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## Sacrifice: An American virtue on rebound

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It was a simple question, really, one the debate moderator hoped would lead Republican presidential candidates into a discussion about how much the public was willing to give to benefit the nation. "What sacrifice," she said, "would you ask Americans to make to lower the country's debt?"

Sacrifice is a word that Americans like to associate with their heritage, their ideals and themselves. But these days, it's not a word that comes easily to the lips of politicians with aspirations to the highest office in the land.

"It's absolutely unnecessary to sacrifice," said Ron Paul, setting the tone for the December presidential debate.

"Sometimes it's not so much doing things so that people sacrifice," said Mike Huckabee, promising to slash spending without pain to a single voter. "It's doing them differently."

Nor was Mitt Romney about to ask Americans to give up anything for any cause, much less fiscal discipline. "The sacrifice that we need from the American people, it's this: It's saying 'Let the programs that don't work go.'"

No Mother Teresas there. Whether the candidates misunderstood the question or were afraid to talk honestly about sacrifice in public, their careful answers reflected how most politicians prefer to focus on what they would do for voters rather than what they would ask of us. Like the cereal ad that boasted "eat right, sacrifice nothing," Washington promises us more services AND lower taxes, more war AND no draft, all gain and no pain.

We live in a time, and in a nation, consumed by consuming, a materialistic culture that encourages people to pursue happiness via shopping sprees and save sacrifice for tithing on Sundays and distant do-gooders.

But it would be a mistake to assume there is no stomach for sacrifice or its sister virtue, service in our society and in our politics. The desire to serve is part of human nature, and a particularly American virtue. History tells us that our selfless instincts flower in troubled times like these, and can be tapped by leaders looking for ways to motivate an anxious people.

Generations of Americans have been willing to die, or risk death, for causes greater than themselves to liberate the colonies from Britain; to abolish slavery or, depending on the point of view, preserve the Confederacy; to extend U.S. borders in fulfillment of our manifest destiny; to defeat fascism and curb Communism; and, yes, to dismantle Saddam Hussein's regime.

Whether we're asked to sacrifice individually (join the military, feed the poor, conserve energy) or collectively (mandated national service, cuts in entitlement programs, a tax on carbon emissions), the next president is likely to find the most receptive audience since John F. Kennedy's "ask not" address captivated a generation nearly 50 years ago.

Government data show Americans over the age of 16 are volunteering at historically high rates, with 61 million giving their time to help others by mentoring students, beautifying streets, responding to disasters, and much more.

And social scientists say the so-called 9/11 generation the leading edge of which consists of young Americans who were in high school and college when terrorists struck New York and Washington seven years ago may be the most civic-minded in the nation's history, in addition to being among most ethnically diverse, technologically savvy and spiritual.

What does sacrifice mean to Kelly Ward? Ask the 27-year-old Harvard graduate and she'll first argue that she's not personally familiar with the concept. Ward runs America Forward, an alliance of public service organizations dedicated to the principle that most of the nation's problems are being solved somewhere often by small, community-based nonprofit groups using innovative methods that government could support or copy.

"This isn't a sacrifice because I believe in what I'm doing. I've found what I was created to do, which is to do my part to change the world," Ward says while sipping coffee a few blocks from her Cambridge, Mass., office. "OK, I could make more money, sleep a lot more and have a personal life had I gone into a different line of work. But how's this a sacrifice?"

What does sacrifice mean to Sharon Rohrbach? She says it has blessed her life. After 16 years as a neonatal nurse in St. Louis watching too many newborns leave the hospital and return with life-threatening conditions, Rohrbach took a pay cut to create the Nurses for Newborns Foundation to bring nurses into the homes of poor mothers.

"I think there's something in each of us who wants to make things better for other people," she says. "I get more out of this than I give by a longshot."

What does sacrifice mean to James Appleby? "I can be without the pint of blood and help somebody out in a big way," says the pharmacist donating blood at the Red Cross building near the White House. "It's just a sense of duty I have." But he's astonished that anybody would call it a sacrifice. "Sacrifice is soldiers being away from their families," he says. "THAT'S sacrifice."

None of this is new. Saddled with weak and distant governments, early Americans since the settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth leaned on each other to tackle tough issues to feed and protect their communities, heal the sick, teach their children, and develop local economies.

The Founding Fathers had altruism in mind when they made the "pursuit of happiness" an unalienable right in the Declaration of Independence. John Bridgeland, former volunteerism czar under President Bush, writes in an upcoming book that the founders were not endorsing momentary pleasures fueled by the pursuit of material goods, "but the satisfaction that comes from a life dedicated to others and causes greater than ourselves."

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his "Democracy in America," reported in the 1830s that America was a giving nation. "Every American," he wrote, "will sacrifice a portion of his private interests to preserve the rest."

Nearly every American president has urged citizens to serve the country and each other. George Washington stated in his farewell address, "You should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness." In his famous "man in the arena" speech, Theodore Roosevelt said the conduct of every citizen matters to the health of the republic. Franklin Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Depression to give desperate men new jobs and eroded land new trees. John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps.

"On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one year or two years in the service, but on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country," Kennedy said in 1961, "I think will depend the answer whether a free society can compete."

And then there's George W. Bush.

In his State of the Union address after the 2001 terrorist strikes, Bush challenged Americans to commit at least two years "to the service of your neighbors and your nation" and created one of the largest service initiatives since FDR's CCC. But after the war with Iraq came, he went silent on service.

While an all-volunteer military is fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering more than 4,000 U.S. deaths in Iraq alone, tens of thousands of injuries and scores of suicides the sacrifice has been largely limited to the troops and their families. No rationing or blackouts that brought World War II to the homefront.

Bush thanks veterans all the time for their sacrifice, but he won't ask Americans to pay higher taxes to foot the war bill. Would it not be a sacrifice to pay more taxes now to protect future generations from mountains of debt?

MSNBC commentator Keith Olbermann mocked Bush in 2007 for calling a troop increase in Iraq a measure of sacrifice. "More American families will have to bear the unbearable and rationalize the unforgivable," Olbermann said, spitting the word "sacrifice" out in disgust. "Sacrifice sacrifice now, sacrifice tomorrow, sacrifice forever."

Wartime sacrifice is often uneven. The wealthy could buy themselves proxies during the Civil War, and during the Vietnam War, the well-connected could avoid the draft.

John McCain was held for more than five years as a North Vietnamese prisoner of war. He could have gone home earlier, taken advantage of his status as the son and grandson of Navy admirals. But he couldn't bear to leave behind others who had been imprisoned longer.

Many men, it was suggested, would have punched their ticket home.

"Yes," the GOP presidential nominee-in-waiting said, in an interview. "But I think many men wouldn't have. ... I really do."

McCain was on stage during the December GOP debate, but moderator Carolyn Washburn did not ask him the sacrifice question. Months later, she is still surprised that no candidate seized the moment.

"People," the Des Moines Register editor says, "want to serve."

"When you give of your time to serve your community in some capacity, large or small, you're a patriot in the true sense of the word," says former Sen. Bob Dole, who lost the full function of his right arm in World War II. "You don't have to be shot to make a sacrifice."

Which brings us back to Kelly Ward, the 27-year-old do-gooder, taking her Ivy League education and putting it to use battling the nation's ills, even as she questions whether this represents any real sacrifice.

She is part of an uplifting cultural trend: Young, highly educated, highly motivated people are bringing their best-business practices to the world of national service fighting bureaucracies, lobbying government and spending money like venture capitalists to address the nation's most vexing problems. They call themselves social entrepreneurs, and you can find them in the most desperate corners of America.

In many ways, Ward and her peers are more like the Greatest Generation than their parents' Baby Boom generation.

"This is the next reform generation," says E.J. Dionne Jr., a Washington Post columnist and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who has written extensively about public service. "The metaphor I think about are the people who started out in service work in settlement houses before the turn of the last century."

Settlement houses offered social services food, shelter and schooling for the urban poor and immigrants buffeted by the industrialization of America. Jane Addams was the founder of the settlement movement in America; she spoke of and to young and affluent Americans who yearned to make a difference, and find meaning in their lives.

"The good we secure for ourselves is precarious, is floating in midair, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life," she wrote a century ago speaking for her own generation and another in the distant future, one that hungers to pull together and help one another, to sacrifice and to serve.

The question is whether they'll be forced to continue to do so on their own, or whether the next president will lead them.

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