

VOLUNTEERISM

America's Best Hope for the Future

By George Gallup Jr.

George Gallup Jr., president of The Gallup Poll, gave the following speech at VOLUNTEER's National Conference on Citizen Involvement (Frontiers 1980) in Estes Park, Colorado, on May 19, 1980.

NO ONE HERE NEED BE reminded of the importance of volunteerism in our society. As you well know, the voluntary efforts of an estimated 60 million volunteers and of voluntary organizations are what keep democracies going, by doing much of what the government would otherwise have to do.

In 1830 Alexis deTocqueville characterized Americans as people who form committees to solve community problems. More recently Waldemar Nielson, the head of a philanthropic consulting firm, speculated that this kind of voluntary activity has been instrumental of the most basic social change and reform in America—from the abolition of slavery and child labor to the vote for women.

Certainly among the more dramatic examples of volunteer power in recent months has been the public reaction to California's Proposition 13. When this law ate into needed tax revenues, volunteers moved right in to help libraries, hospitals, schools and other institutions keep up services that otherwise could not have been offered.

Some observers believe that volunteerism is the glue that holds democracy together. An article in a recent issue of the *Christian Science Monitor* forcefully reminds us of the importance of volunteerism in society: "Just imagine the results of a work stoppage by all of America's volunteers at home and around the world."

Let's look at one key dimension of the total volunteer picture today: How many Americans have engaged in such activities as helping the poor, sick or elderly?

A remarkable 27 percent of Americans—or more than 40 million Americans—say they have engaged in activities of this sort.

Young people—that is, those 18 to 29 years old—are less likely to be involved in this kind of work than their elders. One possible reason for this difference is the fact that many young people are in the process of trying to establish themselves in life and have not had time to put down roots in their communities.

Educational background is also a key indicator of volunteerism. Nearly four in 10 persons with a college background report they are involved in some form of volunteer work with the poor, the sick or the elderly.

Although the figures are reassuring, one also would have to grant that society has failed to make effective use of the talents of the great mass of people. Now that people are free to a great extent from almost complete absorption with physical needs, they can now turn their minds to other needs and solutions of problems created by modern civilization.

No one here will argue that the talents of ordinary citizens can be, and should be, utilized to a much greater extent than they are at present.

A new type of collective action is required to move society forward on many fronts. And one must never forget the importance of volunteerism to the *individual*, who sometimes discouraged about life or disappointed in his/her job, finds renewed meaning in life when s/he is involved in active service on behalf of others.

The Role of Religion

The future pattern of volunteerism will be linked closely to patterns in the religious lives of Americans, because traditionally the church has been near the center of much of the charitable activities and volunteerism of Americans. Not surprisingly, much of today's spirit of helping is religiously motivated.

Church members, for example, are far more likely to say they are involved in some sort of charity or social service work (30 percent so claim) than are nonchurch members, among whom 19 percent say they are engaged in this kind of work.

Furthermore, among those who consider themselves evangelicals, 42 percent say they are involved in such activities, a finding that seems to contradict one of the major criticisms of evangelicals—that they are socially apathetic and concerned only with the winning of souls.

Although far fewer young people in our society go to church than do their elders, they are surprisingly religious in terms of their belief levels and show a great interest in spiritual matters.

In addition, they have a strong desire to serve society. There is another side to the "me generation" among young people. Many, for example, are interested in going into the "helping professions"—medicine, teaching and so on.

One of the challenges for churches and other organizations, therefore, would appear to be to join the will to believe among young with their desire to serve others.

Churches have a great opportunity to enlist young people—and older people as well—in a whole new range of ministries or para-clerical jobs.

Where is religion headed in the 1980s? This is certainly a vital question to be asked by everyone concerned about the future of volunteerism in America.

In a book recently published by Abingdon Press, called *Search for Faith in America*, David Poling and I write:

The church of the Eighties will be more conservative in its theology and ethics. The evangelical tide is rising. A conservative young clergy has arrived, but so has a most powerful sentiment for inter-church, inter-faith relations. Christians like each other and express positive feelings across denominational lines. Will the vitality of the

Christian churches be the surprise of the '80s, affecting deeply and positively the wobbling institutions of America?

It is my belief that evangelicals will have much to do with how religion shapes up in the United States during the 1980s, given the fact that evangelicals already comprise one-fifth of the population, contribute much more generously to the church than non-evangelicals, understand their own faith better, are far more ready to speak out to others about their faith and place high priority on winning others to their evangelical faith.

High Marks for Giving

Americans are not only impressive in their volunteerism, but in their charitable giving.

Two of every three American families and single adults (69 percent) contributed to religious organizations in 1978. On the average, Americans gave \$239 to religious organizations out of a total average donation of \$358 to all charitable organizations. These results are based on a recent survey conducted by CONVO (Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations).

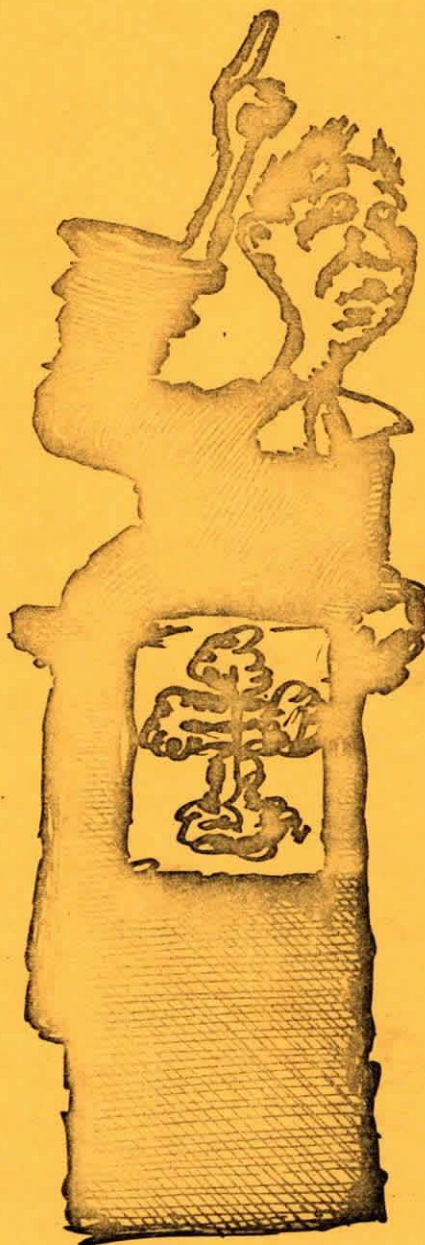
The largest number of families made donations to religious organizations (69 percent) and to health organizations other than hospitals and medical centers (66 percent). However, the average donation made to religious organizations is considerably larger than the average donation made to health organizations: \$239 vs. \$38.

Roughly equal proportions made a donation to an educational group (27 percent) or a hospital (23 percent) in 1978, while 49 percent report having given to other charities not specified in the study. The average donations given were \$16 (to hospitals), \$35 (to educational groups) and \$25 (to all other charities).

Sixteen percent report that they made no charitable donations in calendar year 1978. About one-third (34 percent) of those sampled report that they gave between \$1 and \$100; 14 percent made donations of \$101-\$200; 17 percent gave \$201-\$500; and 19 percent donated more than \$500.

While these figures on charitable giving may be impressive, some have expressed concern that changing tax laws might result in a dramatic decline in charitable donations.

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Since the 1940s when the standard tax deduction was introduced, there has been a steady decline in the proportion who itemize their tax return. The Gallup survey documented that at every income level, those who itemize their tax return give considerably more in charitable donations than those who do not itemize. For example, among those earning \$15,000-\$20,000, the average donation of itemizers was \$652, compared with an average of \$222 among the non-itemizers.

Growing Parent Involvement in the Schools

We are all tremendously concerned about the decline in the quality of public education in recent years, as indicated by test scores. In addition, the ratings the public gives its public schools have declined sharply since 1974 when the first survey was conducted on this issue.

Every year for the last 11 years the Gallup Organization has conducted a survey of the attitudes of the American people toward their public schools. Funding for the latest survey was provided by the Institute for Development of Educational Activities, Inc., an affiliation of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation.

The percentage of the public giving their public schools a rating of A or B has been straight down since 1974 when this measurement was first introduced in these annual studies. In 1974 a total of 48 percent gave their public schools an A or B rating; today far fewer—34 percent—do so.

My father, Dr. George Gallup, in a speech in Houston at the convention of the National School Volunteer Program, said that volunteer programs can be the most valuable tool Americans have to halt the decline in the quality of public education.

Volunteer programs, he said, are one of the best methods to deal with education costs that have doubled each decade in the last 100 years and that parent involvement in a child's studies is a prerequisite to elevating education back to the level that Americans expect.

It will cost public schools this year about \$2,000 to teach each child, and projections are that it will double by 1980 and double again by the year 2000.

Our surveys indicate that the

majority of parents want to help their child in school. Indeed, one of the more dramatic developments in education in recent years is the growing team effort between parents and teachers. Traditionally many parents have been content just to dump the problems of raising children at the door of the school, but now they appear ready and willing to work very closely with teachers. It took very serious problems, such as discipline and the abuse of drugs and alcohol, to bring them together, and in that sense it's a good thing.

This is definitely an encouraging trend because parents have to be brought into the picture. They must help teachers work on these problems.

Preference for Nonmilitary Service

An estimated four million young adults appear ready and willing to volunteer for a proposed voluntary national service program in which young people of both sexes would serve for one year either in the military forces or in nonmilitary work after completion of high school or college.

In addition, an estimated six million young persons (18-24) indicated at least some interest in signing up for such a program.

Whether or not young people have an active interest in themselves volunteering for national service at this time, an overwhelming majority (77 percent) of persons in this age group feel that young people should be given an opportunity to become involved in such a program.

Those in the survey who expressed interest in volunteering (that is, said they "definitely" or "might" be interested) were asked whether they would prefer military or nonmilitary service.

Those choosing nonmilitary service outnumbered those picking military service by the ratio of 2-to-1.

While nonmilitary service is preferred, it is apparent that such a program would also go a long way toward meeting the military needs of the nation.

The group in the survey expressing a preference for nonmilitary service was then asked where it would most like to serve and what types of work would interest it most.

Most members would want to work

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Thomas Jefferson



in the U.S., with opinion equally divided between their own communities (eight percent) or some other part of the U.S. (eight percent). Another five percent said "overseas."

The most popular jobs (from a list of seven) are "conservation work in national forests and parks" and "the tutoring of low-achieving students in school."

As you are well aware, the area of tutoring children to read is a tremendous need in our society. About 20 percent of our populace is either illiterate or functionally illiterate. Thomas Jefferson once said that a society cannot be both ignorant and free, and here you have a lot of young people who would be interested in helping younger people to read.

A Willingness to Serve in the Cities

A Gallup study we conducted for the National League of Cities reveals the existence of a vast resource of volunteer citizen energy that could be used in practical ways to alleviate urban problems.

The value of such voluntary efforts on the part of the nation's urban residents would be (1) as a low cost option for providing some urban services, and (2) as an effective way to improve the social fabric of America's cities, as evidence to city government and the business community that residents believe their city has a future, and is therefore worth investing in.

Here are the key survey findings:

- America's urban residents state that they would be willing to donate an average of nine hours per month to their city and their neighborhoods. Projected to the total population of the 125 million adults residing in nonrural areas, the hours available per month come to the staggering total of approximately one billion.
- About one-half (52 percent) of America's urban residents say they would be willing to serve without pay on city advisory committees to study problems facing their cities and to make recommendations.

Committees in which urban residents express interest include those that would deal with schools and education, senior citizen problems, activities for youth, problems of the handicapped, hospitals and health care, air, water and noise pollution, city

beautification, attracting new business/industry, and preservation of historic places and landmarks.

● About two in three (64 percent) express a willingness to serve on committees devoted to the specific problems facing their own neighborhoods. Most frequently mentioned are committees devoted to the following neighborhood problems: crime and vandalism, clean-up and beautification, schools, establishment of co-operatives, such as food and general merchandise stores, and the problems of retail business, shops and stores.

● A still larger majority, seven in 10 (69 percent), state they would be willing to engage in specific neighborhood activities, including assisting in the performance of some neighborhood social services.

Activities cited most often include serving on crime watch, working in child care centers, helping in employment organizations, matching jobs/part-time work with prospects, assisting in pick-up of trash and litter on streets and sidewalks, helping to fix up abandoned buildings in the neighborhood, helping to organize festivals and block parties, assisting in monitoring or checking store prices and customer policies, and working in co-operatives, such as food stores.

Dramatic Action Needed

While volunteerism is still very much alive in America, there are some dark clouds on the horizon:

First, what will be the overall impact on volunteerism of the growing number of women who work outside the home? Forty-four out of every 100 women over 18 currently do so.

Second, if indeed there is a decline in the work ethic, will this have an impact on interest in volunteerism?

Third, if we have increased leisure time in the future, how will we handle this leisure in terms of volunteer activity?

Fourth, if there is a rise in the "me ethic" and alienation of one from another, what will this do to the quality of citizen involvement?

Fifth, if there is a growing inclination to look down on jobs that are unpaid rather than paid, will this work toward undermining volunteerism in the U.S.?

Sixth, with much of the volunteerism religiously motivated, will a decline in religious interest and involvement sig-



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Edmund Burke



nal a decline in volunteerism—and to what extent?

And finally, if there is a growing mood of cynicism in the nation—a "what's the use" attitude—to what degree will this thwart efforts to enlist citizens in volunteer action?

Volunteerism is clearly threatened by forces on all sides and we shall have to take dramatic and creative action to keep the spirit of volunteerism alive in our country.

In this respect, it is important to give careful attention to the way we approach potential volunteers. While our surveys indicate a vast amount of womanpower and manpower, it is not always easy to take advantage of this talent.

A volunteer program must use personal contact to recruit people, must deal with problems the volunteers consider important, must provide careful consideration of the ideas of volunteers and must recognize and reward them for their work.

Possibly the trend that would be most destructive to the spirit of volunteerism in America would be a trend toward cynicism among the American people.

There is no question that the public is discouraged over the nation's seeming inability to stem inflation, to reduce the crime rate, to make greater headway on the energy front, and to deal with a host of other problems.

Yet confidence in the future remains high and it does so for these three reasons:

First, our country has survived difficult periods in the past.

Second, Americans have shown that they have the capacity to change.

Third, we know that there is much that each one of us as an individual can do to bring about change in our communities and to better society as a whole. Such an opportunity is denied no one.

Volunteerism is not only beneficial to society, it is absolutely essential—in fact, it is our best hope for the future.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, the educator, once said, "The death of a democracy is not likely to be an assassination by ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment."

Edmund Burke once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."