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# The Presidents and Civil Society

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## The Presidents and Civil Society

What have they done regarding volunteering and philanthropy in civil society?\*

FIRST GIVERS: THE PRESIDENCY AND PHILANTHROPY  
CIVIL SOCIETY



A poet famously said, "No man is an island," and we all know it's true. Beyond our individual selves, we live out our lives relating to four distinct but overlapping spheres: (1) family, (2) work, (3) government, and (4) civil society. Of these four spheres, civil society allows us the most freedom.

Think about it. Everybody is born into a family that he or she had no voice in choosing. Most everybody must enter a contractual relationship in the marketplace to earn a living. Just about everybody has to pay taxes to a government that has a monopoly over legitimate force and coercion. In all three of those spheres, our freedom of choice is limited. By contrast, we are fairly free to choose how and to what extent we participate in civil society.

Civil society can be defined as the entire network of social institutions that have been established, distinct from our families, workplace, and government. Civil society is what people do when they voluntarily associate with one another. It is what people are when they come together to express themselves in freedom. It's the PTA, spelling bees, Rotarians, soup kitchens, Elks, little-league baseball, Habitat for Humanity, school plays, bowling leagues, historical reenactments -- the thousands of ways Americans come together in freedom to do something with (and often for) others.

As I have written elsewhere,<sup>[1]</sup> civil society is an idea with a long history, traceable to Aristotle's *koinonia politike* and Cicero's *societas civilis*. By the time Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, it was clear that American civil society was one of our nation's greatest achievements. There were historical reasons for the development of civil society in the U.S. Britain's habit of benign neglect toward her North American colonies had forced Americans to be self-reliant. Also colonial government was less dominating, less intrusive, than government back in the homeland. Tocqueville concluded that civil society was much stronger in America than it was in Europe. Voluntary associations, he observed, were filled with superabundant force and energy to get things done. They performed indispensable functions. Such associations acted as the "independent eye of society," enabling people to help one another when the need was greater than an individual or family could meet, and when state action was too long in coming or not the optimal solution in any case.

What was true in Tocqueville's day remains true in our own. Despite signs of diminution, despite the compelling argument of Robert Putnam in his recent best seller, *Bowling Alone*, America continues to have the most vibrant, generous, far-reaching civil society in the world. We are the envy of other nations.

### PRESIDENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Given this invaluable social resource, what role (if any) does the American president have in nurturing civil society?

The Constitution is silent on the question. The chief executive's role, as defined by our fundamental law, is to lead the national government on domestic and foreign policy.

Beyond that, we can probably all agree on the minimalist answer: to do no harm. A president should not support legislation that would discourage the American tradition of volunteering. Nor should a president support legislation that would supplant voluntary associations or make them wither on the vine, especially when volunteers and philanthropists are helping meet real social needs.

Beyond these common-sense guidelines, there is no formula for what a president should do with regard to civil society. And yet an Oval Office tradition has developed in recent decades that involves our presidents in civil society. Several of our chief executives have used the bully pulpit to speak out in support of volunteering. A few have even launched initiatives to encourage volunteering because there is the perception that our civil society has deteriorated, that volunteer efforts have diminished, that real social needs are not being met.

The history of presidents and civil society has yet to be written -- it would be an extremely worthwhile topic to tackle -- but there is much grist for the classroom mill. It matters not whether you are Republican, Democratic, or independent. Teachers who seek to inculcate the value of giving in their students would do well to turn to the lives of our presidents and first ladies. By their word and deed, our first families have done much to promote volunteering and philanthropy. Teachers can point to the first families' example to help students learn more about our civil society, the importance of volunteering, the different ways Americans volunteer, and the importance of leadership in promoting a robust civil society.

Of course, because presidents are so consumed with domestic and foreign affairs, they have relatively little time to volunteer personally, and they often give civil society a low priority in their agenda. But several of our chief executives have had quite an impact while in office.

One of **President John F. Kennedy's** most remembered quotations (even if it was not original with him) could serve as the motto for Americans volunteering: "Ask not what our country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." It followed that one of Kennedy's most cherished legacies is the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps traces its roots and mission to 1960, when then-Senator Kennedy challenged students at the University of Michigan to serve their country in the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. From that seed-idea grew an agency of the federal government devoted to world peace and friendship. Since its founding, more than 170,000 Peace Corps volunteers -- sent out as "missionaries for democracy" -- have been invited by 136 host countries to work on issues ranging from AIDS education, to information technology, to environmental preservation. Today's Peace Corps continues to have an impact, stepping into new countries like East Timor, helping out in essential areas such as business development, working in emerging areas such as information technology, and committing more than 1,000 new volunteers as a part of President Bush's HIV/AIDS Act of 2003.

**President George H. W. Bush** challenged Americans to volunteer more in his inaugural address of 1989. He referred to a "thousand points of light," bringing good works and hope to others. The Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network mobilizes literally millions of volunteers who are helping solve serious social problems in thousands of communities. Through a variety of programs and services, the Foundation encourages people from all walks of life -- businesses, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, low-income communities, families, youth, and older adults -- to volunteer. The Foundation has gained a national reputation as America's "Address for Volunteering." As the current President George W. Bush commented, "The Points of Light Foundation embodies America's spirit of volunteerism and the goodwill of its citizens. Our nation will ... continue to answer the call of people in need."

**President Bill Clinton** created the AmeriCorps National Service Program in 1993, his first year in office. Since then, AmeriCorps has brought together nearly 200,000 people of all ages and backgrounds to solve community problems and improve the lives of Americans. AmeriCorps members serve through more than 2,100 nonprofits, public agencies, and faith-based organizations. They tutor and mentor youth, build affordable housing, teach computer skills, clean parks and streams, run after-school programs, and help communities respond to disasters. After a year of full-time public service, AmeriCorps members receive education awards to help finance college or pay back student loans.

**President George W. Bush's** Faith-Based and Community Initiative tries to break new ground in government's role in helping those in need. Too often government has ignored or impeded the efforts of faith-based and community organizations. Their compassionate efforts to improve their communities have been needlessly and improperly inhibited by bureaucratic red tape and restrictions placed on funding. Often church-state concerns are raised. The White House and Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiative -- located in seven Federal agencies -- are working to support the essential work of these organizations. Their goal is to make sure that grassroots leaders can compete on an equal footing for federal dollars, receive greater private support, and face fewer bureaucratic barriers.

Those are four examples of presidents using their office to effect change. But it's useful also to look at what presidents did for volunteering -- and as volunteers -- when out of office.

**George Washington** is the indispensable place to start. He serves as the perennial model of a man who attains the highest office in the land, the presidency, and then can leave the allure of politics and return to civilian life: the American Cincinnatus. It's not that Washington was a volunteer -- he was not; it's that he could give up the power and live for something higher than I-me-mine.

**Rutherford Hayes** devoted his final years to philanthropy and volunteering.

**Gerald R. Ford** contributes time and effort to numerous charities and to civic education. He and President Carter, for example, supported the effort to bring the Declaration of Independence to communities across America. He especially supports the Boy Scouts of America and the Betty Ford Center for addiction recovery.

**Jimmy Carter** serves as a model among recent ex-presidents. In 1982 he founded the Carter Center at Emory University. The staff and fellows join with President Carter to resolve conflict, promote democracy, protect human rights, and prevent disease and other afflictions. Through the Global 2000 program, the Center advances health and agriculture in the developing world.

President Carter and The Carter Center have engaged in conflict mediation in Ethiopia and Eritrea (1989), North Korea (1994), Liberia (1994), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1994), Sudan (1995), the Great Lakes region of Africa (1995-96), Sudan and Uganda (1999), and Venezuela (2002-2003). Under his leadership, The Carter Center has sent 47 international election-monitoring delegations to elections in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. These include Panama (1989), Nicaragua (1990), Guyana (1992), Venezuela (1998), Nigeria (1999), Indonesia (1999), East Timor (1999), Mexico (2000), China (2001), Jamaica (2002), and Guatemala (2003).

For his efforts, Carter received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 "for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development." And as if all these contributions were not enough, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter volunteer one week a year for Habitat for Humanity, renovating and building homes for needy people. He also teaches Sunday school and is a deacon in his Baptist church in Plains.

Many of our presidents were volunteering and participating robustly in civil society prior to entering the White House, something every citizen can be inspired by. This should not surprise us. Presidents belong to a pretty exclusive club -- there have only been 42 of them -- and they were often extraordinary individuals in their youth. Indeed, many showed a well-developed civic consciousness before they entered politics, contributing to numerous causes.

**George H. W. Bush** is exemplary in this regard. He has been criticized as a blue blood who did not know the price of ordinary items in a grocery store. But that blue blood also instilled in him a strong sense of responsibility to his community. When he and Barbara moved to Midland, Texas, after the war, the young businessman was not only trying to start a business; he got busy volunteering from day one.

#### FIRST LADIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

We mustn't overlook the first ladies who participated in civil society at every stage in life. Many were volunteering prior to entering the White House; they were not just at home raising children. Early in our nation's history, it was characteristic of first ladies to volunteer when America was at war. Indeed, they often served close to the front, just a few miles from their husbands, which means they were literally on the front lines of volunteering. (Speaking of war, I know a colonel in the Air National Guard who likes to say that serving in the National Guard is the ultimate community service because it makes all other forms of community service possible.) What were our first ladies doing before they were first ladies? Some pretty remarkable things.

**Martha Washington** was at Valley Forge, providing materiel from her personal property and organizing other women to do all the things necessary for an army to survive: nursing, knitting, cooking, and a host of other tasks. These women did the dirty work -- they knew every bodily fluid of the human being. We owe them a great debt. Without their dedication and hard work there would have been no Continental Army, no Revolutionary War, no United States of America.

**Lucy Hayes**, the wife of General (and future President) Rutherford B. Hayes, served in a variety of capacities during the Civil War. She, by the way, was the first first lady to earn a college degree. Following Rud wherever he went into battle, Lucy took her sewing machine to mend clothes and household items to mend wounds. One of the people she most impressed was future president William McKinley.

After the Civil War Lucy Hayes remained active. During the mid-winter recess in 1865, she accompanied a congressional committee to New Orleans to see for themselves the hardships the South was suffering after the war.

**Eleanor Roosevelt's** earliest volunteer activity came about almost by accident. When in New York, Eleanor and Franklin lived with his mother Sara. Sara dominated her daughter-in-law Eleanor to an oppressive degree. So when Franklin moved to Washington, DC, to take an assignment as undersecretary of the Navy, Eleanor experienced much-needed personal freedom. Until the United States got involved in the First World War, Eleanor's main social activity was to go to parties and to leave calling cards. But once the U.S. declared war, she had a new sense of purpose. She provided material support for the troops and organized women to meet the troop trains coming through Union Station in Washington. They handed out hot drinks, cigarettes, knitted socks, and warm buns.

Once they got into the White House, first ladies were not just hosting tea parties. Many used their position to champion civil society.

**Lady Bird Johnson** created a First Lady's Committee for a More Beautiful Capital, then expanded her program to include the entire nation. She took a highly active part in her husband's war-on-poverty program, especially the Head Start project for preschool children. She still supports causes dear to her--notably the National Wildflower Research Center, which she founded in 1982.

**Pat Nixon** used her position as First Lady to encourage volunteer service -- "the spirit of people helping people." She invited hundreds of families to nondenominational Sunday services in the East Room.

**Betty Ford** was frank about her successful battle against dependency on drugs and alcohol. She helped establish the Betty Ford Center for treatment of this problem at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage.

As first lady, **Rosalynn Carter** focused national attention on the performing arts. She invited to the White House leading classical artists from around the world, as well as traditional American artists. She also took a strong interest in programs to aid mental health, the community, and the elderly. From 1977 to 1978, she served as the Honorary Chairperson of the President's Commission on Mental Health. She is currently vice chair of The Carter Center in Atlanta, founded in 1982 to promote peace and human rights worldwide. At the Center, she leads a program to diminish stigma against mental illness and to promote greater access to mental health care. She also is a partner with the ex-president in projects to resolve conflict, promote human rights, improve global health, and build democracy in some 65 countries.

**Nancy Reagan** has also been active in civil society. While her husband was governor of California from 1967 to 1975, she worked with numerous charitable groups. She spent many hours visiting veterans, the elderly, and the emotionally and physically handicapped. These people continued to interest her as first lady. She gave her support to the Foster Grandparent Program, the subject of her 1982 book, *To Love A Child*. Increasingly, she concentrated on the fight against drug and alcohol abuse among young people. She visited prevention and rehabilitation centers, and in 1985 held a conference at the White House for first ladies of 17 countries to focus international attention on this problem. She also continued to work on her campaign to teach children to "just say no" to drugs long after she left the White House.

**Barbara Bush's** story is poignant. The death of their daughter Robin from leukemia when she was not quite four left George and Barbara Bush with a lifelong compassion. She says, "Because of Robin, George and I love every living human more." As wife of the vice president, she selected the promotion of literacy as her special cause. As first lady, she called working for a more literate America the "most important issue we have." Involved with many organizations devoted to this cause, she became honorary chairman of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. A strong advocate of volunteerism, Mrs. Bush helped many causes--including the homeless, AIDS, the elderly, and school volunteer

programs.

**Hillary Clinton** became known for her commitment to health care and children's issues. She worked hard to raise public awareness of the need for children to be immunized.

**Laura Bush's** passion has been childhood literacy. She created a national initiative, "Ready to Read, Ready to Learn," to inform parents and policy makers about early childhood education and the importance of reading aloud to and with children from their earliest days. She helped to develop a series of magazines called "Healthy Start, Grow Smart," to provide parents with information about their infant's cognitive development and health.

As one of her first priorities, Mrs. Bush convened the White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development. Prominent scholars and educators shared research on how infants learn and how parents and caregivers can prepare children for lifelong learning. To share this information with a broader audience, Mrs. Bush hosts regional summits across the country.

A vital part of early childhood education is teaching children to read and to love books. Mrs. Bush strongly supports the president's goal to ensure that all children learn to read by the third grade. She joined with the Library of Congress to launch the first National Book Festival in Washington, D.C., in September 2001. The 2003 National Book Festival drew 60,000 book-lovers from across the nation. Mrs. Bush also hosts the series "White House Salute to America's Authors," to celebrate our country's great literary works. Featured authors have included Mark Twain, Women Writers of the West, authors of the Harlem Renaissance, and three classic American storytellers: Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty.

To succeed in school, children also need excellent teachers. Mrs. Bush works with teacher recruitment programs like Teach For America, The New Teacher Project, and Troops to Teachers to encourage students, professionals, and retired members of the military to become teachers. Mrs. Bush also hosted a White House Conference on Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers.

As Honorary Ambassador for the Decade of Literacy of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Laura Bush leads America's efforts to bring education to people worldwide, especially to women and girls. She is a strong advocate for equal rights for all women. Mrs. Bush is the only first lady in history to record a full presidential radio address, speaking out on the plight of women and children living under the Taliban. She is leading an effort to build a teacher-training institute for women in Afghanistan.

In honor of her mother, a breast cancer survivor, Mrs. Bush supports education campaigns for breast cancer and heart disease. She partners with the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute to share The Heart Truth, which is that heart disease is the leading cause of death among women in America. Mrs. Bush educates women about their risks and stresses the importance of healthy eating, exercise and preventive screenings.

#### A LIFE OF SERVICE: HERBERT AND LOU HOOVER

I'd bet few people know who is responsible for feeding more human beings than any other man who has walked the earth: Herbert Hoover. Scholars estimate that Hoover helped keep 80 million people from malnutrition or starvation. He should not get the credit alone. Working as his partner was his wife Lou Henry Hoover, a remarkable humanitarian in her own right.

For his indefatigable efforts to feed, shelter, and clothe the needy in a career that spanned five decades, Hoover was called the Great Humanitarian. In the course of a richly accomplished life, he was also the Great Engineer and the Great Secretary and the Great Public Servant. Alas, his only career mistake was to be president of the United States.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND STUDY

Why did presidents and first ladies get involved in philanthropy in the first place?

Did the nature or focus of their volunteering and philanthropy change over time?

Is it any coincidence that presidents who were not considered particularly successful -- Hoover, Carter -- contributed vigorously to civil society as ex-presidents?

How did the first families' commitment to volunteering and philanthropy change over time?

What is the relationship among civil society, government, and domestic society? How do they expand and contract in relation to each other?

Based on the previous answer, which presidents may have undermined civil society through their policies? [FDR, LBJ, Nixon?]

*(Question from Clay P. of Grand Rapids, Michigan)*

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\* Full question: History books tell us a lot about what presidents have done to define government, craft domestic policy, shape foreign policy, and influence the economy. But they don't tell us much about what presidents have done to strengthen or weaken that other great area of American life, civil society. What have they done regarding volunteering and philanthropy in civil society?

[1] Gleaves Whitney, Afterword to *The American Cause*, by Russell Kirk (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), pp. 151-52.

[2] George H. Nash, "Herbert Clark Hoover," in *Notable American Philanthropists*, ed. Robert T. Grimm Jr. (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 151-55.