

The Responsive Community

a new political movement is born

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Even inveterate optimists cannot miss the awful signs of social decline in America...

- Basic institutions like marriage and family are in a state of decay.

- Youngsters graduate from public schools with few basic academic skills and little understanding of the responsibilities of citizenship.

- Federal, state and local governments are responsive to special interest groups but largely ignore issues pertinent to the general welfare of society.

Rights and responsibilities

These disturbing symptoms reflect an unfortunate truth—we Americans have gotten into the habit of fixating on our individual rights and our interests as members of particular groups, while we maintain little or no regard for our roles as members of the broader society.

We know exactly what society owes us. Yet volunteers for community service are harder and harder to find, while the number of cases of tax evasion goes up...and up.

Example: Consider the recent finding that young Americans vigorously uphold their right to be tried before a jury of their peers...but are quick to find excuses not to serve as jurors. That ability to ignore the connection between exercising rights and practicing personal responsibility is one reason our concept of rights has greatly expanded in recent years.

When asked in a 1991 poll whether various things are privileges peo-

ple must earn or rights to which they are entitled, 81% of Americans put health care in the rights column, and 66% put adequate housing there.

Consequences

The respondents were not asked who should pay for these very expensive "rights," but many people apparently share the opinion of the man who exclaimed during a TV talk show on the savings and loan mess, "The taxpayers should not have to pay for this—the government should."

The problem with this epidemic of "Me-ism" is that it destroys the sense of civic obligation and the social cohesiveness that helped propel America to the forefront of geo-economic development in the 19th century while preserving personal freedoms more effectively than other nations at the time.

Communitarianism

The communitarian movement was founded in 1990 by a group of academics who believe that we can achieve better balance.

They argued that a renewed emphasis on responsibility to others is needed to strengthen the moral

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foundations of American society and correct many of the social ills.

The communitarian message drew much attention, coming after the experience of the 1980s, when the negative effects of selfishness and greed had become increasingly apparent to many Americans. In particular, the emphasis on community and individual responsibility was very much in tune with the rhetoric favored by Bill Clinton—both as candidate—and president.

Bill Clinton's campaign proposals echoing communitarian themes included...

- Welfare reform requiring recipients to find work or repay their debt through community service.
- Encouraging groups from diverse backgrounds to work together to further their common interests rather than competing.
- Campaign finance reform to limit contributions from Political Action Committees (PACs) and curb lobbying.
- Community self-policing.

An end to something for nothing

In his inaugural speech, Clinton said, "It is time to break the bad habit of expecting something for nothing, from our government or from each other. Let us all take more responsibility, not only for ourselves and for our families, but for our communities and our country."

These are encouraging words. And indeed, the president deserves high marks for bringing that message...and for appointing communitarian-minded people to high-level administration positions.

A major source of constructive influence in the Clinton White House, for example, is domestic policy adviser William Galston, a University of Maryland professor who was one of the founders of the communitarian movement and an active figure in the Progressive Policy Institute, Clinton's favorite Democratic Party think tank.

Other communitarian figures in Clinton's camp include HUD secretary Henry Cisneros and Joseph

Duffey, director of the United States Information Agency.

The real question remains:

Will this high-powered team of avowed reformists make meaningful progress toward reform? I'm cautiously optimistic.

The first piece of Clinton-inspired legislation passed in Congress this year was the National Service Bill.

Strengthening society's foundations

Communitarians believe that a full year of paid national service following high school is a way to provide youths with the experience of meaningful work that serves the needs of the community as well. They also favor more fundamental ways to produce a nation of individuals committed to each other. But the bill that passed earlier this year only appropriates a small amount of money for stipends aimed at vague social services for youths including college students. This initiative, while a good start, needs added muscle to make a real difference.

Communitarians argue that people are encouraged to act selfishly today by a society that emphasizes individual freedom and personal convenience. If society instead signals that work and marriage, for example, are serious commitments that should not be easily abandoned, it will create new expectations of responsible behavior that people will begin to follow.

Further federal initiatives that should be launched now include...

- Drug tests for locomotive engineers, bus drivers, police officers and others who present danger to others if they do their work while under the influence of drugs.

- Higher taxes on cigarettes. This is a noncoercive way to improve people's health by discouraging them from smoking but allowing them to continue if they really want to. Unlike a ban on cigarette advertising, it does not raise constitutional issues of free speech.

The Clinton team has yet to come

up with substantive solutions to the US political system's allegiance to special interest groups at the expense of the general American "community." It should...

- Go beyond the Brady Bill. Truly tough gun control laws proposed in Congress are routinely blocked or gutted, even though the public strongly favors them.

- Cut tariffs that benefit only special interests. The level of tariffs on textile imports, for example, has little to do with public needs. They are set in response to pressure from the textile industry and unions.

These are just two examples of the modus operandi in American politics that bestows the benefits of democracy on the powerful at the expense of the broad community.

A potential solution would be to simply outlaw PACs. We should instead finance congressional elections with public money.

These biennial elections are estimated to cost a total of \$200 million to \$250 million a year...far less than the cost to the public of just one typical cave-in to special interest like the cotton subsidy, estimated to have run at about \$1.2 billion annually in the late 1980s.

How local government can help

Clearly, the federal government can't affect a sea change in social values and behavior by itself.

State and local governments must play a strong supportive role. They should, for example, be responsible for strengthening commitment to marriage and family by laws that automatically make people behave more responsibly.

Mandatory waiting periods before marriage and divorce would ensure that couples have time for second thoughts before they act.

Going a little further, requiring people contemplating marriage to attend classes in conflict resolution would make it less likely that the inevitable disagreements that arise in every marriage will end in divorce.

Laws directed to this end are no

more coercive than those that are already on the books to ensure that people don't get drivers' licenses without some education regarding the dangers of driving irresponsibly or under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

A healthy society should send a message that marriage and raising a family require just as much responsibility as driving.

The public safety question

Our inability to strike an appropriate balance between rights and responsibilities contributes not only to dysfunctional families but to matters of life and death.

Violent crime and gang warfare in our streets are closely related to a drug abuse problem that we seem powerless to control.

Communitarians believe that there are sensible and moderate approaches we can take to improve the safety of our streets by ending our promotion of individual rights over community needs.

Example: Inkster, Michigan, is a poor suburb of Detroit that had become a vast open-air drug market in the late 1980s.

Residents were afraid to walk the streets...children could not play outside...many people even slept on the floor to avoid stray bullets.

In September 1989, after he was asked by a dealer if he wanted to buy drugs, the town sheriff decided to institute a drug checkpoint on the main street.

Police manning the checkpoint did not search the cars they stopped but only asked drivers to show their licenses, registrations and insurance documents. Within a few days, both dealers and customers had vanished, unwilling to reveal their identities.

The strategy worked until it was challenged in court by a former Inkster mayor who argued that the checkpoint represented an unconstitutional search and seizure that he considered "reminiscent of Nazi Germany."

To a communitarian, locally administered drug checkpoints pro-

vide a useful and responsible approach to solving a very serious problem. They involve stopping cars on public roads but never include warrantless searches. They only require drivers to produce documents they are legally required to carry. The minimal inconvenience to the law-abiding public of having to stop briefly is far less than the benefit gained from eliminating a lethal menace from the community. Other policies communitarians support...

•**Sobriety checkpoints.** Stopping all cars on certain roads at certain times, previously announced, is an effective way of finding drunken drivers. It presents a mild inconvenience to those who have not been drinking. Most of those stopped endorse the policy because it has been shown to have a dramatic effect on reducing alcohol-related driving accidents.

•**Curfews** that keep those under 18 off the street late at night to prevent their involvement in drug running. Parents are informed if their children violate the curfew, and young people with a legitimate reason for being out are exempt.

Needed: A major political movement

In the early 1900s, enough ordinary citizens were aroused about abuses by big business that the Progressive Movement developed. With the support of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the movement inspired antitrust and other laws that made US politics and society more responsive to the public interest.

America today faces a similar situation, with individual and group myopia placing many obstacles in the way of meaningful social change.

In the end, leaders in government, academia, the media and business must take it upon themselves to inform people of the urgent need for drastic action. These leaders must drive the mobilization of political forces to pressure Congress and the White House toward the bold steps needed to reverse the deterioration that threatens our future. ■