In the Service of Our Nation

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On the occasion of this summit on service to our nation, let us first pause to remember that as we gather here today, we are following in the footsteps of great leaders who paved this path for us.

I'm sure many of you still remember that in his rousing 1961 inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy memorably said, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." But it is equally important to note that his very next words were, "My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man." Even before the current era of globalization—when not only the spread of new and challenging ideas but also the effects of calamities such as disease, poverty, climate change and natural disasters are tearing down everybody's notion of man-made borders—President Kennedy clearly understood how closely the vitality of our American democracy is tied to the advancement of the human condition both at home and around the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr. also stressed our moral obligations to our fellow men and women, both as citizens of our country and members of the human race. His influence, which was immensely important in rekindling America's sense of decency, opportunity and equality, reached far and wide. Among those who echoed King's ideas was Reverend James Bevel, who gave a sermon in 1962 in the small town of Ruleville, Mississippi, in which he urged African Americans to register to vote. His words were heard—and taken to heart—by Fanny Lou Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper, who was the first person in her town respond to Bevel's call to action even though registering to vote was a dangerous thing for a black person to do at that time in the deep South. As a result, she lost her job, was harassed by the police and savagely beaten, but

that didn't stop her from devoting the rest of her life to grassroots civil rights activism. Her courage and determination drew national attention, thus helping to change Americans' understanding of how an individual can serve democracy and contribute to change that benefits all. Why did she do all this? Because, she said, "Nobody's free until everybody's free."

Let me mention another stalwart supporter of democracy who happened, among other things, to be a former president of Carnegie Corporation of New York: John Gardner, who headed the Corporation from 1955 to 1967 and served as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Lyndon Johnson. Gardner was the consummate public servant. Among his many accomplishments was the creation of two organizations founded on the twin principles of service to democracy and volunteerism: Common Cause and Independent Sector. Gardner had great trust in the American people and the nation they had built. He said, "More than any other form of government, democracy requires a certain faith in human possibilities. The best argument for democracy is the existence of men and women who justify that faith. It follows that one of the best ways to serve democracy is to be that kind of person." To provide yet another avenue for public service, Gardner had the idea of creating the nonpartisan White House Fellows Program to draw individuals from different professions, with different expertise, and of exceptionally high promise to Washington for one year of personal involvement in the process of government. In announcing the program, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared that "a genuinely free society cannot be a spectator society."

I cite these examples at a time when we, in America, seem to be suffering from a kind of historical amnesia. At a time when, as a nation of individuals, we have carried "individualism" to a new level of idolatry. Some have made it an icon, and an end in itself. YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, instant messaging and more: as much as these new technologies seem to connect us, they also contribute to what has often been referred to as the new cult of the individual, because they allow us to report on the minutiae of our daily lives—sometimes in moment-by-moment increments—in a way that makes each trip to the store, each pause for a cup of coffee, each ride on a bus or purchase of a pair of shoes so important as to make nothing important except that it happened to us. This phenomenon goes hand-in-hand with the growing American craving for instant celebrity, even if it is only the fleeting "fifteen minutes of fame" that seems to have become its own reward. Hence, by elevating the individual to center stage in our crowded, complex, confusing and endlessly evolving world, it may seem that each of us is occupied with celebrating our own supreme uniqueness, which is certainly everyone's right, but at the same time, in this way we are often promoting the escalating trend toward individual isolationism as well as the ghettoization of discrete, unconnected interests. And in the process, what we are quickly losing is the sense of the larger community that draws us out of ourselves and our specialized, isolated circles and into the wider society.

Robert Putnam noted this phenomenon in his revelatory book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), in which he made a convincing case for the fact that our stock of social capital—the very fabric of our connections with each other—is in a steep decline, impoverishing our lives, our communities and our nation. In part, he attributes this

slide to the "individualizing" nature of technology, which today, we see all around us: one lone person plugged into their iPod; one person sitting at a computer keyboard; one person surfing the Web, checking their e-mail, watching a video, all on a handheld device that they stare at by themselves. The cumulative effect of this isolation amidst the crowd, says Putnam, may have a devastating effect on our society in that it undermines the active civic engagement a strong democracy requires from its citizens.

Fifty years earlier, the late David Riesman wrote *The Lonely Crowd* (Yale University Press, 1950), a landmark study in which he analyzed what he described as the inner- and other-directed character of men and women in the post-World-War-II era. Riesman, a sociologist, suggested that social pressures, particularly those created by mid-century American developments such as suburbia, where fitting into the community was of paramount importance and the approval of one's neighbors was critical to being accepted into a desired group, were chipping away at individuals' ability to shape the direction of their own lives. He argued that as Americans—fearful of being seen as different than those around them—adopted the aims, beliefs and ideology of their peers, they were, ironically, losing the ability to provide each other with true companionship and fellowship based on deep knowledge of themselves and their family and friends.

The late Erich Fromm, the internationally renowned psychologist, author and philosopher, long ago worried about the same problem, namely, the loosening bonds between the individual and society. He drew a clear distinction between the concept of *freedom from,* or "negative freedom," meaning not being bound by restrictions imposed by society and its institutions, even in a democracy, and *freedom to,* or "positive freedom," meaning having the ability, courage and creativity to constructively respond to and participate in a social system that uplifts its members.

What Putnam, Riesman, Fromm and others down the years who have commented on the mutual support system created from the best aspects of the relationship between the individual and society often point to is that individual fulfillment is not the equivalent of the fulfillment of a society's aspirations. This is especially true of a democratic society such as ours where "We the people," is not just a lofty metaphor that begins the text of our Constitution but the first lines of an operating manual for a system meant to benefit citizens across all the race, class, economic, gender and ethnic strata of our society. As the late Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We may have sailed in different ships, but we are all in the same boat now."

King's apt description of a society of men and women descended from people who, at some point, voyaged here from somewhere else, also puts the responsibility for steering that boat squarely on the shoulders of all our nation's citizens. And it brings up the question of whether pursuing the fulfillment of individual ideals is a laudable goal if it means shirking one's responsibilities to the wider society that not only protects one's rights, ultimate interests and freedoms but also provides the social, cultural and economic opportunities that allow individuals to test their capabilities and achieve their potential. After all, individuals don't live—or thrive—in a vacuum. Each one of us is part of a community and a nation, and all of us are affected by the social and historical context of our times, which provide the opportunities for us to achieve our goals and live our lives as richly and fully as possible.

An American Balancing Act

Striving to balance the longing of the individual to soar to whatever heights he or she can reach while at the same time watching out for those who need some help back down on the ground is an inherently American trait. This was famously noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic 1835 book, *Democracy in America,* in which he coined the term "individualism" to describe the self-reliant character of Americans, who reveled in their freedom from aristocracies. While noting that this unrestrained freedom might well have turned into anarchy, he also observed that the excesses and negative aspects of individualism were held in check by citizens' benevolent associations, which were organized to influence politics, address societal concerns and provide aid to those in need.

Underlying Tocqueville's observations is the notion that in the healthy development of individualism and in the enlightened individual there is that balance between the personal component of the self with its private interests and the public good, which embodies the strength of the community. Neither component can exist by itself. In separation, each is an abstraction without content.

Tocqueville's "enlightened self-interest" raises the expectation that we, as social, political, moral and spiritual beings, will be able to distinguish between integrity and compromise, justice and injustice, personal gain and public interest, means and ends, good and evil. We must always be aware that the absence of intelligence, commitment and choice tends to weaken our social bonds and hence, weaken our society and democracy.

Tocqueville was not alone in highlighting these ideas. Adam Smith, known as the father of modern capitalism who was a moral philosopher as well, wrote with conviction about the importance of the connections between individual aspirations and the enlightened evolution of society. Smith based his economic theories upon his view of human nature, which he described in his first book*, The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759. There, he theorized that man is driven by passionate self-interests, but moderates them with his intellect and innate sympathy for others. In this book, Smith first made the statement that when people are left to follow their self-interests they are "led by an invisible hand, without knowing it, without intending it, to advance the interest of the society."

In that connection, I would like to remind us that our forefathers founded a land of opportunity, not a land of opportunists. They signed the Declaration of Independence, wrote the Constitution and formulated the Bill of Rights with the faith that the ordinary citizen was committed to the accomplishment of extraordinary acts. As the great clergyman and long-time peace activist William Sloane Coffin exhorted, we cannot retreat from the big issues of society and our time into our own self-contained world, which Coffin called the pygmy world of private piety. To do so is to become social, political and moral isolationists. It is to deny the American creed.

That creed, it should be noted, is what distinguished our nascent American democracy from Europe beginning from the time that our nation's framers began the Revolution, and it does still: we do not delegate to the state our responsibilities to help and provide for each other. England, for example, enacted its landmark Statute of Charitable Uses in

1601. The law codified the state's responsibility for assisting the poor, aged and orphaned—as well as for providing hospitals, schools and universities. Other nations, in Europe and elsewhere, followed this model, dampening the growth of civil society—a term that refers to all the voluntary entities that operate apart from government and business. But from the earliest days of our colonial history, Americans saw things differently. Preaching from the deck of the Arbella as it sailed toward New England in 1630, the Puritan leader John Winthrop spoke passionately about the interdependence of the community: "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together." The revolutionary idea of philanthropic citizens working together for societal benefits grew with our young nation, where colonists, pioneers and their descendants faced the stark reality of going without basic necessities if they did not help each other obtain them through cooperative effort. In this organic way, then, voluntary associations formed to fill every void in the community, from fighting fires to lighting street lamps.

Today, such voluntary associations continue to serve as the sturdy backbone of our civil society. The nonprofit sector of our nation comprises more than 1.4 million organizations that provide a large measure of the nation's low-income housing, a substantial amount of its higher education and research institutions and is a critical component of K-12 education, as well. Our nonprofits provide a significant portion of the nation's health care, much of its human services and almost all of the arts. Nonprofits address the needs of underserved and disadvantaged populations by providing billions of dollars in services and programs. This sector tackles complex social problems that other sectors are either unwilling or unable to address.

Another gratifying development for our nation is that in the past century or so, both charity and philanthropy have become great pillars of our society. In the U.S. today there are more than 72,000 grantmaking foundations, which greatly contribute to the vitality of our national life. In 2007, these institutions increased their giving to $42.9 billion according to *Foundation Growth and Giving Estimates: Current Outlook* (2008 edition), a report of the Foundation Center. This estimated 10 percent gain followed a 7.1 percent increase in 2006.

The strength and number of our voluntary associations are the expression of our collective American nature, which insists on generosity, whether prompted by religious or civic obligation. In that regard, it is interesting to note that when the Scottish-born Andrew Carnegie, in his 1889 *Gospel of Wealth,* expressed the bold notion that the rich have a moral obligation to give away their fortunes, he did so as an American citizen, writing in an American context, as an immigrant who had grown wealthy in his adopted nation and not only believed it was his duty to pay back his country but welcomed the chance to do so.

There are many indications that both American institutions and individuals hold similar beliefs, notwithstanding different motivations. According to the Giving USA Foundation, charitable giving in the United States, including gifts from individuals and corporations, was estimated to be $306.39 billion in 2007, topping the $300 billion mark for the first time. Contributing to that total is the astonishing fact that three-quarters of American families give to charity—an average of $1,800 each. And it's not the rich who

are the most generous: Arthur C. Brooks, author and professor of business and government policy at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs notes, "It is low-income working families that are the most generous group in America, giving away about 4.5 percent of their income on average. This compares to about 2.5 percent among the middle class, and 3 percent among high-income families." Adds Brooks: "The most charitable people in America today are the working poor."

A Responsibility to the Future

Americans' commitment to sharing what they have with others represents a desire not only to improve conditions in the present but also an understanding of how important it is for both individuals and societies to plan for the future. Being good stewards of the future is built into our governmental system and has been a paramount concern of some of our most remarkable leaders. Examples abound. Even in the middle of the Civil War, President Lincoln signed the 1862 Land-Grant College Act (also known as the Morrill Act), which essentially nationalized access to higher education, extending it to all Americans—including such disenfranchised groups as women and minorities. In effect, the law spread higher education all over the U.S. by putting new universities where the people were. Today, the member institutions of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, an association of public research universities, land-grant institutions, and many state public university systems, enroll more than 3.6 million students, award approximately a half-million degrees annually, and have an estimated 20 million alumni.

Around the same time that he signed the Morrill Act, President Abraham Lincoln also created the National Academy of Sciences to advise Congress on "any subject of science or art." In the following century, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated "The New Deal," a set of programs and promises created between 1933 and 1938 to alleviate the nationwide suffering brought about by the Great Depression. The aim of these programs was to put people back to work, reform the financial system, and spur economic recovery as well as to match the abilities and talents of individuals with national needs. Under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, numerous initiatives were launched: the Federal Writers Project employed writers, editors and researchers who created, among other publications, the *American Guide Series*, covering every state and several major cities; the WPA Federal Theater Project put unemployed thespians to work producing about 1,000 performances in 40 states; the WPA Federal Art Program provided similar work relief for visual artists; WPA construction projects included roads, bridges, public buildings and airports. President Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, to give another example, was an innovative effort that helped to remedy two pressing problems at once: unemployment on one hand and decaying national parks on the other. Some three million young men would go on to serve in the Corps, working together to revitalize our nation's natural resources.

American generosity, however, was not confined to the U.S. As early as the 1820s, for instance, private individuals in the United States supported such efforts as Greek independence and in the 1840s, aided victims of the Irish famine. Another early effort by Americans to offer charity overseas was through the Christian missionary movement,

which rose to prominence in the 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1920s, forty percent of the more than 30,000 Christian missionaries worldwide were Americans. The nondenominational Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions alone sent 13,000 young Americans abroad. As proselytizers, these missionaries often failed and were sometimes unwelcome. But as educators, doctors, nurses and in other capacities, they contributed much to the societies where they worked. Among the major intellectual, educational and scientific institutions that have missionary roots are the American University of Beirut, the American University of Cairo and the former Robert College in Istanbul, now known as Boğaziçi University, established in 1863 as the first American school outside of the U.S.

Between 1915 and 1930, an era of great strife in the world, Americans mounted what, at the time, was perhaps the greatest humanitarian relief effort ever undertaken. The organization that came to be known as the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (ACRNE), also called Near East Relief, was created to assist not only the victims of Armenian genocide during World War I but also other Christian and non-Christian minorities who had been decimated and displaced by the war. In 1919, *The New York Times* reported on a nationwide campaign that mobilized many elements of civil society, a range of religious and civic leaders, academics, corporations, and the general public to raise $30 million in aid, but by 1930, according to its successor organization, the Near East Foundation, "Near East Relief had raised more than $110 million for this humanitarian work, fed more than twelve million people, provided medical aid to six million, cared for and educated over 135,000 orphans, and saved at least a million lives."

In the aftermath of World War II, prompted by the realization that a stable, economically sound Europe was essential to promoting both European democracy and global peace, the U.S. embarked on an extraordinary program of reconstruction for the war-torn continent. The Marshall Plan, enacted in 1948 under President Harry S. Truman, channeled $13 billion in economic and technical aid to 16 European countries. In the meantime, at home, the GI Bill extended unprecedented opportunities to more than two million returning soldiers, helping them go to college, get jobs, buy homes, and start businesses. It is estimated that the bill, at least in part, provided for the education of 450,000 engineers, 240,000 accountants, 238,000 teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, and 22,000 dentists, as well as for the college education of at least a million other individuals. In 2008, Congress once again recognized the service of its military veterans by enacting a new GI Bill. Earmarking nearly $63 billion over a decade, the program is aimed at giving soldiers who fought in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere the same education benefit provided to veterans of World War II.

But with generosity comes responsibility—and we have seen the mantle of responsibility enthusiastically taken up by Americans time and time again, through volunteerism. In a speech at the University of Michigan in 1960, President John F. Kennedy asked students whether they would be willing to volunteer abroad. Within days, hundreds answered his call, signing a petition pledging to serve in a Peace Corps if it were formed. The Peace Corps was, in fact, established in 1961, with the goal of promoting "world peace and friendship through a Peace Corps, which shall make available to interested countries and areas men and women of the United States qualified for

service abroad and willing to serve, under conditions of hardship if necessary, to help the peoples of such countries and areas in meeting their needs for trained manpower." Central to the very idea of Americans volunteering to leave home and travel overseas to help individuals and communities in the developing world was the idealism that President Kennedy knew was endemic to the character of Americans: their willingness—even eagerness—to share scientific, technical, educational and other knowledge, along with plain elbow-grease and know-how with their fellow men and women around the globe. To date, more than 190,000 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in 139 countries, working on issues ranging from AIDS education to information technology and environmental preservation. After President Kennedy's death, President Lyndon B. Johnson helped to fulfill Kennedy's dream of creating a domestic volunteer program modeled after the Peace Corps by signing legislation establishing the Volunteers In Service To American (VISTA) program as the "domestic Peace Corps" in 1964.

Successive administrations continued to carry forward the concept of service and volunteerism. In his 1991 State of the Union address, President George H.W. Bush declared, "We can find meaning and reward by serving some purpose higher than ourselves—a shining purpose, the illumination of a thousand points of light. It is expressed by all who know the irresistible force of a child's hand, of a friend who stands by you and stays there—a volunteer's generous gesture, an idea that is simply right." This theme forms the mission of the Points of Light Institute, which, through its collective network of partnering nonprofits, government agencies, faith-based organizations and companies seeking to engage in service, manages millions of volunteers and 50,000 volunteer-driven community impact projects around the country.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed legislation that incorporated VISTA into a new federal program called AmeriCorps that works with more than 3,000 nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and faith-based groups on efforts ranging from rebuilding communities after natural disasters to teaching reading in low-income communities. More than 70,000 individuals currently join AmeriCorps annually, totaling more than 500,000 members since its inception. According to a May 2008 report from the Corporation for National and Community Service, 60 percent of AmeriCorps alumni continue to serve the nation through the nonprofit sector.

After leaving office, in 2005 Bill Clinton established the Clinton Global Initiative; among its goals is the provision of life-saving treatment to people in the developing world who are living with HIV/AIDS. Towards that end, the Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative (CHAI) has helped 1.4 million people gain access to medicines purchased under CHAI agreements, representing nearly half of all people living with HIV and on treatment for the disease in developing countries. Sixty-nine countries have access to CHAI's negotiated prices for HIV/AIDS drugs and diagnostics, representing more than 92% of people living, globally, with HIV. President George W. Bush has also made the treatment of AIDS a priority. Notably, in 2003, President Bush launched the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to combat global HIV/AIDS, a $15 billion initiative that is the largest commitment by any nation to combat a single disease in human history. In another area, forming a remarkable—and remarkably effective partnership—Bill Clinton and former president George

H.W. Bush worked together to aid victims of Hurricane Katrina and the Asian tsunami. Soon after the tsunami hit, they raised $11 million for relief efforts. By 2007, their Katrina Fund had raised more than $130 million.

Another former president, Jimmy Carter, along with his wife Rosalynn Carter, established the nonprofit Carter Center in 1982, which works in conjunction with Emory University "to improve the quality of life for people in more than 70 countries." Jimmy Carter is also a champion of Habitat for Humanity, which is focused on eliminating global poverty and homelessness. Habitat for Humanity notes that on an annual basis, "Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter give a week of their time—along with their construction skills—to build homes and raise awareness of the critical need for affordable housing." The Carter Work Project is held at a different location each year, and attracts volunteers from around the world.

Another major effort that harnesses the idealism of American youth is Campus Compact, founded in 1985 by the presidents of three private universities—Howard Swearer of Brown University, Timothy Healy of Georgetown University and Donald Kennedy of Stanford University—along with Frank Newman, then president of the Education Commission of the States. Out of their vision of "colleges and universities as vital agents and architects of a diverse democracy," emerged a national coalition of more than 1,100 college and university presidents, representing some six million students, dedicated to promoting community service, civic engagement, and service-learning in higher education. Each year, member students work in thousands of communities, both locally and globally, providing such services as tutoring at-risk youth in reading and math; building houses for low-income families; conducting environmental safety studies; and assisting the elderly, gaining valuable leadership and communication skills in the process. The estimated value of service contributed by students at Campus Compact member schools each year is $7.1 billion. It is important to note that volunteer opportunities are certainly not limited only to college-age students; there are many programs for high school students that provide service opportunities in their local communities or elsewhere in the U.S.; other programs even provide service venues abroad.

In recent years, tragic and catastrophic events have coalesced Americans into a kind of spontaneous national corps of volunteers, spurred to unprecedented action and extraordinary generosity. This was certainly evident in the hours, days, weeks and months—even years—after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In New York, almost immediately, hundreds of people lined up outside hospitals to give blood in the hope of helping survivors. In the following weeks, the Red Cross had received approximately 22,000 offers of assistance and had processed 15,570 volunteers—a greater response to a disaster than had ever been seen by the organization before. A 2003 Congressional report noted that "In the first days following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, an unprecedented number of Americans contributed over $2.2 billion (some estimates run as high as $2.7 billion) in donations to [hundreds of charities] to assist in the relief of victims." More than $1.1 billion in grants was made by over 1,300 foundations and corporations, and both public and private assistance to victims and families continues today.

As noted earlier, after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in August 2005, Americans once again mobilized their re-

sources, giving their time and their money to help their fellow citizens. Just one month later, $1.2 billion had already been contributed by the American public; by 2007 nearly $4 billion earmarked for Katrina relief had been contributed to the nation's charities. And as of 2006, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports, "Since the storm struck, more than 500,000 volunteers have worked along the Gulf Coast, according to estimates by the federal government."

Of course, there are times when the ebb and flow of the national economy impacts the scope of volunteerism and giving, which may be the case with the current downtown in the U.S. economy. As a July 2008 report by the Corporation for National and Community Service notes, "Nationally, the volunteer rate fell in 2007 for the second year in a row, to 26.2 percent." Rapid turnover in volunteers is also a nationwide problem: one out of every three people who volunteered in 2006 did not do so again in 2007. But even so, there is a definite bright side to the news: in all, it continues to be amazing that 60.8 million Americans performed more than 8 billion hours of volunteer service in 2007, and the report concludes that "volunteer intensity" is on the upswing, with more than 30 percent of volunteers contributing over 100 hours of service in a year.

Even taking into account the slight dip in recent numbers, there is no denying that volunteerism has become institutionalized in the United States, which is something to be proud of as a nation. And it should not be surprising: after all, to volunteer is to participate in democracy. To volunteer is to refuse to be marginalized. To volunteer is to support the compact America's citizens have always had with their country: to join their personal aspirations for the future with their hopes for the progress of the nation.

Most important of all, volunteering is an act of freedom, of personal choice. It is important to remember that, because too often in history the concept of volunteerism has been adulterated in the service of authoritarian states and governments that have the power to command so-called volunteers to carry out specified actions. The Nazis, for example, used the term "volunteer" to mask many of their horrendous crimes, including forced labor and the conscription of men and young boys from conquered territories, perverting the very idea of a volunteer. The Soviet Union and other totalitarian states have also commanded "volunteers" to carry out the aims of the regime and have used forced "volunteerism," both in peacetime and during war, as a means of purging unwanted groups and individuals.

But even authoritarian states can be positively affected by voluntary citizen participation in civic life. For example, the idea that volunteerism goes hand-in-hand with a sense of personal freedom—and a rising confidence in the strength of civil society—was visibly, and often movingly demonstrated in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake that struck China in May 2008. Though Chinese society is under the tight control of government leaders who rarely allow citizens to act outside the bounds of the carefully defined social order, the response of Chinese citizens to the earthquake broke many rules and may have ushered in at least the beginnings of a new era of citizen involvement in national life. Almost immediately after the earthquake struck, in an unexpected and spontaneous act of humanitarian concern for their fellow citizens, men and women from many different parts of China—an estimated 200,000 volunteers—

began showing up in Sichuan, the province that was the epicenter of the quake, where in addition to the thousands of dead and injured somewhere around five million people were left homeless. As *The New York Times* reported, a Chinese psychologist who had, on his own initiative, taken a plane flight and borrowed a bicycle to get to the afflicted area in order to provide free counseling, summed up the outpouring of citizen aid by saying, "Ordinary people now understand how to take action on their own." The Chinese government, though traditionally wary of any form of public activism, even eased their usual tight rein on NGOs that rushed in to provide assistance, and in official press coverage, paid unprecedented tribute to the volunteers. Bao Shuming, a senior research coordinator for the China Data Center at the University of Michigan, pointed out the significance of these events in terms of the development of civil society in China. He said, "This is going to dissolve some boundaries between the government and the common people. People are becoming more educated and organized, and society is becoming more open."

While China and its people may be just on the cusp of voyaging toward a more open society, not only nationally but also in their relationships with other countries, Americans, as mentioned earlier—and despite some notable periods when isolationist sentiments held sway—can look back on a considerable history of reaching across borders to offer help for causes that concerned them. Today, Americans' generosity to our international neighbors has become an integral part of our national identity, so much so that, in many respects, to be an American volunteer is tantamount to being a volunteer for the world. One prominent area is education: the doors of our colleges and universities—the true portals to knowledge—are open to all, as indicated by a recent Institute of International Education (IIE) survey, which reports that there were more than 580,000 international students studying in the U.S. in 2007. Another example is the Fulbright Foreign Student Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, which brings citizens of other countries to the United States for master's degree or Ph.D. studies. Over 1,800 new Foreign Fulbright Fellows enter U.S. academic programs each year. Its counterpart, the Fulbright U.S. Student Program "is the largest U.S. international exchange program," reports IIE, which manages both the U.S. and Foreign Student programs, "offering opportunities for students, scholars, and professionals to undertake international graduate study, advanced research, university teaching, and teaching in elementary and secondary schools worldwide." In 2007 alone, the program awarded approximately six thousand grants, "at a cost of more than $262 million, to U.S. students, teachers, professionals, and scholars to study, teach, lecture, and conduct research in more than 155 countries, and to their foreign counterparts to engage in similar activities in the United States." Other programs, such as the Eisenhower Fellowships, provide professional enrichment and networking opportunities for Americans and their foreign counterparts, including government leaders, heads of ministries, educators and others. The Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program brings mid-level professionals to the U.S. who are from designated countries with development needs and provides them with specialized study and training.

In the same way that the U.S. invests in international student exchanges to enrich learning and knowledge across all borders, so it invests in combating diseases, which do not recognize the national boundaries that human-

kind has drawn to divide the globe. Medical breakthroughs brought about by American researchers benefit not only American citizens but people everywhere, and no government invests more money in medical research than our own. In this area, the European Union (EU), for example, is not even close to the United States. As reported in a study by the European Medical Research Councils, non-market-sector medical research in the EU amounts to 0.17 percent of GDP compared to 0.37 to 0.40 percent in the U.S., where the National Institutes of Health alone invest over $28 billion annually in medical research. And there's more: in 2008, the U.S. contribution to the World Bank in support of projects to promote development and reduce poverty grew by $300 million to a total of $1 billion. Programs implemented by the United States Agency for International Development to promote economic growth, family planning, agricultural development, education, health and the environment in developing countries also have a 2008 budget of just over $1 billion. To strengthen the battle against the global spread of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, in 2008, Congress reauthorized PEPFAR with $48 billion over 5 years. Overall, the proposed U.S. budget for foreign aid in 2009 is more than $26 billion.

The Challenge Ahead

Based on the long-standing tradition of American largesse, the challenge to our nation is not to reinvent the concept of the citizen volunteer. As we've noted, in great numbers, Americans are already putting their shoulder to the wheel or reaching into their pocketbook to help out in their community, their state, their nation and even their neighbors around the globe. Hence, the next step we have to take is to find ways of providing new and more various opportunities and incentives for more people to become volunteers and to contribute their time, their knowledge and their service on a regular basis. We also need to increase volunteer opportunities in a planned and coordinated way in order to decrease duplication. It's wonderful how often many different people and organizations all want to help out in a particular area or work on a particular problem, but instituting cooperative efforts and collaborative projects would allow for more effective targeting of available resources while freeing up others for equally critical needs. Instituting more organized systems to enable Americans to volunteer would also serve as a kind of "volunteer R&D," meaning, on a local and national basis, we'd have a way to test which efforts are most effective and which are not, and which groups and organizations are doing the best job. That way, we could be strategic about investing both human and material resources in the programs and projects that provide the best services and are of the highest quality and in fine-tuning them as needs arise. Such a system would provide the means for maximizing the benefits of volunteer efforts not only on a short-term basis but over the long run, as well.

At a time when the U.S. faces many challenges at home and abroad, and there is seeming disillusionment with many of our institutions and policies, cynicism has become a corrosive force in our society. But as Americans, one of the greatest antidotes we have to any pessimism we may hold about our individual or collective future is our citizens' deep commitment to volunteerism. There is nothing cynical or shallow about offering to lend a hand. Doing so is the opposite of so many of the ills that too often these days

have characterized our society: a volunteer is not a mere consumer, not an entertainment unit waiting to be amused or a socioeconomic unit that can be swayed or manipulated by carefully crafted messages or fictions or false evidence disguised as facts. And a volunteer, today, is bucking the trend of crass commercialism and self-interest-above-all-else that seems to be taking an increasingly prominent place in our society. The service provided by volunteers—on the local level, the national stage, or in global venues—unites both secular and religious traditions, as well. Indeed, service and aid to those in need is a paramount principle of almost every religion and their respective denominations. All the major religions call upon their followers not only to envision walking in the shoes of their fellow men and women, but to actually help them along their way if that is what they need. In the New Testament, prominent on the list of things St. Peter exhorts Christians to do is add "to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity." The Jewish concept of *tikun olum*, often translated as "to heal the world," is incorporated into the faith as a tradition of service and charity. And over and over again, the Qur'an stresses the importance of charitable giving and of aiding those in need. When the religious impulse to provide aid and charity is threaded together with the moral obligation of citizens to serve their nation through volunteer efforts, the foundations of democracy grow ever stronger.

Above all else, a volunteer is the very definition of a good ancestor, a human who not only acknowledges but celebrates his or her humanity and who sees what to others may be invisible: the bonds that tie us together across the globe and through the centuries. We need many more people to volunteer to be good ancestors. Author Milan Kundera once wrote, "Human time does not turn in a circle, it runs ahead in a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is a longing for repetition." Volunteers, those wonderful ancestors to all humanity, understand that the opposite is true: we cannot linger in the past or recreate what has gone before. Our task, as members of a society and a nation—and, along with the rest of humanity, as fellow stewards of our one world—is to create a future in which we can all dwell in peace, and live safer, healthier, more fulfilling lives. That future is waiting for us to create it. It is waiting to see what together, we can do.

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