

A Civic Reef

Sketching An American Middle



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It is proper to demand more of the man with exceptional advantages than of the one without them.

Theodore Roosevelt

In democratic societies, each citizen is habitually busy with the contemplation of a very petty object, which is himself.

Alexis de Tocqueville



A Classics Lesson

During the 1970's, American college kids were avid readers of a publication called The National Lampoon. This irreverent monthly was campus humor (loosely based on the Harvard Lampoon) that had found a national audience. It was so popular that it spawned a weekly radio broadcast known as the National Lampoon Radio Hour. Several of the principals of this endeavor were instrumental in the creation of now classic movies (Animal House) as well as Saturday Night Live, the weekly television institution that continues to this day. The National Lampoon was so successful that it became a publicly traded company.

The National Lampoon was raw. It pushed the envelope. It was audacious. It pushed social buttons. It was vicious at times. Yet it was new. It was creative, and it may have caused the "post-hippies" of the 1970's to think in a broader context. Many of us will never forget its High School Yearbook issue, which deftly mimicked the format of a typical high school yearbook to pierce the stereotypes of what was, and continues to be, a uniquely American experience.

Later The National Lampoon published its infamous "Minorities" issue, which unscrupulously and hilariously catalogued many of our racial and cultural prejudices. The Irish "would sell their children for whiskey". Poles had "bred with warthogs". Little was known about Canadians because "Canada was rarely visited by anyone other than illiterate sports fisherman". The humor was biting, yet it was egalitarian. Few ethnic or cultural groups were spared, and by doing so, The Lampoon succeeded in illuminating the universal absurdity of racial hatred and stereotyping.

Thus when describing the Greeks, the National Lampoon made a prescient (if unintended) observation. In addition to "having a cute alphabet," the comedy writers at the Lampoon, intending to be simply sardonic, noted that, "**The Greeks invented democracy, but they forgot how to use it**".

Could not the same thing be said about America in the 21st Century?

The National Lampoon had, by the 1980s and 1990s, faded into oblivion, a victim of its own success, for American popular culture had moved on to scale far greater heights of audacity and bad taste.



Rare Forms

We left Chicago's Lincoln Park in September 1986, and moved to a small old house at 10 North Avenue, near the center of the Village of Lake Bluff, IL. I was working nearby and Lisa had agreed to a suburban move on the condition that we could find a cute house, in a cute town, where we could walk to absolutely everything, including a train station that would, we thought, regularly return us to the excitement of the city. The movers had already departed and we were making the final runs between our yuppie apartment and our new home, ferrying valuables and a few final items not entrusted to the movers.

It was a Monday morning and Lisa and I had developed a system whereby she would remove items from the car and place them onto the front porch. I would then carry them to the bedrooms on the second floor. After about five minutes into this, our final run, I had just plopped down a heavy box

in the middle of the master bedroom. Suddenly I sensed the presence of another person. I did a quick about face expecting to see my wife. Instead of Lisa, I stood face to face with.....Ed Muto. He was holding a very large box. "Where do you want this?" he said.

Ed Muto was Lake Bluff's local mailman. He had been passing by, and insisted that Lisa not carry heavy packages. We obviously were not the first or the last recipients of Ed's thoughtfulness, for we would later learn that he was, and is a prominent fixture in the Village. Upon his retirement a few years ago, Ed Muto served as the Grand Marshall of the infamous Lake Bluff, 4th of July parade, but I doubt that he was seeking any special recognition the day he voluntarily lugged our heavy boxes up the stairs at 10 North Avenue.

Ed Muto was fulfilling a role that transcended his civil servant's job description. Why had he momentarily forgone his appointed rounds to help us? Would he be paid for this? Did he have a community service clause in his Postal Worker contract? Did he expect to be profiled in Town & Country? Was he simply being a good Christian, or a good Jew, or a good whatever? Ed Muto and people of his ilk were conditioned to behave in a certain long forgotten way, to fulfill a certain public duty.



An Ordinary Circumstance

My father used to say that if you wanted to trace our genealogy you could study it at any jail in the State of Ohio. He was kidding.

We actually don't know much about my father's family. They just sort of showed up in the middle of the 19th Century on a farm in Northwestern Ohio. We know that they were Germanic and that they may have come to Ohio from New York State. My great-grandfather was an Ohio dirt farmer. During the American Civil War he served as a captain in the Union army. He survived. His brother in law was not so lucky. He is thought to have starved to death at Libby Prison, a confederate prisoner of war camp.

My grandfather was too young for World War I and too old for World War II. When the Great Depression arrived, he left the farm and moved his family to town. He could never find full time employment at any time during the 30's, so he worked three to four part time jobs instead. The bakery and the hardware store both employed him, and at night he worked as a watchman in a warehouse.

During those trying times, my grandmother immersed herself and her family in religion. Weekends were spent in Church, or quite commonly, in tents. The camp meetings and revival meetings that regularly rolled through town were a second home for my father and my uncle. A third brother was killed in an auto accident in 1929, at the age of 16. My grandmother was a passenger and survived the accident which partially explains her great religious fervor.

My father and uncle both ended up in World War II. They both survived without a scratch. This was pretty fortunate because they each saw plenty of action. Between them they served in nearly every major battle campaign in Europe. They earned two Bronze Stars and one French Croix de Guerre. My Mom says that my Dad was supposed to get his Croix de Guerre from General De Gaulle himself, but the war allowed no time for the ceremony. I don't know if this was true or not. We have no idea what they actually did to secure these honors because neither of them would ever speak about the circumstances. When asked why he went to the Army, my father always gave the same reply, "I was drafted". Certain other Veterans who did go on about their wartime experiences were "phonies", "cowards who got shot in the ass retreating", from my Dad's perspective. Anyway, we do know that my uncle couldn't light a cigarette without his hands trembling until 1949.

After the war, my father served as our County Auditor for 12 years. This position didn't pay very much, but it was a respectable role for someone with only a two year night school degree; he was a respectable public servant. As County Auditor, my dad had a say in what people and local businesses were to pay in property taxes each year. It was apparently not unusual for people to attempt to influence his judgment via gifts and other attempted bribes. My dad would never budge, and this for some reason was of some memorable comfort to me growing up.

Eventually my father left public service and went into business with two other partners. For 12 years he worked tirelessly. I can remember him late at night sitting at a makeshift desk in our basement, in his underwear, on the phone, smoking a cigarette. During that time, we took one vacation, a trip to Miami Beach. My father wore a business suit and smoked cigarettes for most of the trip. He died of a heart attack at age 53, and three years later his business filed for bankruptcy.

My dad was a Republican and once met Robert Taft Senior. He seemed to dislike FDR, and generally spoke about big government in disparaging terms. Yet he was no conservative zealot. When JFK was assassinated, we all had to watch the funeral, every minute of it.

My father lived an ordinary, 40 regular, 9 ½ D, Oldsmobile driving American life. He never got rich, but he did better than his parents. He was not really a war hero, but he served. He had no use for anything "Mickey Mouse". He didn't talk big and he disdained people who did talk big. He was not particularly religious, or rather; he disdained the "Mickey Mouse" nature of formal religions, at least the tent meeting kinds. He absolutely hated "phonies".

When he died, it occurred to me, at the age of 13, that his life had been a necessary one, a critical one, not just for me, or for our family, but to our town and to Ohio, and to America. This was not just because he went to Europe and placed his life in danger, and not because he was a so-called public servant, but because he showed up, and he thought about things, and he cared. He stretched himself beyond his humble beginnings to become a thinking, honest, useful American specimen.



A Civic Reef

Lake Bluff, IL stands in the shadow of its larger sibling, Lake Forest. Lake Forest is a classic American sanctuary, like Greenwich, CT, and Grosse Pointe, MI, a place where the captains of industry could securely, if not discreetly, locate both their privileged progeny and the massive fruits of their labors. Lake Forest became the quintessential 19th Century retreat for the most quintessential of American cities, Chicago. The Swifts, the Armours, and the Fields all moved to Lake Forest. This was an extremely volatile era, of the Pullman strike and the Haymarket riots. It was a time of revolution in Europe, and it is not surprising that after the great Chicago fire, the city's emerging aristocracy set out to construct their special castles in the forest.

While Lake Forest was settled by millionaires, Lake Bluff was conceived by Methodists. Lake Bluff was a summer camp, a place to which a new class of financially secure, if not wealthy, artisans, engineers, tradesmen and other professionals, and their families, could escape. They escaped the stench and disease of hot Chicago summers. They relished the Lake Michigan breezes, the clean air and water. It was a place where the very concept of recreation took root. This was recreation for a broader swath of society. It was an opportunity made possible by industrialization. For the first time in history, people other than the well born, the well bred and the downright wealthy, could escape for a week or two to enjoy an idyllic tranquility devoid of want and fear.

The Lake Bluff Assembly was known throughout the country as a prominent Chautauqua site. These summer get-togethers with 1,000's of participants, were 1 part prayer meeting, 1 part entertainment, and 1 part self improvement opportunity. Like every Chautauqua, The Lake Bluff Assembly hosted the most renowned preachers and other famous orators of the day.

Much of the audience had recently immigrated, and its concept of a summer idyll clearly included the spiritual, a heartfelt thanks to one's Creator, and most importantly a conviction that one should not squander good fortune. These were religious people, yet they were practical people. In Lake Bluff, the rational mind was God's great gift and one ought only to feel compelled to use it. This was 19th century recreation!

The easy coexistence of the spiritual and the secular was this crowd's idea of a good time. Science lectures, geography lessons, and the latest social theories were casually sprinkled among the fiery sermons of the greatest preachers of the day. It is likely that Darwin's new theories were passionately examined.

Even though they mostly disappeared over a century ago, these so-called camp meetings should not be forgotten. We live in a world where peace and stability, if not survival depend on the establishment of strong and stable middle class peoples, the basic building blocks of secular democracy.

From Iraq, to China, to Africa, and back again, we need to consider the fundamental balances that once took root here.



A Civic Ecosystem

The United States of America entered the 21st Century as the most successful global power since the Roman Empire. Not even the Romans could claim the unchallenged scope of American political, economic, military and cultural domination. For all intents and purposes, the American President had become the leader of the entire human race, in the sense, at least, that he was now the single individual routinely expected to be the ultimate master of events.

American media, and its machinery of images, controlled the airwaves, dominated the internet and thus indirectly influenced the hearts and minds of nearly all the planet's people. No developed country could match American economic output, and most astonishingly, America's ability to continually increase its economic productivity. With the exception of China, there was no other economy in sight that might someday match American economic supremacy.

Yet even the most die-hard American patriot could surely sense an underlying vulnerability, a cynical and fearful sense that our democratic and market based machinery might lack the vibrancy and resolve to address the challenges of the new millennium. This was punctuated by the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath.

Every American now knows that the atmosphere is warming. Even our kids have a refined understanding of the fragility of the environment and how the human race is systematically destroying the delicate biological balances that all life requires. They accept that the oceans are polluted and dying. The thought that earth could someday turn into an overheated, blistering, insect-ridden swamp is now plausible for nearly every American.

There are a growing number of young people who feel guilty about being even a small part of the selfish, consumerist humanity that is destroying forests, and birds, melting the icecaps and enlarging the ozone hole. They have been taught that life itself is held together by deceptively obscure yet powerful components like ozone levels, wetlands and plankton.

Yet few Americans, especially kids, have ever seriously considered the delicacy of the American civic environment. Their America has become the most powerful economic, military and social force the world has ever known. To grow up in America has been to grow up in a kind of historical and cultural fortress.

Young people seem to develop a firm mental model about the way America works. This model is what happens when boring old civics classes give way to popular imagery and sound-byte. In this model, government is the realm of creepy "politicos" who like to see themselves on CNN. Politicos are controlled by "insiders", who are in turn paid somehow by big corporations. Most politicos; whether liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, were creepy student government types back in high school!

In this model, politics might be more worrisome were it not for "activists". Activists are people who work for free to correct the injustices created by the politicos, insiders and the big corporations who, it is believed, control them. They are the "involved" peers who feel passionate about some great cause that is important to them. Every once in a while they co-opt a politico into pushing their cause, at least long enough to pass an important law of some kind.

Young people especially relish the idea of becoming activists, usually during college. All they need is an injustice to correct and a little passion. In this model, the interaction of politicians and activists is thought to create a balance, a democratic equilibrium, where we Americans tend to get most things right most of time.

This popular model is so successful that nearly all young people as well as most adults now prefer to observe the democratic process, from afar. The world of politics is all succinctly reported to us by the press, who work diligently, to summarize every issue into small bits of imagery that we can digest in less than 15 seconds. Based on these so-called "sound bytes", voters will periodically migrate to the polls.

These seemingly natural balances have made it possible for us to successfully run America with minimal public interest year-in and year out. There is no need to pay attention, no need to vote, no need to become involved, unless of course one feels angry about something in particular, in which case one can always become an activist.

What if this system were somehow flawed, or at least out of balance? It is a fact that politicians and truly active activists account for a tiny percentage of all Americans. What if they got together and forgot to include the rest of us? What if the press were feeding us sound-bytes that were somehow misleading? What if the media were controlled by people who wanted the rest of us to *buy* things? What if activists conveniently forgot to tell us certain details about their real intentions? What if there were activists who were brought together by sinister, rather than worthy causes? What if it turned out that our news sources were actually in the *entertainment* business?

If any of these things were to happen, we would be vulnerable. Our interests might not be truly represented. Yet, to one degree or another, all of these conditions already exist.

There is a vulnerability to our system that people, especially young people, seem to sense. They are often inclined to dismiss politics and government as corrupt, misguided, uncaring, unrepresentative and downright disgusting! It is a realm with which they'd prefer to stay detached. However, if they can indeed sense the vulnerability of our system, then they surely can understand that in the end, their own lives may ultimately and negatively be affected.



A Minor Experiment

Successful democracies are rare. The Greeks, who invented democracy, lived under a military dictatorship until only a few years ago. Before that, there had been a three millennia hiatus since the glory days of Athens. While there are today, many nations that have democratic systems of government, their degree of effectiveness and their levels of political freedom can vary extremely. Democracy in Japan is a brief 60 year episode in a millennium of cultural and political history. We should not forget that Adolph Hitler was elected. So was Saddam Hussein! Democracy in Spain is about 30 years old. True political freedom in India is just 10 years old.

The Founding Fathers were keenly aware that they were attempting a system of government that nobody believed could possibly survive. They put the future of an entire continent into the hands of some illiterate dirt farmers. While they were to succeed to an unimaginable degree, the delicate system that they created is imperiled.

The United States of America is based on a fairly peculiar idea, that regular people, the dirt farmers, could participate in their own governance! In the 18th Century this was an incredibly wild and untested concept. Thomas Jefferson actually believed that farmers, by being close to the land, to the cycles of nature, had a particularly noble and uncorrupted wisdom that when harnessed could challenge even the greatest intellectuals of the old aristocratic world.

For over two hundred years, America has succeeded where so many other civilizations have failed, by harnessing the collective wisdom of its people. We are the stewards of a system that is ultimately accountable to us. It is an adaptable system that tends to meet the challenges of history. America's proudest moments have come because its individual citizens, the basic building blocks of civic life, were able to take collective risks, to deal with reality and to accept tough choices.

The strength of this country derives from our ability, sometimes grudging, to accept things that we don't really want to accept. In 1860 a majority of Americans were still prepared to accept the moral stain of slavery as a necessary underpinning of our economy. By 1863 slavery was abolished. In 1940 more than 80% of Americans were opposed to "foreign entanglements". Five years later we had saved both Europe and Asia from oppressive tyranny. In each case, we did what we needed to do. Most of us were persuaded to do the right thing, in spite of the extraordinarily painful changes that it was to create in the short term.

Today, our politicians are highly effective at not telling us things that we don't want to hear. Jefferson's noble dirt farmers have evolved into a fat, stupid, highly indebted and mostly clueless electorate, incredibly and dangerously self-absorbed. We have distanced ourselves from our communities and our government, while at the same time, allowing ourselves to become ever more dependent on our government. We expect our government and our leaders to solve more and more of our personal problems. This is true regardless of social or economic strata.

Sadly, politicians are forced to raise massive amounts of money in order to purchase the media time necessary to convey the simplistic and emotional impression that they alone can solve our problems. We beg them to tell us what we want to hear.

We expect our government to "create jobs", to "provide affordable healthcare", to "defend the homeland", to "grant dignity". Yet no government can actually do any of these things.

Government, at its best, can only provide a framework within which citizens may collectively convey these good and necessary outcomes.

By allowing this to happen, by becoming consumers of government rather than contributors to government, we have disconnected ourselves from the apparatus of our civic lives. In the 40 years since John F. Kennedy's famous "Ask Not" speech, we have only made ourselves more vulnerable to manipulation, corruption, and perhaps unthinkably, to future tyranny.

Citizens are like the plankton in the civic ocean, the oxygen in the civic atmosphere. We are at the bottom of the civic food chain, yet we are essential to it. Our ability to simply be aware, to be wise (at least collectively) to exhibit concern that stretches beyond our short term self interests and pet causes, is as critical to civic life as fresh water is to a wetland.



The Myth of the Extraordinary Man

Americans are almost pathologically conditioned to believe that all human progress is the result of extraordinary achievement; extraordinary attainments by great and glorious American individuals. Our history books and our literature are filled with incredible tales of personal struggle, of fearlessness, of independent judgment, heroic action, competitiveness, and most frequently of all, superior talent.

From the Pilgrims, to the founding fathers, from Lewis and Clark to Lincoln, from George Washington Carver to Thomas Edison, from Babe Ruth to Michael Jordan, we Americans consistently worship the magical, mythical imagery of the great American hero.

Yet the great practical success of this nation has much more to do with the quality of *average* Americans. America has succeeded, not because we were blessed with an uncommon crop of extraordinary talents, but because our common talents, those individuals, those families, those many nameless and long forgotten souls who simply showed up to live American lives, tended, *on average of course*, to get farther, build more and leave more behind. Europe, Asia, Africa and South America have all fielded quite notable civilizations, but none of them has achieved so much so fast as the United States of America.

Some might say it was all self selection. We have indeed attracted our share of the best and the brightest, and obviously each and every immigrant who made the effort and took the risk to come here in the first place, exhibited a huge degree of uncommon courage, and perhaps was predisposed genetically to do so. But the sheer diversity of those who came here and of those who have

succeeded here suggests that we have done more than assemble some genetic dream team of highly achieving immigrants.

Many of America's immigrants were seriously *unwelcome* somewhere else. They were not thought to be valuable. They were poor. They practiced unwelcome religions. They were of races that were considered to be inherently, if not genetically, inferior.

Yet ironically, our greatest moments were moments when such "misfits" were able to achieve extraordinary things. In 1775 a group of untrained, ragtag, uneducated New England farm boys dragged tons of cannon over 200 hundred miles through the snow from Fort Ticonderoga in New York State to Boston thus surprising the British there and handing them a hugely embarrassing and strategically critical defeat.

It has often and rightly been cited that our victory in World War II over two of the most dominating military machines in human history, had as much to do with the sheer quality of the *average* American GI as it did with our economic ability to manufacture more weapons and supplies.

Perhaps our greatest achievement has been the sheer ability to almost always maintain an orderly political system. With the notable exception of the Civil War, this nation has been able to consistently harness the chaos of free markets, free movement, multiple races, and multiple creeds without allowing such divergent passions to explode into political if not social calamity. How were we able to do this?

Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French historian who famously chronicled the American democratic experiment during the 1830's was amazed by the fact that Americans were dizzyingly diverse and seemed to have no particular social or political unifier, other than a "a universally passionate commitment to freedom and self government".

It is this commonality, this "zealous interest", this sense of collective duty, to preserve the whole, to preserve the system, to preserve the Civic Ecosystem that is in decline. Rich, poor, male, female, Christian or atheist, educated or not, we have become to one extent or another, civic parasites.

How does it happen that in the United States, where the immigrants have only recently immigrated to the land which they now occupy, and brought neither customs nor traditions with them there; where they met one another for the first time with no previous acquaintance; where in short, the instinctive love of country can scarcely exist; how does it happen that everyone takes as zealous an interest in the affairs of his township, his county, and the whole state as if they were his own? It is because everyone, in his sphere, takes an active part in the government of society.

Alexis de Tocqueville, quoted by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Disuniting of America* (1992)



The Civic Person

The life of Benjamin Franklin may have cast the die for what we now consider to be the classic American citizen. Businessman, scientist, entrepreneur, philosopher, volunteer, and politician, Franklin was all of these. Countless Americans for three Centuries have set out to follow his example.

While Franklin's life story has achieved mythical acclaim, his philosophy of life, rather than his mere accomplishments, deserves additional attention. He is often cited as the author of the greatest moniker of selfish individualism, "God helps those who help themselves". Yet according to historian H. W. Brandes, Franklin made a clear distinction between the individual "self" who struggled with temptation, who strove for self improvement and material advancement, spiritual connectedness and grace, and what he called the "Civic Person".

The Civic Person had a duty, a role, and a destiny which was distinctly separate from one's individual identity. This distinction allowed Franklin (who in private life had been far from perfect) to engage public life with unrestrained commitment and energy. In Franklin's view, a Civic Person need not be rich, need not be sin free, need not have lived a perfect life in order to be able to give to and gain from his community. The Civic Person had eyes and ears. Civic people had ideas. Civic people had energy and by contributing these ideas they not only could improve the lot of the entire community, they could achieve a sort of public redemption that might otherwise elude them.

Today we expect our leaders to live perfect storybook lives and, not surprisingly, they reliably fail us. We expect them to tell us what we want to hear. Not surprisingly, our leaders have become expert at spinning every single issue into a clear and indisputable context. When the realities of policy diverge from our rosy expectations, we conveniently blame the politicians, not ourselves. We are thus free to excuse ourselves from public life. We are left to criticize an amorphous "system". We are free to languish in cynicism. We are a generation that has almost completely disengaged, not from the rhetoric of politics, but from the hard work that is required to hold politics accountable.

What if every American might envision himself/herself as Civic Persons? Civic Persons are inherently valued. They cannot be victims and they cannot be misled. They have but one duty, to seek the truth, and in that regard, they are all on equal footing. By seeking the truth, we are like tiny coral in a grand coral reef, each one of us equally capable of regenerating a tiny bit of growth, of setting the ultimate direction, and shape, and vibrancy of an American civic ecosystem.



The Tyranny of Groups

Perhaps by some pollster's design, or as a natural consequence of mass media, the American Civic Person is most threatened by one simple yet all pervasive tendency. He is constantly grouped.

He is considered to be part of a group, and he thinks of himself as part of one or more groups. Yet by being labeled under a group moniker, the Civic Person is marginalized. He begins to confine his thinking to the sensitivities of the group. His ability to contribute fresh ideas or to question accepted ideas is diminished if not extinguished. In fact he need not continue thinking once he learns what group he is in, for he simply has to view the poll results for his group to find out what he thinks.

We are all assigned to groups, so much so that we now actually think of ourselves strictly in the parenthetical. We are "Seniors", "Single Parents", "Working Poor", "Gay", "Persons of Faith", "Disabled" "Persons of Color", "Family Businessmen", "Soccer Moms".

When introducing themselves for the first time, many Americans are more likely to describe their group before revealing their name. Even the US census has become increasingly group sensitive. It seeks to know whether our households are black or white or Native American or Hispanic, regardless of our actual human or economic condition. This is because it is easier for Government to deal with groups than it is to deal with individuals. It is easier for politicians. It is easier for bureaucrats. This is understandable, but such grouping is a tyranny that saps the strength of democracy.

This problem is exacerbated by the political process itself, where activists and politicians of all persuasions are tempted to stretch the truth a little, or a lot, when advocating for their respective group. Labor unions for example, don't call themselves "Unions". They represent "Working People". Religious groups claim to represent "all People of Faith". Civil Rights groups represent "People of Color". Teachers' unions are "Education Associations".

So consider the plight of a gay, female, black, Christian businesswoman. Her views are presumed and thus represented by at least five (probably many more) special interest groups. Millions of lobbying dollars are raised and allocated in her name. Her real views and sensitivities are unknown but for the periodic statistical sampling by pollsters, who somehow are able to divine her true intentions as well as those considered to fall neatly into her groups. Sadly her real position on a number of important issues may even be unknown to her, for if she is like most of us, she has abdicated her position as a thinking citizen.

Grouping robs us of our civic identity. It literally outsources our democratic birthright to armies of single-minded activists and hard core political operatives who speak in our name. It also robs our political system of any ability to reach compromises or to craft broadly-supported, creative or visionary policy.

This Tyranny of Groups is broadly reported as a problem of "Special Interest Politics", but this implies that it is a problem beyond our control, an institutional problem of Washington D.C. The real problem is that so few of us spend any time considering and establishing our own views about anything. We simply grab a quick, convenient, and shallow moniker. We are content to describe ourselves as liberal or conservative, as pro-Choice or pro-Life, as Republican or as Democrat. We

memorize the mantra of a special interest group or two, and if it fits well enough, like an off the rack suit, we are content to wear it.

Americans have a duty, a patriotic obligation to pay attention. By not allowing ourselves to be tossed into some fictitious group, we serve to strengthen the civic reef. We serve to restore the oxygen of political debate.

The only common project engaging the youthful imagination is the exploration of space, which everyone knows to be empty.

Allan Bloom



An Honorable Marketplace

Americans enjoy a love/hate relationship with capitalism. We revere the idea of the small business person, the successful entrepreneur, personal initiative etc. Yet we are secretly embarrassed about the power of greed, the power of money, and the injustices that these can create.

Why does the circumstance of economic success require acts of contrition? Should we feel guilty about our profit motives and the fact that competition creates both winners and losers?

The average American's understanding of economics has become almost fictionalized. Adam Smith said that individuals should be freed to follow their self interest and that in so doing they would actually increase the wealth of everyone, the community as a whole. After all, he was writing about, "The Wealth of Nations." It was a very big idea. It changed the world. No other economic system in human history has raised more people out of poverty, yet we almost always forget this. The rest of the world, particularly the developing world, has an even more contorted view.

Capitalism can create extreme imbalances (but so does communism or socialism or utopianism). Nonetheless, the world's poorest people, some of whom are emerging from downright medieval circumstances, can today tune into the latest reality TV and reruns of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous". Anybody in this situation might logically conclude that capitalism is simply corrupt. They might logically be drawn to the perceived safety net of extreme philosophical sects of all creeds, and other desperate worldviews.

Capitalism cannot flourish in corrupt societies. Capitalism flourishes with perfect information. It requires fairness, a level playing field, where labor and capital can easily flow to their most productive uses. The special flavor of American capitalism was incubated within a strong cultural and work ethic, where informal codes of personal behavior helped to regulate the ebb and flow of economic behavior.

Capitalism falters when people cheat. The "enforcement" costs become too high. This can take the form of outright corruption, bribes, organized crime etc. It can also take place in more subtle forms. Think of the money we'd all save if business could be universally conducted with a handshake! Think of the economic burden we've created by becoming cheaters, and then paying lawyers and politicians to curtail our cheating!

Corruption is not strictly an institutional matter. Corruption begins and ends with corrupt individuals. All institutions are, in the end, run by individuals, who must make personal decisions about truth or the lack thereof. The health of an economy depends on having better than average Civic Persons, individual economic actors who feel compelled to hold themselves to a higher standard. These could be business leaders who are visionary, and competitive, but who are at the margin anyway, ethical, capable of telling the truth and of playing by rules. It can also mean cab drivers who won't try to rip us off.

Americans might try to make sense of this via the analogy of sports. Without rules there can be no game. It is not completely schizophrenic to be a great competitor and a great sportsman at the same time. Sadly, however, we once celebrated this delicate balance more than we do these days, and we may be on the verge of any entire generation that believes that the whole point of sports is to win at all costs, to get away with as much as possible and to always blame the officials when losing.

Truth is an economic "Good". It is, in fact, the ultimate economic Good. It may also be seen in a spiritual light, for the world's great religions all purport to be pursuing the Truth, and thus it has been possible in Western societies, from time to time to set aside sectarian differences by simply acknowledging the possibility of one transcending Truth, a Civic Truth.

This is the first nation in the world that was ever established on the basis of reason instead of simply warfare. These were eighteenth century deists, these gentlemen.

Over hear we read, "In God We Trust." But that is not the god of the Bible. These men did not believe in a Fall. They did not think the mind of man was cut off from God. The mind of man, cleansed of secondary and merely temporal concerns, beholds with the radiance of a cleansed mirror a reflection of the rational mind of God. Reason puts you in touch with God. Consequently, for these men, there is no special revelation anywhere, and none is needed, because the mind of man, cleared of its fallibilities is sufficiently capable of the knowledge of God. All people in the world are thus capable because all people are capable of reason.

All men are capable of reason. This is the fundamental principal of democracy. Because everybody's mind is capable of true knowledge, you don't have to have a special authority, or a special revelation telling you that this is the way things should be.

Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (1988).



Our Burden

If it can be said that Americans are focused on anything at all other than our personal well being, our outward, civic gaze most often attaches to vague, remote and fictionalized considerations. If we consider the so-called "issues" of the day, "The Economy", "Homeland Security", "Healthcare", "Equal Rights", "Race Relations", "The Environment", "Declining Moral Values", "Crime" etc. etc., these concepts are all things that are entirely beyond the control of any one of us. They are all completely institutional notions. They are all things we can whine about, but not things for which we are remotely willing to take responsibility. If we choose to confront any one of these issues in a personal way, we perceive few choices short of becoming an Activist of some ilk, or a religious zealot. The issues of the day have been framed in a context where only government (or perhaps religion) can wield any power to do anything.

These monikers might describe the type of world in which we'd prefer to live, but these "Issues" convey nothing at all about what we need to accept, what we actually need to do, and how we need

to do it. Of course we would all like to live in a safe, beautiful, completely fair and prosperous world, particularly one in which we Americans are prosperous. But this has nothing to do with us personally. These issues create no personal obligation, whatsoever.

No politician, ever, is going to discuss, except in the most abstract fashion, the real challenges that the great American civilization must overcome in the 21st century. It is simply too risky for his or her political fortune, to tell us the truth. Even the brightest, most courageous, most visionary statesman will focus on getting elected first then maybe, just maybe, he will try to address one or two fundamental issues.

A democracy derives its strength from its citizenry and it follows that the successful adaptation and survival of a democracy must, in the end, derive from the successful adaptation of its citizens. Might we assume that such transformation is even possible?

This is the monumental burden of saving a precious system and extending America's democratic garden to a desperate world. It is a call to become global citizens, caring, energetic, with an informed and selfless view of the great potential of all human (not just American) possibility.