

Great Nations Need Great Citizens

by **Richard D. Lamm**

A nation's wealth and status is like starlight what you see is not what is, but what was. Just as the light we see from a distant star started its journey thousands of years ago, so is the nation's current success due principally to past actions. Great Nations have great momentum; past investments in education and productivity continue to give benefits even after those good traits deteriorate. To a large degree, one generation benefits from the seeds planted by their fathers and mothers. We, in turn, plant seeds that will be reaped by our children. Some of these "seeds" are measurable; some are immeasurable. We do measure and lament that the Japanese are now investing twice as much as we are in new tools and equipment. We know from educational scores that our children are in the bottom third in all international comparisons. We wring our hands over the yearly

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trade deficit, but what we measure is only a small part of our status.

The real story is in those things we do not measure. The intangible assets also grow or decline. Herein lays the fate of empires. What drove the seventh-century Arabs to organize themselves and burst out of their parched land to attack both the Persian Empire and Europe? They handily defeated the Persian Empire and almost captured Europe. Whoever would have guessed that these disorganized nomads would threaten anyone, let alone Europe. "Civilization was thrust into the brain of Europe on the point of a Moorish lance," observed Robert Ingersoll. What inspired the Mongols? Or the Greeks under Alexander? Often under-equipped and half starved, these nations and many others found a spirit, an amazing bravery and initiative that took them to victory.

The key seems to be the spirit and attitude of their people. A nation's human resources are inevitably more important than the natural resources. Plato postulated in the *Republic* that the stability and success of a political community depends on the moral character of the people who make up that community. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that American democracy was largely based on the character and mores

of the people, which were hard to quantify, but which ultimately would control the success or failure of the country. He warned that an excess of individualism would undercut the free institution upon which democracy depended. Robert Bellah, who calls these mores "habits of the heart," has written that "one of the keys to the survival of free institutions is the relationship between private and public life, the way in which citizens do, or do not, participate in the public sphere." Great nations cannot be judged by the success of their stock exchanges or their GNP – great nations have great intangibles. Great nations must have great citizens, and the kind of future we will have depends on what kind of people we are and what kind of kids we produce.

Tocqueville marveled at the American trait of citizenship. He pointed out that there is an important difference between an inhabitant and a citizen.

There are countries in Europe where the inhabitant feels like some sort of farm laborer indifferent to the fate of the place where he dwells. The greatest changes may take place in his country without his concurrence; he does not even know precisely what has happened; ... Worse still, the condition of

his village, the policing of his roads, and the repair of his church and parsonage do not concern him; he thinks that all of those things have nothing to do with him at all, but belong to a powerful stranger called the government. ...Furthermore, this man who has so completely sacrificed his freedom of will does not like obedience more than the next man. He submits, it is true, to the caprice of a clerk, but as soon as the force is withdrawn, he will vaunt his triumph over the law as over a conquered foe. Thus he vacillates the whole time between servility and license.

Tocqueville concluded that when a nation loses these traits of citizenship (i.e., its public virtues), it perishes.

There is a hubris in America of late that "God is an American" who will watch over us no matter how inefficient and hedonistic we become. Democracy has triumphed. But our Constitution will not save us if the intangibles go sour. The Constitution was the framework, the structure for the checks and balances for correction when human faction or folly moves us to excess. A ruthlessly ambitious person in one branch of government would rise up to find himself checkmated by the other parts of the system. The structure allowed free men and women to live their lives, create wealth, and build their country.

Less mentioned, but equally important to the success of our nation, is the foundation upon which the Constitution was built.

Our Founders assumed the often inarticulated values, customs, mores, and culture of hardworking people who cared about the future. They assumed these public virtues would continue. Mary Ann Glendon, in her thoughtful book *Rights Talk*, points out that the Founders of our country "counted on families, custom, religion and convention to preserve and promote the virtues required by our experiment in ordered liberty. Jefferson, Adams, and especially Madison, knew that the Constitution and laws, the institutionalized checks on power, the army, and militia could not supply all the conditions required for the success of the new regime. They often explicitly acknowledged the dependence of the entire enterprise on the qualities of mind and character with which they believe the American population had been blessed."

If you change the underlying social milieu, not even the brilliance of the Constitution can save the country. The Constitution is a structure for citizens who are dedicated and motivated. It will not save a society that does not vote, does not care, has no sense of posterity, and is addicted to hedonism. The Constitution, however brilliant, will not make up for people who have lost the ability to care about the future of their nation. Tocqueville particularly warned that excessive individualism could destroy all that public virtue had built.

Are we not there? Former Secretary of Commerce, Peter G. Peterson, says "American individualism used to honor community values. Now, it seems

to be a quest for unlimited personal advantage. As consumers, rather than citizens, we seem to have become a nation of silent players and special interests in which few speak effectively for the common good.

America talks endlessly about the follies of its leaders, but what about the follies of its citizens? America in many respects faces more of a "citizenship" problem than a leadership problem. Ortega y Gasset found that "what makes a nation great is not primarily its great men, but the stature of its innumerable mediocre ones." Too many Americans believe that our nation has a divine destiny, but this is a dangerous hubris. As Toynbee warned, all great nations rise and all fall and the "autopsy of history is that all great nations commit suicide."

Every once-great nation in history thought God was on its side, but to date God has never allowed any great civilization to exist for very long. Greatness in nations is not a geopolitical status, but an ephemeral stage. We talk about "American exceptionalism," but we are merely whistling past history's graveyard, in which every other once-great civilization lies buried. I am not sounding taps for America but instead an alarm bell. We are losing those stern virtues that made us a great nation in the first place and becoming an overindulged people with hedonistic values that are not compatible with long-term greatness. We forget Livy's warning that "luxury is more ruthless than war." Americans know what they want, but not what they can afford. They have

forgotten that rights and privileges require duties and responsibilities. We are today more threatened by a blanket of excess than by an iron curtain.

The battle flag that Admiral Nelson chose for the Battle of Trafalgar read, "England expects every man to do his duty." The words really seem an anachronism. We know all about our rights, but very little about our obligations. We speak of rights in a loud voice, and responsibilities in a whisper. We want the fullest kinds of freedom in democracy, but unrestrained freedom may undercut democracy. Ambassador Henry Grunwald put it this way:

We have not grasped the cost accounting of freedom. The great source of our current bafflement is that we somehow expect a wildly free society to have the stability of a tradition-guided society. We somehow believe that we can simultaneously have, to the fullest, various kinds of freedoms: freedom from discipline, but also freedom from crime; freedom from community constraints, but also freedom from smog; freedom from economic controls, but also freedom from the inevitable ups and downs of a largely unhampered economy.

Both American conservatives and liberals are embodiments of this paradox. Liberals are forever asking state intervention in the economy for the sake of social justice, while insisting on hands-off in the private area of morals.

Conservatives take the opposite view. They demand self-determination in politics, but suspect self-determination in morals. They demand laissez-faire in behavior. In theory, there is no contradiction between these positions. For freedom to be workable as a political and social system, strong inner controls, a powerful moral compass, and sense of values are needed. In practice, the contradiction is vast. The compass is increasingly hard to read, the values hard to find in a frantically open, mobile, fractioned society. Thus a troubling, paradoxical question: Does freedom destroy the inner disciplines that alone make freedom possible?

Democracy is built on an inordinate faith in ordinary people. Winston Churchill summed up democracy with the words, "Trust the people." But as Grunwald points out, that may be undercut if people lose their self-discipline and self-restraint. Freedom can thus be too free. "Freedom is the luxury of self-discipline," says one French philosopher. Well, we have the freedom, but little sign of self-discipline.

Having just won the Cold War, it is hard for Americans to take some of these warnings seriously. I would suggest we did not so much win the Cold War as we outlasted the Soviets by borrowing from our children. We may decline right along with the Soviet Union. Saul Bellow states

ominously: "The United States is as much threatened by an excess of liberty as Russia was from the absence of liberty."

To return to my starlight analogy, the seeds of today will not keep our nation prosperous or stable. We are violating too many of the laws of economic gravity and social stability. Each one of us this year will get over \$1,500 more from government services than we are willing to pay for. It is not enough to say we do not want that much government – however much government we democratically decide we want, we should pay for. We have hung an albatross of debt around our children's necks.

Our educational system's deterioration needs no elaboration. Read any morning newspaper. Thomas Jefferson stated, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free ... it expects what never was and never will be." Fewer and fewer people read newspapers; fewer and fewer people even watch the network news. When asked what beliefs they would die for, 48 percent of a large national poll said "none." Only 24 percent said they were willing to die for their country. Two-thirds of Americans have never given time to community activities or helped to solve community problems. Two-thirds of us cannot name our local congressman. More than half believe they have no influence on the decisions made by local government. One-fourth admitted that they do not care about their neighborhood's problems. This is not compatible with greatness. We have ignored, or taken for granted, a vital building block necessary to

continue greatness – some mutual sense of citizenship.

We can supply order for a while without citizenship, but not forever. We can ultimately never make enough laws or hire enough policemen to make up for a lack of self-discipline and self-restraint. A society that needs to put up mesh fences over many of its freeway overpasses to keep fellow citizens from throwing harmful objects at each other does not seem to have lasting power. A society that talks seriously about granting “rights” to animals and trees, but is silent about any obligations and responsibilities of citizenship, lacks proportion and sustainability.

“Civilization begins with order; grows with liberty and dies with chaos,” warns Will Durant. We risk that outcome. There has been a great unbalancing in America. We have unbalanced community in favor of individualism; responsibilities in favor of rights, and duties in favor of privileges. We want education without study; wealth without work; freedom without participation; and democracy without citizenship. We must self-correct or perish, but this is hardly a sustainable agenda. ■