On Citizenship

by William B. Dickinson

Dear Fellow Citizen: For more than a decade, these communications have begun with the same salutation. It was no accident that I chose "fellow citizen" to address a core constituency of people for whom citizenship holds an important, even sacred, place. The term has been used by presidents and others in times of national crisis when our nation must pull together for a common cause. Thomas Jefferson addressed "friends and fellow citizens" in his First Inaugural Address. So did Abraham Lincoln on a similar occasion. And President Bush employed the words in his speech to a traumatized nation in the wake of 9/11.

How, then, can we explain the relentless erosion in use of "citizen" as a benchmark of the rights and responsibilities that come with being an American? Who do some critics avoid the word as elitist or exclusionary when, in fact, throughout history it has been seen as something to be cherished? What, in the minds and hearts of people, will take its place?

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First, some definitions. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, a citizen is "a person owing loyalty to and entitled by birth or naturalization to the protection of a given state." *The Columbia Encyclopedia* describes a citizen as a "member of a state, native or naturalized, who owes allegiance to the government of the state and is entitled to certain rights." Citizenship, now so freely given and easily dismissed, once was hard-won.

In ancient Greece, property owners in the city-states were citizens and, as such, might vote and were subject to taxation and military service. Spartan men had to endure years of military service and mentoring before receiving the title. "At the age of 30," writes historian Will Durant, "if he had survived with honor the hardships of youth, he was admitted to the full rights and responsibilities of a citizen, and sat down to dine with his elders." And in Athens, writes Edith Hamilton (*The Echo of Greece*, 1957), "the height was reached when men who were no longer sacrificed to whatever was thought a benefit to the state, voluntarily sacrificed themselves for its welfare …. Athenians used their freedom to serve their city." Socrates drank hemlock, arguing that it was "more right and honorable to endure whatever penalty the city ordered rather than escape and run away." Civic duty, indeed!

The breakdown in the values attached to U.S. citizenship stems from the disparagement of national sovereignty and the glorification of globalization. Before 9/11 in particular, college students thought it fashionable to demean nationalistic feelings and seek a broader definition of their duties. "I don't consider myself a citizen of the United States," one student told me. "I am a citizen of the world." My reply was unnecessarily harsh: "Well, I hope that if you get busted for drug possession in Singapore, you call the United Nations instead of the U.S. Embassy." Of course, I knew where his first panicked call would go.

After the invasion of Iraq, talk surfaced briefly about the need for a military draft. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told reporters that draftees were of no value (he later apologized), but the message was clear. The United States would pursue its war against terrorism without participation of the citizenry at large. (*Full Disclosure Note: I was drafted during the Korean War and served two years in the Army.*) Students in one of my classes reacted with palpable alarm at the

thought that they might be called upon for military service. Trying to quiet such fears, the House in 2004 defeated a bill to reinstate mandatory military service on a vote of 402 to 2. Nor were taxpayers asked to make any sacrifices. The war is waged with money borrowed from future generations, and financed by foreign nations with large trade balances. Meantime, troop strength is shakily maintained by volunteers, many of them from disadvantaged backgrounds, and lured by costly bonuses and benefits. Foreign nationals are recruited with promises of fast-track citizenship.

Americans of my generation (born in the 1930s and 1940s) are likely to remember the importance attached to their first vote, no earlier than age 21. Voting was seen as a central obligation of citizenship. No more. Despite the lowering of voting age to 18, young people stay away from the polls in droves, creating by default a disproportionate advantage to their elders in setting social welfare policies. Our political parties bear some responsibility. Gerrymandering of state legislative and congressional district lines makes voting an exercise in futility. In the 2004 elections, only eight U.S. House members lost re-election bids. We must ponder this question: If large numbers of Americans no longer think it necessary to vote, or face conscription, or pay the taxes necessary to finance war, then what exactly are the obligations of citizenship?

The fault lines in our sense of civic obligation showed up during hurricanes Katrina and Rita. If a society is defined by the way it handles the bodies of victims, then we have reached a nadir. Corpses were left to rot on the streets and float in the fetid water of New Orleans for days and weeks, images usually associated with third world countries. In an angry analysis, "How the City Sank," (*New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2005), Nicolai Ouroussoff described the death of a "sense of public mission" that doomed New Orleans to flooding. "The challenge we face is not just about infrastructure," he concluded. "It's about reknitting the connective tissue that binds us into a functioning society." Others also saw the chaos in New Orleans as a breaking of the social contract that requires public officials to help protect families from forces beyond their control.

Uncertainty over such obligations is evident in the growing debate over dual citizenship. As immigration exploded in recent decades, pressure increased to allow newcomers to remain attached to their "home" countries. Census data show 34 million foreign-born persons living in the United States, the largest number in American history. U.S. law allows an American citizen to take out one or more other citizenships, swear allegiance to a foreign state, vote in foreign elections, and run for office in another country, among other things. A new book by Stanley A. Renshon, a political science professor at the City University of New York, argues that dual citizenship, especially when it entails active participation in the political life of an immigrant's home country, leads to conflicts of interest, attention and attachment. "Citizenship without emotional attachment is the civic equivalent of a one-night stand," he argues in *Reforming Dual Citizenship in the United States: Integrating Immigrants into the American National Community*.

Renshon and other critics believe that dual citizenship, and attempts to use it by foreign governments for their own purposes, weakens a crucial community tie. Now noncitizens, including illegal immigrants, are pressing to vote in local and state elections. The argument is that if people are working in the community and paying taxes, they deserve the opportunity to vote. But one thing that differentiates American citizenship from simple residency is the right to vote. Erasing that distinction will further weaken the ties that bind one American to another. Theodore Roosevelt put it this way in 1906: "There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American but something else also, isn't an American at all …. We have room for but one sole loyalty and that is a loyalty to the American people."

These debates suggest urgency in reasserting the meaning of citizenship. Our fractured youth culture in particular needs to be brought together in a common under-standing of the responsibilities of being a citizen.

American society cannot meet its democratic promise if citizens are simply free to consume goods and do what's best for themselves. Freedom without the counter-balancing weight of responsibility is not freedom, but license. ■