

The Volunteer Spirit

As we share gifts and celebrate our blessings this holiday season, it's encouraging to see signs of a resurgence in this country of the old-fashioned spirit of voluntarism.

America has a long tradition of private philanthropy, probably unrivaled in world history. From coast to coast, in almost every metropolis in the land, private gifts—of time and energy as well as funds—sustain nonprofit hospitals, universities, museums and other institutions. Almost every community and religious group has its charity drives. And throughout our history, from the tenements of the Lower East Side of New York to the barrios of Los Angeles, millions of Americans have volunteered their services to those less fortunate—as nurses, as Boys' Club counselors, as Sunday school teachers, in countless other ways. The spirit of voluntary giving is as much a part of our culture as the spirit of private enterprise and the spirit of local self-rule.

In recent years, of course, there have been fears that the voluntary tradition was dying in the U.S. Government, and particularly the federal government, has taken over an increasing share of social responsibilities, providing a broader and more systematic distribution of social services. It is argued that individuals, heavily taxed and increasingly cynical about the waste and inefficiency of the system, have become less interested in the problems of the weak and unfortunate.

It is a plausible argument, but misses a larger point. First of all, it should be remembered that, for all its flaws, the social welfare system of the U.S. was itself a voluntary expression of a generous people, carried out through the mechanisms of a political democracy. Indeed, one reason for the difficulties of bringing order to this chaotic system is that the social welfare principle itself has strong support and there is always suspicion that any attack on the system represents an attack on the principle.

But even aside from that, it appears that private, individual voluntarism is alive and healthy as well.

The American response to the world refugee problem affirms that truth. The problem itself defies imagination, perhaps 16 million displaced persons around the world and the number growing, by UN estimates, at something like 2,000 a day. All of the world's relief institutions are heavily burdened. Yet things would be much worse were it not for volunteers.

Thousands of doctors and nurses from all over the U.S. have volunteered to spend at least three months in Cambodian refugee camps. Nineteen relief organizations, many with only a handful of paid staff, have delivered some \$75 million in private contributions to the Cambodian relief effort.

Community organizations across the land have tried to make life easier for the 200,000 refugees who have settled here this year, as well as the more than 135,000 Cubans and Haitians who aren't officially classified as refugees. At the International Center in New York, 800 volunteer tutors come in every week to help Indo-Chinese and Eastern European refugees learn English. In Minneapolis-St. Paul, church groups, community associations and the privately funded American Refugee Committee have taken the lead in resettling and finding work for some 9,000 Laotian refugees.

This generous spirit has at times been sorely tried. Fidel Castro did his share by emptying his prisons to send felons to the U.S. along with upright citizens, thus creating tensions in and around settlement camps in the U.S. The burden of the sudden influx of refugees on social services and the job market in places like Miami has generated other conflicts. And of course, every society has its share of moral jackals who prey on the weak and helpless.

But at holiday time, it is useful to forget the world's darker side and think for a time about all those people who are big enough and strong enough to offer help to the less fortunate. When they still can be found on every hand we can be sure that there is much that still is right with the world.