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Will 9/11 and the War on Terror Revitalize American Civic Democracy?

by
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Observers of American life have seen a silver lining in the dark clouds that billowed from the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Along with the horror wrought by the terrorist attacks came an outpouring of solidarity and patriotism—a sudden change of heart for many Americans who, prior to that fateful day, had seemed to be drifting inexorably toward individualism, self-absorption, and cynical disinterest in public affairs. As Stanley Greenberg (2001) aptly puts it, suddenly the "we" mattered more than the "me." People reached out to family members, neighbors, and friends, while proudly declaring their membership in the American national community.

Seventy percent of Americans reportedly gave time or money to charities attempting to help the victims of 9/11 (Independent Sector 2001). Anonymous commuter suburbs in New Jersey suddenly organized to provide constant care for dozens of families who lost loved ones.[1] In the days and weeks after 9/11, more than four-fifths of Americans displayed the U.S. flag on homes, cars and trucks, and clothing.[2] And Americans declared renewed trust in the federal government to "do the right thing." In April 2000, only 29% said they felt such trust "always" or "most of the time," but 64% expressed such faith in a poll taken shortly after 9/11.[3]

In important respects, popular reactions to 9/11 and the subsequent fight against terrorists in Afghanistan resemble what happened in previous U.S. wars. Despite grievous episodes of repression and exclusion, U.S. wars have promoted civic vitality. In a nation whose citizens are famous for their proclivity to organize and join voluntary endeavors, outbreaks of martial conflict have sparked voluntarist upsurges that repeatedly carried over into postwar eras.

The American revolutionary struggle against Great Britain was waged and won by committees of correspondence and volunteer militias—and the era during and after the revolution brought the first great explosion of voluntary group formation in the new nation (Brown 1974). The Civil War of 1861 to 1865 was fought and supported by volunteers (with the military draft responsible for at most 15% of the men who fought). In turn, the Union victory unleashed fresh rounds of civic organizing by men and women who modeled peacetime association building on war mobilizations. At national and local levels alike, the foundations of modern American civic life were laid as the Civil War generation matured between the 1860s and the 1910s (for details and references, see Skocpol 2003, ch. 2). Thereafter, U.S. involvements in World Wars I and II brought new partnerships between government agencies and federated voluntary associations. From the Red Cross and the YMCA to trade unions and business and professional groups, from the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the PTA to dozens of fraternal groups, voluntary associations contributed vitally to World War mobilizations—and, in the process, gained new infusions of dues-paying members (Skocpol et al. 2002).

Understandably, the dramatic shifts registered in post-9/11 surveys have encouraged observers to speculate that America's current wartime crisis may again spur civic revitalization (cf. Galston 2001; Putnam 2002).[4] But deeper consideration of the conditions that allowed past wars to contribute to civic engagement suggests why today's conflict might turn out differently. In the Civil War and World Wars I and II, new attitudes coincided with government efforts to mobilize the citizenry for war, and preexisting membership associations channeled popular participation. But so far in this new crisis, official efforts to mobilize citizens have been sporadic and weak, while existing civic organizations provide few channels for group involvement.

Political scientists need not rely on attitude surveys alone to assess possibilities for civic renewal in America's new war on terror. Historical comparisons bring into sharper relief the full set of attitudinal and institutional factors that influence the civic impact of war.

Attitudes Shift at the Outbreak of War

For long-past wars, we do not have national surveys comparable to the opinion polls that enable us to track attitudinal changes today. Qualitative evidence nevertheless reveals that outpourings of patriotic and community sentiment accompanied the onset of conflict in April 1861, April 1917, and December 1941. Newspapers, organizational declarations, community demonstrations, and personal memoirs all provide relevant evidence. When wars break out—and especially when the nation is attacked—millions of Americans become aware of their shared national identity and are willing to work together on local and national responses to the crisis.

Government Authorities May—or May Not—Call for Mass Mobilization

If popular attitudes invariably shift with the outbreak of war, the willingness of government authorities to orchestrate voluntary citizen participation varies considerably, depending on the nature of the conflict and the capacities of government. Modern wars require major domestic as well as military commitments, but government bureaucracies only sometimes possess the capacities and resources to act directly.

When the U.S. federal government suddenly found itself challenged by a massive secessionist movement in 1861, for example, President Abraham Lincoln desperately needed organized volunteer contributions. At that point, U.S. standing armies consisted of a mere 16,000 men, mostly deployed in the West, and led by a small corps of aging professional officers, many of whom "went South" to fight for the Confederacy. In the North and South alike—but especially in the North—the Civil War was fought by an outpouring of military volunteers assembled by local community leaders, combined into state-level units, and knit together to form the Union Army. To support the troops and organize relief efforts at home, women and older men created similar volunteer federations—the forerunner of what would later become the American Red Cross.

Federal bureaucracies were more developed by the outbreak of World War I than in the 1860s. Nevertheless, executive agencies had little capacity to reach directly into local communities and individual homes, so they turned to the national and state leaders of voluntary federations for the organizational networks they needed to run drives to conserve foodstuffs and sell Liberty Bonds, campaigns for relief and military recruitment, and campaigns to maximize economic production. Federal authorities also encouraged professionals and managers to come together in new associations to help manage national projects. Wartime mobilizations spawned many new voluntary associations, and existing groups gained visibility and recuited new members when they cooperated with government.

By the time the United States fought World War II, government capacities were sufficiently developed that authorities did not need voluntary groups as badly as in 1917. Yet it was clear from the start that this conflict would be massive, lengthy, and costly. Remembering how World War I was fought, U.S. officials saw advantages in getting masses of Americans directly involved. Conservation and fund-raising drives were rerun in much the same way as in 1917–19, with women's groups, fraternal groups, the Red Cross, the Knights of Columbus, the YMCA, and hundreds of professional, business, and ethnic associations called upon to mobilize their members to contribute to the war effort. Again, memberships in voluntary associations surged forward into the postwar era.

In the post-9/11 war against terrorism, U.S. authorities have not been so eager to engage in mass mobilization. Obviously, this is a different kind of conflict, waged by a relatively small number of highly trained professional military personnel backed by a few newly mobilized National Guard units. An all-out war against the Iraqi regime may eventually require a new U.S. military draft, but the initial military efforts in Afghanistan have not. What is more, in 2001 and early 2002, heightened homeland security measures and efforts to cope with the anthrax scare seemed to call for professionals, not citizen volunteers. The nation also faced an economic slowdown, yet reigning Republican ideas led officials to put their faith in tax cuts and consumer spending as remedies.

Given all of this, in the months following 9/11, federal officials such as Director of Homeland Security Tom Ridge stressed managerial coordination and professional expertise.

With limited U.S. military quotas filled, volunteers were turned away. To be sure, President George W. Bush sporadically called on Americans to volunteer in their communities. But his appeals seemed largely symbolic, not connected to vital wartime activities, even as Bush administration officials visibly puzzled over what to do with volunteers.[5] President Bush did not launch any big new civic effort, such as mandatory national service for young Americans.[6] Instead, for weeks after 9/11, his most prominent appeals were commercial rather than civic. The Travel Industry Association of America estimated that two-thirds of Americans saw the President starring in a television advertisement calling for people to express "courage" by taking more trips. And the president repeatedly asked people to go shopping to stimulate the economy. If enduring images of World Wars I and II featured posters of Uncle Sam encouraging citizens to do their duty, perhaps we need a revised version poster to capture the main presidential message in 2001!

Civic Organizations Channel Participation

In historic wars, citizens were eager to volunteer and the federal government engaged in mass mobilization. Yet the nature of existing voluntary associations at the time of the Civil War and the World Wars also contributed to wartime mobilizations and helped to sustain gains in civic connectedness.

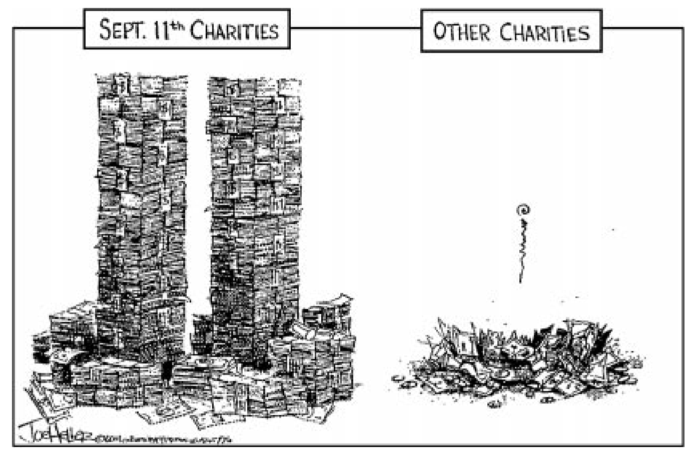
From the early 1800s until the 1960s, membership-based voluntary associations were at the center of American public life (for further evidence and citations, see Skocpol 2003, chapters 1–3). Leaders established civic reputations by helping to organize fellow citizens into membership groups. Clubs, lodges, and posts were as ubiquitous as churches and schools—and most local membership groups were linked together into state and national federations. When national crises struck, therefore, leaders knew how to mobilize fellow citizens, and there were well-worn institutional channels through which people could work together and pool resources.

After the 1960s, however, U.S. civic life was radically reorganized (Skocpol 1999; Skocpol 2003, chapters 4–5). In the wake of the Civil Rights and feminist movements, traditional

chapter-based membership federations, most of which had been racially and gender segregated, failed to attract many younger members. The war in Vietnam, ultimately unpopular and militarily unsuccessful, rendered traditional patriotic associations less appealing to many Americans. Challenged by movements and defections from below, traditional voluntary associations were also bypassed in national politics by professionally managed advocacy associations, which proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s. Professionally run citizen-advocacy groups often had no individual members at all, or else recruited monetary contributions through the mail (Berry 1977, 1999). At the state and local levels, meanwhile, nonprofit social agencies proliferated. Like advocacy groups, these are professionally managed civic organizations that raise money from donors, government agencies, or mailing-list adherents, rather than from members who attend meetings and pay regular dues.

Well before the crisis of 9/11, therefore, professionally managed associations and institutions had become central to American civic life. Churches remain vital centers of membership activity in many U.S. communities, but other kinds of membership associations have dwindled or disappeared. When a national crisis happens nowadays, there are fewer well-established channels through which people can volunteer together—and fewer ways to link face-to-face activities in local communities to state and national projects. Throughout much of American history in war and peace, voluntary membership federations teamed up with local, state, and national public officials to pursue important public projects (Skocpol 2003, ch. 3). But today, partnerships between civic organizations and government are primarily a matter of collaborations among professionals.

Against this background, we can better understand why, following 9/11, Americans suddenly displayed new attitudes of social solidarity and trust in government, while barely changing their patterns of civic participation. I prepared Figure 1 using data gathered by Robert D. Putnam in a nationally representative panel survey conducted months before and, again, months after 9/11. As the figure shows, net gains in civic attitudes were much greater than net gains in civic behavior. Not surprisingly, given the spectacular nature of the terrorist attacks, the one sort of activity that exhibited a big net upward jump after 9/11 was mass TV viewing.



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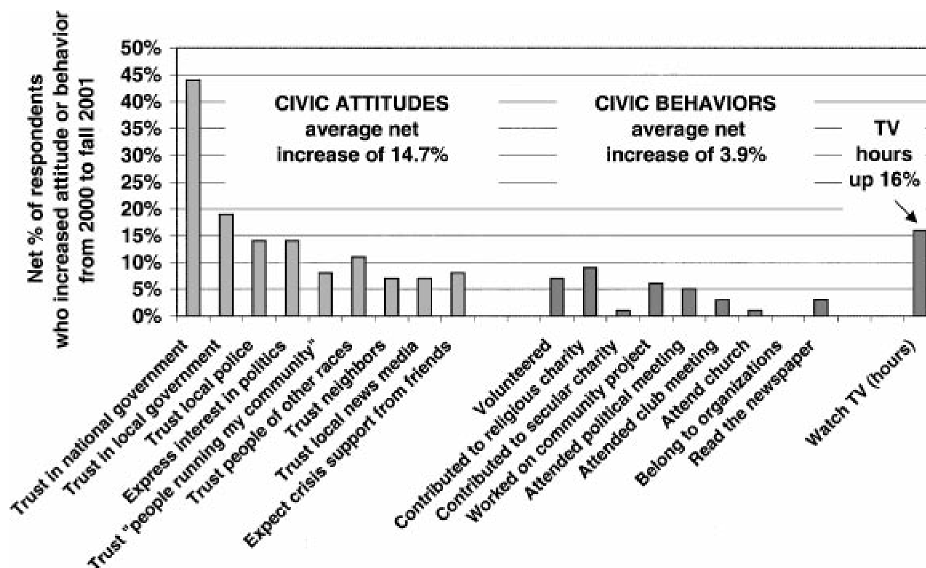
Wartime crises may immediately evoke attitudes of civic solidarity, but some combination of government mobilization and available organizational channels is needed to enable people to act together. If this hypothesis is true, we should see less of a gap between attitudinal and behavioral change among Americans *already engaged* with membership associations prior to 9/11—and we should see positive responses when government offers new opportunities to participate. There is some evidence on both scores. According to a report from the Pew Research Center (2001), a large majority of Americans perceived religion to be more important after 9/11, yet religious *behaviors* changed very little, *except* among people who were already regular churchgoers. Moreover, after President Bush backed modest expansions in national service programs and appealed to Americans to join, applications to AmeriCorps and related programs shot up.

Institutional shifts also help us to understand imbalances in U.S. charity following 9/11. Prior to the 1960s, charitable giving was typically channeled through chapter-based federations, which took advantage of wartime sensibilities to raise resources both for the immediate crisis and for long-run organizational and community needs. Federations with thousands of local chapters could also move funds around to meet a variety of needs. Yet U.S. charities today are highly professionalized operations, very dependent on media-driven messages to attract money from contributors who expect their money to go exactly where the advertisements promise. After 9/11, U.S. charities were inundated with contributions if they advertised plans to help the victims of the terrorist attacks. But if charities tried to bank resources for general needs, they could get into trouble—as did the American Red Cross, when a national "scandal" broke out over its attempts to devote some post-9/11 donations to other needs (Sontag 2001). Furthermore, in the

Figure 1
After September 11, 2001, American Civic Attitudes Changed More Than Behavior



Data from Putnam (2002).

months after 9/11, charities that routinely help the poor in communities across the United States were starved for necessary resources.[7] Food banks and other local agencies were out of the media limelight as their regular donors gave to 9/11 causes.

An Urge to Act—but How?

The American "public feels urge to act—but how?" asked an insightful article appearing in the *Christian Science Monitor* not long after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (McLaughlin 2001). "What Americans are being called upon to do—live normal lives—hardly seems heroic. Unlike during World War II, citizens aren't needed to roll bandages for GIs or collect scrap metal to make airplanes." My analysis of the roots of war-encouraged spurts in civic engagement suggests that, indeed, Americans since 9/11 may be willing to do more than they have been asked to do by government, and more than they have been allowed to do, given the structure of existing civic organizations.

If they persist, post-9/11 attitude shifts toward patriotism, trust, and community responsibility may contribute to electoral trends and changes in individual behavior, especially among young people just coming of age. There is, however, little evidence that 9/11 and its martial aftermath led to any immediate upsurge in collective voluntary activities at all comparable to the upsurges associated with historic wars. This twenty-first-century conflict has different requirements, and Americans today live in a very different governmental and civic universe than their forebears—a changed public world in which political authorities and nonprofit organizations rely on professional management and media messages rather than on organized popular participation.

Terrorist attacks and the commitment of U.S. forces to armed combat abroad may have aroused the usual patriotic and communal feelings, but the outbreak of this war could not suddenly remake the institutional face of American civic democracy. Absent organizational innovations and new public policies, therefore, the reinvigorated sense of the American "we" that was born of the travails of 9/11 may well gradually dissipate, leaving only ripples on the managerial routines of contemporary U.S. civic life.

Notes

1. Andrew Jacobs, "Town Sheds Its Anonymity to Comfort the Bereaved," *New York Times*, 14 October 2001, sec. B.
2. William Risser and Sam Ward, "USA Today Snapshots: Stars and Stripes Flying High," *USA Today*, 19 October 1001, sec. A.
3. Dana Milbank and Richard Morin, "Poll: Americans' Trust in Government Grows," *Washington Post*, <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A42864-2001Sep28.html> (June 28, 2002).
4. See also E.J. Dionne Jr., "Our New Spirit of Community," *Boston Globe*, 26 December 2001, sec. A.
5. Alison Mitchell, "Asking for Volunteers, Government Tries to Determine What They Will Do," *New York Times*, 10 November 2001, sec. B.
6. Albert R. Hunt, "Waiting for the Call," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2002, sec. A.
7. Winnie Hu, "Outpouring for Sept. 11 Groups Means Less for Food Banks," *New York Times*, 21 November 2001, sec. B.

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