



Toward a Civil Society

by Lawrence W. Reed

(The Mackinac Center first published a version of this commentary in July 1996. As the 2000 presidential election approaches, its re-issuance is especially timely.)

Summary

When French social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, he was amazed that Americans were constantly forming voluntary associations to meet social needs of every kind. Americans today should return to this vision of the civil society rather than relying on impersonal, involuntary, and ultimately ineffective government programs to provide for their needs.

Main text word count: 802

Genuine cultural progress occurs when individuals solve problems without resorting to politicians or the police and bureaucrats they employ.

“Taxation,” said Oliver Wendell Holmes, “is the price we pay for civilization.” But a much better case can be made that taxation is actually the price we pay for the *lack* of civilization. If people took better care of themselves, their families, and those in need around them, government would shrink and society would be stronger as a result.

Economist Mark Skousen put it well when he said, “[E]very time we pass another law or regulation, every time we raise taxes, every time we go to war, we are admitting failure of individuals to govern themselves. When we persuade citizens to do the right thing, we can claim victory. But when we force people to do the right thing, we have failed.” The triumph of persuasion over force, people helping people because they want to and not because government tells them they have to, is the sign of a civilized people and a civil society, Skousen argues.

For all people interested in the advancement and enrichment of our culture, this is a crucial observation with far-reaching implications. Cultural progress should not be defined as taking more and more of what other people have earned and spending it on “good” things through a government bureaucracy. Genuine cultural progress occurs when individuals solve problems without resorting to politicians or the police and bureaucrats they employ.

When the French social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville visited a young, bustling America in the 1830s, he cited the vibrancy of civil society as one of this country’s greatest assets. He was amazed that Americans were constantly forming “associations” to advance the arts, build libraries and hospitals, and meet social needs of every kind. If something good needed to be done, it rarely occurred to our forebears to expect politicians and bureaucrats, who were distant in both space and spirit, to do it for them. “Amongst the laws which rule human nature,” wrote Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, “there is none which seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized, or to become more so, the art of associating together must grow and improve”

It ought to be obvious today, with government at all levels consuming a whopping 41 percent of personal income, that many Americans don't think, act, and vote the way most Americans did in Tocqueville's day. So how can we restore and strengthen the attitudes and institutions that formed the foundation of American civil society?

Certainly, we can never do so by blindly embracing government programs that crowd out private initiatives or by impugning the motives of those who raise legitimate questions about those government programs. We cannot restore civil society if we have no confidence in ourselves and believe that government has a monopoly on compassion. We'll never get there if we tax away nearly half of people's earnings and then, like children who never learned their arithmetic, complain that people can't afford to meet certain needs.

We can advance civil society only when people get serious about replacing government programs with private initiative, when discussion gets beyond such infantile reasoning as, "If you want to cut government subsidies for Meals on Wheels, you must be in favor of starving the elderly." Civil society will blossom when we understand that "hiring" the expensive middleman of government is not the best way to "do good," that it often breaks the connection between people in need and caring people who want to help. We'll make progress when the "government is the answer" cure is recognized for what it is—false charity, a cop-out, a simplistic non-answer that doesn't get the job done well, even though it makes its advocates smug with self-righteous satisfaction.

Thoughtful observers are noticing encouraging trends in the country. An article in the January 29, 1996, issue of *U.S. News & World Report* trumpeted the "revival of civic life." Among the examples it cited was that of Frankford, Pennsylvania. Frankford had become a highly taxed, depressed, and government-dependent community desperate for answers. A spark of civil society was lit, and now people are solving problems themselves. They're not sitting back, bemoaning their plight, and editorializing about how the politicians should save them. "Once you get past the resentment of the government not doing it for you, you get it done yourself," said a local resident.

We can learn a whole lot more from the Frankfords of the world than from those who think charity means spending someone else's money or just pontificating about social needs from behind a word processor. Restoring civil society requires that we "just say no" to shirking our personal and local responsibilities and expecting Lansing or Washington to do everything for us. It requires us to think creatively about stimulating private initiative, and then just doing it.

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