

News and Commentary

Maine Policy Review (1992). Volume 1, Number 3

Creating a more civic-minded culture

by Gregory P. Gallant

The Margaret Chase Smith Library is pleased to co-sponsor the December, 1992 edition of *Maine Policy Review*, which focuses on issues related to creating a more civic-minded culture in Maine. Senator Smith devoted her career to public service in its ideal form. Perhaps more than any other tenet, she values the obligation of Americans to perform their responsibilities of citizenship. Without the fulfilling of these responsibilities by citizens, she believes, the foundations on which our political system is based will be weakened. It is quite fitting, therefore, that the Library play a modest role in addressing this important topic.

The timeliness of this publication is magnified in some ways by this year's presidential election and by America's changing position within the global economy. During the campaign, we witnessed a remarkable showing by a third party candidate. Calling for the application of business principles to government in order to solve the nation's fiscal problems, Ross Perot garnered surprising support across the country for his perceived ability to accomplish what he promised without the gridlock characteristic of the American political tradition. In doing so, he touched at least two nerves: a dissatisfaction with politics as usual; and, America's waning competitive position internationally. He also appealed to the desire of some for a quick solution to the nation's problems. However, without a long-term commitment on the part of Americans to civic responsibilities and participation, as well as an understanding of the governmental process, Americans may become susceptible to solutions based on emotion.

Our government is based on citizens of the United States performing their civic responsibilities - responsibilities which, as Rushworth Kidder points out, are neither short-term nor apt to pay financial dividends. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights are not by-laws under which a corporation and Board of Directors operate with the overriding goal of profitability. The rules of maximizing profits do not apply to the obligations of public service. And although organizations should strive for a balanced budget operationally, the returns of public service and civic obligation are not always equal to the investment required. As James F. Orr III observes in his article in this issue, profit-making and civic participation are not mutually exclusive; they can, and should, complement each other.

In the past, our system has been strong enough to deal with innate inefficiencies. This may no longer be the case. There appears to be a consensus that major segments of our work force are ill-equipped to compete in the new global economy. Low-paying jobs are moving to developing countries. Highly-skilled positions with good compensation are harder to create and maintain. This task is made more difficult because many in our work force do not possess the skills required for these new positions. If a segment of American society is unable to compete

economically, and thus does not or cannot perform its obligations of citizenship, its members may seek short-term satisfaction in the offerings of a candidate who exploits the fears that citizens have about the future.

We must begin working toward creating a more civic-minded culture. The cost of doing otherwise is simply too high. This truth of this is being reflected in a growing number of social ills that plague American society, including a too-readily compromised adherence to ethical standards. Participation by all segments of society in a healthy, even contentious debate, is crucial. Although difficult choices need to be made, the public airing of a vast array of conflicting opinion is critical to arriving at decisions that represent true consensus. We must hope that the choices made in this crucible will forsake expediency in the name of our future well-being.

The returns from such a complex, but democratic, process may only be realized in the long term. To paraphrase Walter Lippmann, sometimes we must plant trees that we may never get to sit under. The efforts we make now to instill a sense of citizenship and civic responsibility in young and old alike are the seeds of those trees that we leave to citizens of the future. A truly democratic society requires no less if it is to endure.

(Editor's note: The opinions expressed by Dr. Gallant in this commentary are his own. They do not necessarily represent the views of Senator Smith or the Margaret Chase Smith Library Center's staff and board of directors.)

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Full cite: Gallant, Gregory P. 1992. **Commentary: Creating a more civic-minded culture.** Vol. 1(3): 49-50.