

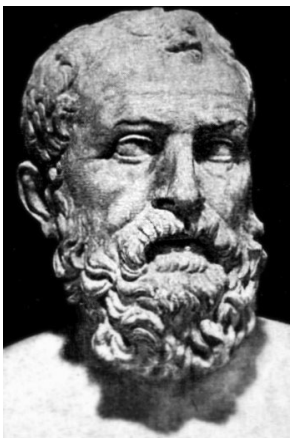
Society's Uncivil Slide

By WILLIAM B. DICKINSON

We live in an ever more uncivil society. Civility's markers — respect for others and self-sacrifice — seem out of date as economic stress turns us inward. At its worst, fragmentation of the communi-

fare of other beings. George Vecsey, sports columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote that Ashe “came from a time and place when people had a glimmer of some communal good.” He stands in stark contrast to those on Wall Street and elsewhere whose greed trumped concern for others.

The good life is inseparable from the good community. The ancient Greeks knew this, believing that the individual could find the good life only



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ty leads to warring groups of ideologues with fixed views unsusceptible to reason. Celebrities set bad examples. Jerry Rice, the quintessential team player, recently criticized some of today's NFL elite as divas who think only of “me, me, me.”

We look for the exceptional public figures embodying the ideal of concern for the welfare of others. The U.S. Open tennis tournament prompted several articles noting that its stadium is named for Arthur Ashe, who, 16 years after his death, is remembered as a person dedicated to the ultimate wel-

when associated with others in the community. Aristotle captured this ethos when he said that a city-less man is like “a solitary piece in checkers.” The great lawgiver Solon was described by Plutarch as one who believed that “a man should not be insensible or indifferent to the common weal, arranging his private affairs securely and glorying in the fact that he has no share in the distempers and distresses of his country.”

We have drifted some distance from this ideal. The United States is fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, wholly with recruited armed forces. The military draft, the spreading of risk throughout the community, has been abandoned and was described by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as of “no value.” When I was teaching, several of my college students told me that a draft is unconstitutional because it would interfere with their freedom of choice. Their elders, meanwhile,

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have been spared any tax increases to pay for the conflicts, the cost of which approaches \$1 trillion.

Perfecting oneself by perfecting the community is an ideal that should be reinforced, especially in today's tough economic times. The need has seldom been greater. The Census Bureau reported on September 10 that the nation's poverty rate climbed to 13.2 percent in 2008, up from 12.5 percent in 2007. Some 39.8 million U.S. residents then lived below the poverty line, portending an even higher number this year. Since the start of the recession in December 2007, the nation has lost about 6.9 million jobs. More than 14.9 million Americans were jobless by Labor Day. "An economy has psychological or, if you will, spiritual, dimensions," author Charles R. Morris has written. "A conviction of fairness, a feeling of not being totally on one's own, a sense of reasonable stability and predictability are all essential...."

Calamities sometimes bring out the best in people, if not their governments. Natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina do not merely destroy, but create numerous selfless acts of kindness. Rebecca Solnit makes this case in a new book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. As the prevailing order collapses, she says, another order takes shape: "In its place appears a reversion to improvised, collaborative, cooperative and local society."

Perhaps what happens in natural disasters can be applied to other forms of societal distress. A national United We Serve initiative recently encour-

aged community service in commemoration of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Indeed, an estimated 61 million people are currently volunteering around the country. Thousands of volunteer opportunities are listed on a government website, www.serve.gov. My hometown, Lawrence, Kansas, benefits from dozens of volunteer efforts, from community food banks and free health clinics to demonstration gardens and hospice counselors. The University of Kansas, along with many universities, encourages — even requires — community service of those seeking tenure. Helping out seems to be a Midwest tradition. Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota hold three of the five best volunteer rates among states, averaging about 40 percent. (Nevada, at 17.5 percent, leads states with the worst rates.)

Somewhat chastened by their exemption from national service, young people are giving more of their time to community service. Some are doing it out of a desire to embellish their applications to competitive colleges. Others, however, find fulfillment in volunteering through centers for community outreach and similar organizations. During the 2008 election campaign, Barack Obama and John McCain both called for expanding volunteer opportunities. Early in 2009, Congress overwhelmingly approved the Serve America Act for the staged growth of the domestic volunteer force that includes AmeriCorps. Its members are eligible for a small living stipend and then an educational stipend after



a year of work. The goal was to have 250,000 volunteers by 2017. But Congress continues to wrestle over funding. The desire to serve is there. In 2008, 35,000 college seniors and graduates applied for 4,000 available places in Teach for America. And 13,000 people, young and old, tried to get into the Peace Corps, with only one-third accepted.

But before a new politics of the common good can take root in the public at large, young people will need better instruction on the essentials of civic responsibility. Civics courses at the elementary and high school levels are notoriously inadequate. Higher education, too, has failed to foster civic engagement. A report from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute captured the problem in its title: “The Coming Crisis in Citizenship: Higher Education’s Failure to Teach America’s History and Insti-

tutions.” The report concluded that “Higher civic learning and greater civic involvement are closely associated.”

Will hard times put us on the path toward becoming a service nation? Nonprofit organizations have 9.4 million employees and 4.7 million full-time volunteers nationwide — 11 percent of the American workforce. Many of the new jobless are taking volunteer positions to fill time and bolster their resumes and self-esteem. Our plight demands a new understanding of the social contract whereby governments have obligations to their citizens and citizens have responsibilities to society. We have something to learn from the public philosophy of the Athenians. They believed that abstention from the life of the community soon led to abstention from life itself. ■

