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Volunteerism in the United States:

How the Government is Retracting its Promise to Take Care of its Citizens

Alexis de Tocqueville, a well-known critic of democratic participation in government institutions, stated in his book, *Democracy in America*, that volunteerism “prompts [Americans] to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state” (Tocqueville 507). Although many members of American society still subscribe to the idea that sacrificing a part of their lives ameliorates “the welfare of the state,” many critics of volunteerism insist that the responsibility of “the welfare of the state” lies within the United States government, and not individual members of American society. Critics of volunteerism insist that the federal and state taxes that they pay each year should be sufficient to ensure the social welfare needs of the less fortunate members of U.S. society; therefore they should not be required, nor asked to volunteer. In contrast, proponents of volunteerism argue that federal and state taxes do not produce enough money to financially assist all members of U.S. society that need aid; therefore it is society’s responsibility to make-up for what the government cannot provide. This cycle of transferring social welfare responsibility from the government to its citizens is becoming increasingly contentious¹.

¹ As society grows in numbers, many Americans are left without basic survival needs. This is why transferring responsibility is becoming contentious. As society’s population increases, the more people are in need of government assistance.

While the United States government continues to encourage members of American society to volunteer by creating agencies such as the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), many Americans² oppose the government's solicitations for free labor. The CNCS is one of the government's solutions that encourage Americans to volunteer so that the government does not have to provide paid employees to do similar work. By creating the CNCS, the government is attempting to solicit free labor to provide non-monetary support for social welfare programs that the government implicitly declines responsibility for. The CNCS uses political support of the U.S. government to persuade Americans to volunteer in their communities to argue that volunteering is a vital characteristic of United States' values. I argue that the United States government created the CNCS to solicit free labor from members of American society in order to reduce monetary compensation to federally sponsored social welfare programs. I argue this not only to call attention to the government's deterioration of funding for social welfare programs, but also to bring attention to the need for direct relationships between the United States government and non-profit organizations in order to resuscitate the nation's less fortunate from denial of government assistance. I prove this argument by addressing Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Policy because that was when social welfare programs became necessary for basic human survival. I then use John F. Kennedy's inaugural address to note when volunteerism historically gained popularity. In addition, I analyze the Peace Corps, a federally-sponsored program that Kennedy created, by proving that presidents use volunteering as ulterior motives to gain political clout. Next, I show how Ronald Reagan transferred social welfare responsibility from federally-sponsored programs to non-profit organizations, and describe how that transfer created a distance in the relationship between the government and its citizens. Then, I connect how direct relationships between

² By *Americans*, I am referring to all people living within the United States, not just citizens.

governments and non-profit organizations relate to the concept of volunteerism by using George W. Bush's continued attempt to solicit free labor from members of U.S. society by observing Bush's current recommendation of 4,000 hours of volunteering per member of society.

After I finish describing the historical background of my argument, I shift to the issue of direct relationships with the government. I begin by using the CNCS' website as a resource to demonstrate how the government misuses its political clout to solicit free labor instead of giving money directly to non-profit organizations. In addition to the CNCS website, I use a comparative political analysis article entitled "Civic Responsibility and Patterns of Voluntary Participation around the World," by Mary Alice Haddad, to compare how members of Japanese society view social welfare responsibility. Direct relationships with the government combined with historical evidence of social welfare programs leads to my conclusion that the government is transferring social welfare responsibility to the public, and by doing so, they are regressing to a pre-New Deal Era in which members of society have little income and live in extreme poverty due to a lack of government assistance.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Redefining Social Contract

Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated a change in how the government regards poverty stricken members of society by creating many social welfare programs. Out of the Depression Era, when many Americans were starving, Roosevelt created programs that put Americans back to work; therefore redefining American economic security. For example, Sidney M. Milkis discusses the redefinition of the government's responsibility to its citizens in his article "Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Economic Constitutional Order, and the New Politics of Presidential Leadership" by stating "This redefinition of the social contract, obligating the national government to provide an adequate standard of living for all its people, presupposed not only a

new understanding of individual rights but also a change in constitutional arrangements; it meant that the executive, as the leading national institution in American politics, would have to be strengthened” (Milkis 33). To paraphrase, Roosevelt enacted a new contract between American society, and the government by promising basic survival needs for all its citizens³. This new contract is known as the New Deal, and many programs that Roosevelt created stemmed from the idea that during the Great Depression Americans were left jobless and starving. The New Deal created a sense of security because it meant that the government would not ignore the needs of its citizens. Moreover, by promising basic survival rights to its citizens, the New Deal ensured its citizens survival; therefore creating nation-wide social welfare security. Although many New Deal programs, such as Social Security, are still active in current social welfare policy, the government is currently beginning to regress towards a pre-New Deal Era in which the government does not take responsibility for the basic survival needs of its citizens.

John F. Kennedy’s Presidency: Volunteerism Gains Popularity

From the New Deal Policy to the 1960’s, the United States was recovering from the Great Depression, and most Americans were still reliant upon the government for survival; however, many presidents between the New Deal and John F. Kennedy’s presidency were beginning to promote volunteerism. The concept of volunteerism gained popularity during John F. Kennedy’s presidency in 1961 when he requested in his inaugural address that Americans “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” (John F. Kennedy Inaugural Address). By implying that the United States government needed help from its citizens instead of helping its citizens, Kennedy initiated a transfer of social responsibility from the government to its citizens. Not two months after Kennedy’s inaugural address, he created the Peace Corps. By

³ I use the word *citizens* because in order to be eligible for most social welfare programs, you have to prove citizenship.

preemptively asking Americans to help the government, Kennedy initiated a response from Americans who were ready and willing to serve their country when the president called upon them. The Peace Corps, as described by Kennedy as a “pool of trained American men and women sent overseas by the U.S. Government, or through private institutions and organizations, to help foreign countries meet their urgent needs for skilled manpower” currently has over 8,000 trained volunteers in over 70 countries (Keeping Kennedy’s Promise). To paraphrase, the Peace Corps trains American men and women to help build houses, educate children, aid the medically needy, and bring food and water to those in other countries who demonstrate need. Critics of the Peace Corps oppose the idea of sending skilled workers overseas to help the less fortunate because they argue there are members of American society living in the U.S. who need government assistance. Kennedy’s encouragement of volunteerism began the government’s solicitation for free labor. Kennedy’s Peace Corps was, and still is an instrument for finding free labor.

Kennedy asserts that “Our Peace Corps is not designed as an instrument of diplomacy or propaganda or ideological conflict. It is designed to permit our people to exercise more fully their responsibilities in the great common cause of world development,” the political goals of the Peace Corps illustrate an ulterior motive (Keeping Kennedy’s Promise). In short, Kennedy suggests that the Peace Corps does not encompass any political agendas; it merely acts as an instrument for Americans to exercise their responsibilities as global citizens to help the needy. However, since Kennedy’s presidency was a period of political confusion, and Cold War policy generated cultural misunderstanding. As a result, Kennedy’s ulterior motive for promoting world peace was to restore the reputation of America and its members. For example, when discussing

the Coercion Period⁴ of Cold War policy, Michael R. Hall argues in “The Impact of the Peace Corps at Home and Abroad,” that “While economic and strategic considerations of the Cold War increasingly prompted U.S. policy-makers to take an expansionist line in global affairs, the Peace Corps aimed to display a different aspect of America’s might- its moral character” (Hall 54). In short, during Kennedy’s presidency, Cold War policy was to restore the American reputation. By sending American volunteers overseas, Kennedy relied on American volunteers to gain trust of other countries while simultaneously reestablishing political negotiations with foreign countries. In the case of Kennedy’s Peace Corps, the government acted upon the concept volunteerism by using its citizens to gain political power. In essence, the government reversed its social contract to its citizens that the New Deal promised, and used it as a mechanism for political motives. This was the beginning of the government’s refusal to acknowledge its social contract to its citizens; therefore, reverting back to a pre-New Deal Era.

Ronald Reagan’s Presidency: The Shift in the Concept of Volunteerism

Subsequent presidents continued to enact Kennedy’s approach to volunteerism until the 1980’s when Ronald Reagan created a shift in the concept of volunteerism by suggesting that non-profit private organizations would assist the public more than current government sponsored social service programs. Reagan issued a covert plea to the members of American society to assist the United States government. For example, on May 24, 1986 he commented on the increase of volunteerism in American society, stating, “a reassertion of good, old-fashioned neighborliness now that our country has regained its self-confidence” (Reagan). For Reagan, when Americans volunteer it leads to a heightened national security. Moreover, instead of the government supporting the public by social welfare programs, members of American society

⁴ The Coercion Period is known by most historians as the period of renewed negotiations with foreign nations. A period of great instability.

would take the government's place by offering their services or monetary donations to local shelters, needy neighbors, and hungry community members. In contrast, the United States government implies that members of American society who do not subscribe to the idea of "good, old-fashioned neighborliness," are a threat to national security. By creating this binary between volunteers and non-volunteers, Reagan is using intimidation to ask more Americans to volunteer. In any case, obtaining more volunteers works in the government's favor because it provides free labor for non-profit organizations; thereby reducing the financial support needed for government-sponsored social welfare programs.

Reagan created a transfer of responsibility from the government to private, non-profit organizations by creating the White House Office of Private Sector Initiatives in 1981, and stated that non-profit private organizations would "accomplish far, far more than government programs ever could"(White House Office of Private Sectors Initiatives). With this statement, Reagan asserts that compared to privately owned organizations, government programs are inadequate. However, Regan is really illustrating classic Republic politics by transferring social welfare responsibility from public to private sectors. By assuming that members of American society were willing to financially support non-profit organizations, and accept responsibility for the less fortunate, Reagan relied upon non-profit organizations to provide monetary, emotional, educational, and social support to less fortunate members of American society. Furthermore, Reagan created a sense of national pride in American society by implying that members of American society were more capable of caring for the nation's less fortunate. Since private, non-profit organizations mostly survive by donations from the public, Reagan assumes that American society had the monetary funds to support members of society who were in need of assistance. This shift in government responsibility for social welfare problems within American society created a distance between members of American society and the United States government

while encouraging government solicitation of free labor. Not only does this shift from government to citizen responsibility lead to increased poverty, but it also creates an even further distance from the social contract that the New Deal promised its citizens.

George W. Bush's Presidency: Current Volunteering Measurement

Although volunteerism underwent many modifications from the 1980s until today, current policy is indicative of government's solicitations for free labor. George W. Bush has continued Reagan's volunteering concept of transferring responsibility to non-profit organizations. Not only has Bush's focus continued on the path that Reagan set forth during his presidency, but author Paul C. Light argues in "The Volunteering Decision" that Bush's "focus is on the traditional notion that individuals should give to their communities out of the goodness of their hearts, not because of government inducements" (Light 23). In other words, Light suggests that Bush's role in getting American society to volunteer is based on a generational notion that volunteering is something cultural that all Americans should participate in, and they should not be forced by the government to volunteer. For example, Light's suggestion that Bush' focus is on volunteerism from "the goodness of their hearts," and not government encouragement is illogical because during Bush's first term as president "he asked [American society] not just for community spirit, but for 4,000 hours of it" (Light 25). If volunteering is something "that individuals should give to their communities out of the goodness of their hearts," then volunteering should not be measured. Although there is nothing improper with volunteering, the way that the government is using volunteering to rescind its responsibility to its citizens is immoral.

Overview of the Corporation for National and Community Service

The CNCS is an independent federal organization, which means that the president of the U.S. appoints the Board of Directors and the Chief Executive Officer to make all administrative decisions. The United States government created the CNCS in 1993 in order to solicit free labor from Americans. This organization uses the concept of national pride to market volunteerism members of American culture. For example, in the *About Us* section of the CNCS' website states, "Today, the ethic remains strong. Across our county Americans of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities are donating their time to schools churches hospitals, and local non-profits in an effort to improve their communities, and serve a purpose greater than themselves" (The Corporation for National and Community Service). In other words, most Americans are volunteering to help their communities improve, and in doing so they are subscribing to a set of values that most Americans subscribe to as well. The CNCS seems to imply that people who volunteer are active in U.S. values, and those who do not volunteer are not able to obtain that set of values because they do not volunteer. However, many members of American society argue that one does not have to volunteer to subscribe to U.S. values. By implying that there is a level of American values, CNCS is pressuring non volunteers to join American values by helping society's less fortunate. The CNCS assumes that in order to be included in these values, one has to participate in volunteering. In addition, when the CNCS states, "Today, the ethic remains strong," they are equating volunteering with morality. By suggesting that volunteering and morality are interchangeable, the CNCS imply that in order to be considered a participant in American values one must volunteer. However, Americans who subscribe to the idea that their tax dollars should pay for social welfare programs reject the notion that volunteering leads to a part of American values that is unattainable by non-volunteers. Agencies such as the CNCS are

aiding the government in creating a pre-New Deal Era which is consequently, encouraging the government to leave social welfare responsibility to its citizens.

The United States government attempts to use the CNCS in order to create a closer, more embedded relationship between American society and the government. The CNCS uses financial support from the United States government to persuade members of American society that the government is opening up negotiations with them to solve social welfare problems. For example, the CNCS' mission statement states that they “[Act] as a catalyst by providing strategic critical support to volunteer organizations that in turn deliver much needed services to communities throughout the country” (The Corporation for National and Community Service). In other words, the CNCS receives money from the government to find members of society willing to work for free. Since the CNCS is a federal organization, its funding comes from the U.S. government. Instead of the government giving money directly to non-profit organizations, the government gives money to this corporation to find volunteers to work for federally sponsored organizations. Rather than creating a closer, more embedded relationship with the government to solve social welfare problems, the government created this corporation to take care of its lack of funding for social welfare programs. In doing so, the government disregards the need for direct negotiations with members of American society to solve social welfare problems. By disregarding direct negotiations, the government is implicitly refusing to acknowledge its social contract with its citizens; therefore, abandoning its social responsibility to its people.

Comparing Views of Government Social Responsibility: The United States and Japan⁵

Although the CNCS claims that volunteering is a characteristic of United States values, Mary Alice Haddad writes in “Civic Responsibility and Patterns of Voluntary Participation

⁵ I use Japan to compare to the United States because it is the most opposite to the U.S in respects to volunteerism.

around the World” that volunteerism is directly correlated with how members of a society view government responsibility for solving social welfare problems. Haddad uses studies of comparative political and civic society to argue that countries whose members view the government as responsible for solving social problems volunteer in organizations that have close relationships with that government. For example, when Haddad compares volunteering in the United States to volunteering in Japan she finds that “Japanese have comparatively higher participation in those organizations that have embedded relationships with the government, whereas Americans have comparatively higher participation in those organizations that do not have embedded relationships with the government” (Haddad 1222). In other words, Haddad suggests that members who view the government as responsible for solving social problems volunteer in organizations that have close embedded relationships⁶ with their government. Members of Japanese society view their government as responsible for social problems; therefore, members of Japanese society are more likely to work with the government to solve social welfare problems. In contrast, since members of American society have a higher rate of volunteers in organizations that have distant non-embedded relationships⁷ with the government, then members of American society are less likely to work with the government to solve social welfare problems. This is not to suggest that all members of Japanese and American society view their governments as such. This comparison shows a pattern between members of society who view responsibility of social welfare problems differently. Furthermore, since members of Japanese society have a close relationship in terms of collectively solving social welfare problems with their government, then the Japanese have created an open forum for making

⁶ Embedded relationships are those who work with the government to solve social welfare problems. These relationships are not private, non-profit organizations. They are funded the government. Embedded relationships are prominent in countries such as Japan. Some examples of embedded relationships are Parent-Teacher Associations, and volunteer fire departments.

⁷ Non-embedded relationships are more common in countries such as the U.S. They do not have a direct relationship with the government and most likely lobby politicians to initiate political change. These relationships consist of private-non profit organizations that receive most funding from members of that society, and not the government.

change possible in relation to social welfare problems. The Japanese government views themselves as responsible for their citizens' wellbeing; therefore, its citizens can initiate social change in contrast to the U.S. government which is trying to transfer social responsibility to its citizens.

Although the CNCS relies on members of American society to take action and begin volunteering to help solve the nation's social welfare problems, many argue that it is society's responsibility, not the government's, to create programs to take care of needy populations that require assistance. This idea that members of American society are responsible for the nation's less fortunate can be risky because it leads to political corruption. Haddad argues that non-embedded organizations are forced to lobby politicians in order for them to formulate policy change. She uses the example of the Japanese government to argue that organizations that have close relationships with the government are more likely to implement change over those who do not have close relationships. For example, Haddad states when discussing the results of her study that "In many countries, the non-embedded organizations that use overtly political methods of advocacy-lobbying politicians, mass public relations campaigns, or legal battles, which are the most common in the United States-are quite rare. In [Japan], embedded organizations that work closely with bureaucrats in making and implementing policy are often the most prevalent" (Haddad 1240). In other words, countries that have distant relationships with the government resort to paying politicians to vote in their favor, whereas, in countries that have close relationships with the government work directly with government officials to implement policy change. Haddad asserts that close embedded relationships with the government are beneficial in implementing policy change more than distant relationships. This makes sense because, according to Haddad, when non-profit organizations begin lobbying politicians, corruption occurs. This example illustrates that closer, embedded relationship with the U.S. government

create open forums for implementing change than non-embedded relationships that encourage political corruption. As I have already stated, Reagan created a distance between members of American society and the government when he transferred government responsibility of social welfare programs to non-profit organizations. Haddad argues that this distance is what creates political corruption, so the less direct the U.S. government is or becomes the more corruption exists within government politics. The United States government's struggle for power over who is responsible for social welfare policy can only last as long as its citizens allow the government to transfer social contract back upon its citizens.

In short, the United States government is promoting volunteerism to rescind its social contract to its citizens. Even though Alexis de Tocqueville argues that volunteerism ameliorates "the welfare of the state," the government has a responsibility to its citizens (Tocqueville 507). Although the Great Depression was the cause of the redefinition of social contract, the government is in no position to rescind its promise now that the Great Depression is long over. From Kennedy to Bush, encouraging volunteerism has been a political agenda for most presidents. Clearly, the Japanese government has figured out that its responsibility to its citizens works in their favor because the government involves members of their society to advocate social welfare change. One thing is certain: if the United States government continues to promote volunteerism as a maneuver to break the social contract by transferring responsibility to its citizens, then Americans' basic survival needs will not be met, and the government will revert back to a pre-New Deal Era. Not only will this cause many Americans to starve, but many Americans will die because of the lack of basic survival needs such as medical care, and clothes. Social contract is in need of resuscitation, and citizens of the United States should forget about volunteering for the government. Instead, they should become advocates in promoting social welfare change.

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