis de Toqueville warned in the 19th century, it breeds ever-escalating demands for greater equality. It is like an unquenchable thirst.

In that context, democracy has evolved in the second half of the 20th century. It has come to mean not just the rights to speak, worship and vote as you please. It's also come to include the right of economic survival. And poverty is today killing democracy.
The challenge is reflected in a 1996 U.N. report: Despite the most profound political openings in history, 89 countries have been hit by economic decline or stagnation since the 1980s, reducing the incomes of more than a quarter of the world’s population. Some 1.6 billion people are worse off than they were 15 years ago: 43 countries are poorer than they were in the 1970s; and economic disparities have gone from “inequitable” to “inhuman,” the United Nations warns.

Whatever their long-term potential, shock therapies and other reform cure-alls have so far had selective impact. In much of the Southern Hemisphere, for example, macroeconomic stability has failed to better the lives of the majority.

Across the Atlantic, apartheid’s end and new “equity” legislation designed to narrow the gap between blacks and whites in South Africa have also not improved the majority’s plight. On paper, blacks are getting richer — per capita income between 1985 and 1995 among blacks increased by 10 percent.

But only a tiny elite prosper, while ever growing numbers of Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas, Tswanas and other blacks live below the breadline. Up to 40 percent of the black labor force is without formal employment. And prospects for the future are bleak. In 1995, a year of good growth, 100,000 jobs were produced but 400,000 entered the labor market.

In Russia, democracy has given birth to initiative and opportunity, but also to homeless children begging in subways and garbage people who live off dumps of filthy discards and spoiled foods reminiscent of Third World eyesores in Manila, Cairo and Mexico City.

With industrial production plummeting 60 percent and the gross domestic product down 40 percent over the past five years, Russian society as a whole is significantly poorer today under democratic rule than it was under communist rule a decade ago. At least 50 million now live at or below the official poverty line. Even life expectancy is down — for men from the mid-60s to the late 50s.

Worldwide, the gap is best illustrated by the fact that the assets of the world’s top 358 billionaires today exceed the combined annual incomes of countries with almost half the world’s people.

As a result, the U.N. agency challenges conventional wisdom that impoverishment is not dangerous because it is likely to be, in historic terms, temporary and will therefore be absorbed or tolerated. “International policy makers,” it says, “need to question whether that optimism is warranted.”

It instead warns of a new century described by ominous new catchwords such as “ruthless growth,” “voiceless growth” and “futureless growth.” The repercussions for democracy are wide ranging.

The bottom line, to conclude, is that the singular themes of the 20th century — from the essence of its ideological development to the backdrop of its wars — has been promotion of democracy, the empowerment and fulfillment of human rights for every man and women in the earth’s farthest corners. Democracy, as enshrined in the U.N. Charter of Human Rights, will be the foremost legacy of this century.

Yet, at the dawn of a new era, the basic civil and human rights of most of the world’s people are still being violated. So the real point today is that Ralph McGill’s message is as relevant today as it was in the 1950s and 1960s. The only difference is the arena. Back then, it resonated nationally. Today, it challenges us globally. And, more than ever, we as journalists have our work cut out for us.

Thank you.