

# MR. NIXON'S VOLUNTARISM



*Whatever happened to a campaign idea?*

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Reluctantly, liberal Democrat that I am, I must admit that the Nixon Administration has come up with a rather good idea. It is a not completely original and rather tricky conception and has not yet been advanced very far. But it surely points in the right direction. I refer to Nixon's plan to activate a large variety of private citizens, groups, and institutions to launch and fuel overdue domestic reforms.

In a major campaign address, Nixon spoke about "the voluntary way," reminded us that there are more than one million voluntary associations in America and quoted a Gallup Poll which estimated that 6 million adult Americans would be willing to contribute 245 million man-hours a week to voluntary activities. A Gallup Poll of students only, released on June 20, 1968, states: "The traditional goals of college students of making money and 'getting ahead in the world' appear to have lost some of their charm. No less than two college students in every three said they would have an interest in working either in VISTA or the Peace Corps." The "two out of every three" refers to a population of five million.

President Nixon struck the keynote in his inaugural address. "We are approaching the limits of what government alone can do. Our greatest need now is to reach beyond government, to enlist the legions of the concerned and the committed." *The Washington Post* added [Jan. 26] that "some presidential aides say this program of government-encouraged 'voluntary action' will be 'a central theme' of the new Administration."

The plans call, according to White House sources, for corporations, trade associations, labor unions, churches, foundations, universities, PTAs, and others to help solve social problems by volunteering time, skills and money. Executives are to show Negroes how to run businesses; housewives are to teach disadvantaged women to shop and help elderly people to cook; college students are to provide free tutoring; etc.

This is in line with the Nixonian concept, to return to his take-off address: "to match the magnitude of our tasks, we need the energies of our people—enlisted not only in grand enterprises, but more importantly in those small, splendid efforts that make headlines in the neighborhood newspaper instead of the national journal." Nixon is to promote voluntary efforts in TV appearances

the way "FDR did for the March of Dimes," a White House aide told Alan L. Otten, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter.

Plans were floated to set up a White House office to steer the volunteer drives and to coordinate them, especially by collecting and sharing information on the various projects to be undertaken. A special award was considered for the most active volunteers; they would receive insignia they could pin on their lapels.

If the citizens are to participate more actively, they must be kept informed and with as much candor as possible. On February 10th Nixon instructed the Federal departments and agencies "to get statistics to the public faster and on a fixed schedule." The directive, issued via the Bureau of the Budget, ordered that "no more than two days should elapse between the time figures are ready and their release to the public." And, the President stated, "a particular statistical series must be released on the same day each week, month or quarter." Under LBJ, release dates were re-scheduled not infrequently to suit political needs.

Attorney General John N. Mitchell picked up the theme in a speech he delivered at a conference sponsored by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. He startled his audience and the press when he proposed that a National United Anti-Crime Fund be established to finance and coordinate citizens' crime control efforts on local as well as national levels. Mitchell pointed out that \$699 millions were raised in 1968 by United Fund campaigns. If only 10 percent of this were allotted to anti-crime measures, Mitchell said, this sum would exceed Federal contributions to local law enforcement and criminal justice efforts!

Other cabinet members are even more on the voluntary beam than the President. Even before Nixon turned it on, Robert Finch projected it as a key element in his 1966 campaign in California, and George Romney applied it when he was Governor of Michigan. Recently, he was appointed to head the subcommittee on voluntary action of the new Urban Affairs Council.

At Washington cocktail parties, the book most often quoted is no longer Pat Moynihan's attack on social scientists and LBJ's war-on-poverty but Peter Drucker's *The Age of Discontinuity*. "Reprivatization" is the new catch phrase, meaning returning to the private sector missions now in Federal hands, with the Federal govern-

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ment conducting the orchestra rather than playing all the instruments. One columnist called for the appointment of Drucker as Special Aide to the President, as a person closer in spirit to the new Administration than Harry Kissinger, not to mention Daniel P. Moynihan.

Even before Nixon was settled in the White House, he assigned one task-force, headed by Richard Cornuelle, to study the "voluntary" way and launched two "participatory" programs. In one, citizens' views were recorded on government tape recorders (beginning in Birmingham, Alabama, and Westchester County, New York), to be brought—well, some of them—to the President's ear. In the other, 80,000 citizens listed in *Who's Who* were invited to recommend people for top administrative posts.

The least reported idea may well be the best one. One of the groups most prone to take to the streets, one with no legitimate political outlet, is that aged 18 to 21. Nixon promised during the campaign to work for a lower limit on the voting age and on Feb. 10, he directed his Attorney General to "study the possibilities." If achieved, this would not only give the youth a vote but would make politicians more attentive to their needs and views.

### *Difficulties*

The conception behind the voluntary way and citizen participation is quite clear. Our problems are enormous; while the society is affluent, the government is poor. Mobilizing the energies of the private sector would yield more than money—it would bring in free manpower skills. And, in return, the drive would give the youth and many solid citizens what they are lacking—a sense of meaning, of sharing in a worthy project, and of belonging. Participating in these drives would build up citizens' commitments not only to the specific programs but also to the American way of life. More politically, if some of these programs fail, the Administration would not be the target of criticism. If they succeed, it still could reap much of the credit for having initiated the voluntary wave.

Thus, in theory, Nixon has brought up a valid, even an exciting conception. There are, though, several "catches," some of which are already slowing down the drive. One is the problem of "follow-through" which plagues Federal programs. It is one thing to task-force a program and "talk it up," quite another to de-bug, launch, sustain and carry it through. If the government is to launch a whole flotilla of voluntary drives, it will require much more of a push than Nixon and his Cabinet have given it so far. Thus, rather typically, as these lines are being written, little more has been heard from Mitchell about the Anti-Crime Fund or lowering the voting age. The White House Office for Volunteer Services remains, as far as I can ascertain, an aide's wishful thinking. No more citizen-taping or mailing to *Who's Who* has been reported.

And, relying on volunteer staffs to carry out any projects is a hazardous business. Volunteers' enthusiasm can

be rapidly aroused at the start, but wanes with equal rapidity. Volunteers are notoriously unreliable—and cannot be fired or otherwise penalized when they don't show up, neglect their assignments, etc. Actually, it is quite accurate to state that the voluntary way is often the most expensive way to get a thing done. Some foundations have used as much as half of the money they raise on administration and public relations.

Voluntarism is hardly a new idea; hence, there is a large body of experience upon which to draw. Aside from the Peace Corps and VISTA, there are thousands of students who regularly tutor slum children free-of-charge under a project coordinated by the National Student Association and whose administration is financed by OEO. Volunteers work for the Red Cross and in many hospitals. 83,000 volunteers are reported participating on 150 community-action governing boards, etc. The full list is so long that quite a few volunteers could occupy themselves by completing and updating it.

The experience of these voluntarily-fueled drives indicates that their success required considerable "programming" and training. A former key staff member of the Peace Corps explained: "For ten percent [of the volunteers] all we would have to do is pay their fares. They are imaginative, energetic, and versatile enough to find their own assignments, and carry them out drawing on whatever skills they have. But for most volunteers a *role* must be first thought-out, specified, and then—the volunteers prepared for it. It is easiest for teaching, because there is a relatively clear task and one for which a volunteer can be relatively easily coached. But most other assignments, for instance, those involved in community-action, are not at all clear. And, without considerable executive input, even supervision, little if nothing will be done, resulting in loss of momentum, a morale crisis, and rejection of the volunteers by the community and voluntarism by the volunteers."

During the 1967 six-day war in the Middle East, hundreds of young Jews jumped on airplanes and flew to Israel to help. Fight they could not (they were not trained and could lose their American citizenship), and the Israelis had little time or mind to screen, assign, and train them for other pursuits. Quite a few ended up working the kitchens of *Kibbutzim* or marking time on the farms.

The list of tasks volunteers may be prepared to do in this country may at first seem as long as the list of American social problems. But again experience speaks louder. My Peace Corps informant grew increasingly depressed, as he recalled the prolonged negotiations and complicated maneuvers the Peace Corps had to go through to get teachers' associations to permit Peace Corps trainees to practice-teach, without their having had the prescribed teachers' training courses. The associations saw such Peace Corps activity as threatening professional standards—and the employment opportunities for qualified

teachers if the Corpsmen were to continue to teach upon their return home. One major reason that the Teacher Corps, a Johnson program, never took-off is the strenuous opposition of the organized teachers and the labor movement.

The fear of generating cheap labor which would result in the unemployment of "legitimate" workers is considerable, especially when reference is made to millions of volunteers, as do Nixon *et al.* One of the best thought-out voluntary programs is that of a year or two of National Service for all Americans who reach high-school graduation age. The AFL-CIO Executive Council, in a meeting held Feb. 27, 1967, responded to this idea, but addressed itself in effect to all voluntary work: "The National Service concept raises serious problems. . . . An artificially low pay rate will result in the emergence of a large manpower pool unfairly competing with the remainder of the labor force."

In a conference dedicated to the National Service idea, Jacob Clayman, the Administrative Director of the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO, put the point like this: ". . . If such unfair competition were indeed the result of a National Service, its entire worth would be vitiated. If, in the process of providing socially valuable goods and services as well as wholesome training for youths, we destroy the economic standards of their elders, we indeed would be jumping from the frying pan into the fire."

Teachers, nurses, social workers, construction workers, and businessmen (once new, non-white businesses get preferential treatment) are not about to dance in the streets for the voluntary way. Once the features of Nixon's "active society" become more evident, and if it is not carefully designed so that existing labor and business are fully protected, these groups are more likely to treat the program like football players—that is, the way they "welcome" the other team.

### *Spirit of the Times*

Second, voluntarism does not thrive in a vacuum. The Peace Corps flourished in the Kennedy period, but its appeal has declined both as it aged and as large segments of the American youth grew alienated from their government, even their country, following the continued escalation of the war in Vietnam and riots in the cities.

Nixon, who has overcome more than one handicap which seemed unbeatable, may yet become an inspiring figure to American youth, academia, and the educated middle class—the mainstays of voluntary action. But before this can happen, he must get the country out of the Vietnamese war without getting it into another and become a recognized friend of the minorities and a true champion of domestic reforms. Only then will he be able to generate the kind of commitment a broad-based volunteer drive would require.

The "cool," professional, business-like atmosphere Nixon has deliberately evoked so far has served to soothe the country's nerves, and has built up confidence in his Administration without generating undue expectations, both welcome achievements. But it does not generate the sense of mission, of desire to help "get the country moving again," which the early Kennedy days elicited. At that point, it seems to me, the readiness to volunteer peaked. There is as yet no King who will do for the Nixon volunteers, even the businessmen, what Martin Luther did for the civil rights movement; not even what FDR did for the March of Dimes.

Should the voluntary drive take off, a whole set of secondary problems would loom up that are barely visible now. Implicit in the call—"let us all get out there and lend a helping hand"—is the notion that we are all fellow-citizens who share the same basic views of what needs to be done and how best to do it. Actually, the main source of volunteers—the local establishments (corporations, Chambers of Commerce, labor unions, PTAs) and the anti-establishment groups (students, active Negroes, Democrats and some left-of-liberal housewives)—have rather opposing views of America and the ways it may be transformed.

If the voluntary wave is to be channeled mainly through the local establishments, it will inevitably be colored by their interests and prejudices. Over recent years, Federal government has become a persistent force, however weak, in enforcing some desegregation and a measure of reallocation of wealth in favor of the poor. If the main force for domestic programs is not to be transferred to local elites, voluntary help for the needy in the South is sure to be segregated as well as "token" in scope. Sharecroppers in Florida can expect about the same help from local businessmen as the grape-pickers in California. There may be a local drive against crime in Wilmington, Delaware, or Cicero, Illinois, but it will not be much more observant of civil rights than the Ku Klux Klan. The danger of the local anti-crime activists turning from fund-raisers into vigilantes cannot be ignored. More donations to hospitals? This sounds just fine, but they will certainly be directed to non-government hospitals—i.e., mainly to institutions segregated by race and class.

One of the major advances of recent years has been growing recognition that paternalism will not do. Both to overcome their psychic hang-ups, resulting from a long-held sense of inferiority, and to secure their continued support for projects after they are launched, participation of the disadvantaged is essential. But most of the programs cited by Nixon's aides seem quite reminiscent of the old let-me-show-you-how-to-do-it variety (rather than let-me-give-you-a-chance-to-learn-from-your-own-mistakes), and evoke scenes of small handouts and hand-me-downs from corporations, "paternal" groups, and PTAs. I can just see the local Elks in Columbus, Ohio, or Palo Alto, California driving up to the nearest slums in their new Buicks to de-

liver a check for the construction of a community see-saw.

Several of the suburban matrons who donned their aprons and came—mop-in-hand—to the “inner city” for one day, to swab the streets and paint the houses of Harlem (a few blocks, that is), complained that they were not well-received. More prolonged contact of middle-class volunteers with the ghetto will require at least considerable preparation in the difficult art of “cross-cultural” communication.

Even with such preparation, there is only a rather limited set of tasks which middle-class white people could hope to accomplish in most contemporary black neighborhoods. They could merely deposit checks and run, but even this—the lessons of foreign aid suggest—may not be appreciated. Black community leaders feel that the United States owes them, as one of them put it, about \$400 billion in back pay. They are unlikely to thank politely the March of Dimes, even if its baskets were emptied at their doorsteps. Voluntarism, though, thrives on recognition



of the effort *and* the intent. Without continued psychic rewarding (which absorbs much of the time spent in fundraising by organizations such as the United Jewish Appeal or Community Chest), the guilt which motivates the donation is quickly quenched and the stream dries up.

This is not to suggest that much could not be achieved by mobilizing the private community. But more government money, and guidance as well as monitoring will be required if massive drives, once launched, are not to be deflected, to become anti-Black, paternalistic, and ignorant of the needs of youth.

If anti-establishment groups were to gain an upper hand at the helm of volunteer campaigns, as they have of the one to organize welfare clients to demand the full benefits they are entitled to, the clashes with local elites—and the Nixon Administration—would be even more resounding than those encountered by community-action cadres during the Johnson period. Anti-establishmentarians are already forcing the “clarification” of a key feature of Nixonian voluntarism, one which the astute President may well prefer to leave befuddled. Conservative groups hope that voluntarism will *replace* government efforts in behalf of the needy, not only future programs but also existing ones. Liberal groups hope that Nixon’s voluntarism will *add to* but not deflect attention from additional “ur-

gently needed,” to use the argot, “government initiatives.”

Thus, Richard C. Cornuelle, a former official of the National Association of Manufacturers, and his co-NAMer, A. Wright Elliott, speak for those who wish “individualism” to replace federal welfarism, “maybe within a decade.” At the same time, Roy Wilkins, for NAACP, is quoted as saying, “tax incentives and tax credits or government subsidies of private enterprise [by the way, hardly pure voluntarism] must not become substitutes for sound, publicly financial programs in employment, housing and community facilities.”

Could the Nixon Administration “bring us together,” help initiate local voluntary projects in which a broad spectrum of the local communities would participate, argue out their differences, learn from each other, and come to share in these endeavors, we would surely be ahead. One skeptically hopeful person, trying hard to stay open-minded about the new Administration and especially about the New Nixon, stated:

“If he would come through on this one, if he would inspire the youth, the intellectuals, and fire up the social conscience of the business community. . . . If he could give the nation a sense of mission, meaning, accomplishment on the domestic front, the kind of excitement nations usually generate in war—why he would make a *great* President!”

But there is no sign that efforts to involve a broad coalition of groups are being undertaken, indeed even that the difficult problems of community-wide non-paternalistic voluntarism are understood.

Anyhow, at present it seems rather far-fetched to worry about who the volunteers will be and how they will relate to each other and to the needs of their communities. As the burdens of foreign policy, traditionally Nixon’s major preoccupation, and those of domestic Federal reorganization and management become very real, Nixon seems to pay less and less attention to promoting his “central theme”—the voluntary way. There are increasing signs that the “voluntary way” is favored more by two Nixon speech-writers and some members of his now defunct task force on voluntarism, e.g., Richard Goodwin, than by the President himself. There is a nagging sense that maybe Nixon did not really “mean it,” despite the somewhat measured enthusiasm he put forth, and that maybe we are into a new crisis of credibility. Two people who to’d me rather proudly that they had been invited to write recommendation letters to Nixon are now rather disillusioned; nobody they carefully recommended was appointed, and they never heard why their favorites were disregarded. The other 50,000-odd citizens who wrote, and those who felt relieved taking their grievances to the President himself, via tapes, are now feeling increasingly uneasy; “they have not heard from him” (not even a brief acknowledgment note of the kind ground out by the machines). Nor have they seen that their anguished expressions had any effect. Aroused citizens who pulled out

their checkbooks and pens following Mitchell's appeal have yet to be told where to mail their anti-crime contributions. And suburban housewives all steamed up, have now returned to the routine of their local charities.

Students of management, aspiring new executives, are taught a subject entitled "Human Relations." They are told to be sensitive to others, to learn to listen, to give others a sense of participation and importance. There are, though, basically two ways to proceed in improving human relations. One is really to open up, to share information and decisions and involve subordinates in the enterprise. The other is to pretend to do all these things, to make all the right "noises" and gestures and talk about sharing without really opening up at all. For a while, the gestures work almost as well as the real thing; people are taken in, are excited by the newly "sensitive" management. They believe in it. But, slowly, the inauthenticity of the gestures is revealed. Then, the early confidence is replaced by a double sense of frustration—one over the issues which are not being faced and, two, over the fact that people have been taken for a ride, turned into suckers.

It is much too early to tell what the Nixon voluntary way will amount to. But, increasingly, it all seems like Vicki Cole's trip to Washington, D.C. Vicki carried the placard with the slogan, "Bring us together again." On Nixon's order, she was flown to Washington for the inauguration, put on the prow of a leading float, escorted to the grand balls. Nobody seemed to mind that Vicki never wrote the placard she held up; she picked it up at random after she lost her own. No recognition was extended to whoever it was who did come up with the useful slogan. Nor was there any sense of proportion to the rewarding of Vicki's brief and not too arduous enterprise. It was a "P.R." gesture—very glossy and quite inauthentic. Maybe an augury of things to come?

