

MORE TOCQUEVILLE

LEXINGTON

The worker and the volunteer

IN AMERICA's latest refinement of the principle of instant news, the grand conference on volunteering—to be convened in Philadelphia on April 27th—has been reported, commented upon, condemned and commended—all before it has taken place. News consumers already know that it will be chaired by Colin Powell, a potential president; that three ex-presidents and one sitting one will be in attendance; and that some really important people, like Oprah Winfrey, will be there as well. In short, Americans have got the point that volunteering to help poor children is a Big Issue. It is good for the soul, and good for society. Switch channels, move on to a new subject.

The fashion for large-scale volunteerism, backed by government and corporations, has gone up and down in recent years. George Bush proclaimed in his inaugural address the emergence of "a thousand points of light", an effort by Americans everywhere to compensate at local level for services no longer provided by the government. It was barely followed up and did not take off, which is one reason for the extra hype behind the summit in Philadelphia. Yet it is not only Republicans, with their urge to cut spending and downsize government, who like the idea of volunteers. Mr Clinton's AmeriCorps, in which young people are meant to earn their college fees by community service, is based on the same principle. This, too, began with a burst of enthusiasm and then ran into the sand, attacked by conservative Republicans as a whimsical notion that would cost too much money.

These official failures, however, do not disguise the fact that America likes to see itself as a nation of volunteers. Toqueville pointed out in the 1830s that the tenuousness and distance of government in America required men to do many community jobs for themselves; and, although government seems now to have become all-embracing, creeping into every fissure of life, many Americans still like to think that they can help the community by their own efforts when the need arises. After the Los Angeles riots in 1992, when government and city money still seemed slow to appear, black ministers brought in Amish from Pennsylvania (where volunteerism has always been a way of life) to teach the rudiments of barn-raising to people whose homes had been destroyed. Every natural disaster, such as the floods that have ravaged the upper mid-west in recent weeks, brings out armies of volunteers to pile up sandbags or distribute food. On a more routine, mundane level, Americans help in soup kitchens, coach Little League, clean their schools, sweep their streets; fully 65% of them, according to a recent poll by CNN/USA Today/Gallup, claim to have done some volunteer work in the past year. They do not wait for the government, though they know it will step in in the end; they believe their own efforts count.

All this is excellent; but it is also disparate and piecemeal. The nature of volunteerism is that it is voluntary, and therefore

lasts as long as the volunteer feels inclined to pursue it. Volunteerism is great at building barns, scrubbing graffiti from walls, and even teaching motivated children. But the summitters at Philadelphia have bigger ambitions than that. As described by Mr Powell himself, the idea is to rescue children who are "disengaged from American life". Mentors will work with them, one-on-one, to motivate them to succeed in school and to keep them off drugs and off the streets. It is reckoned that 2m children could be rescued by 2000, if everyone pulls together as planned. If the brave volunteers of the mid-west can keep back raging rivers from their homes, so brave volunteers in the inner cities can

keep back the tide of teenage delinquency which everyone can see coming.

Several big companies have signed on to the effort already. Disney has promised a million hours of voluntary service from its employees. Kmart has offered to use 2,150 of its stores as "safe havens" for children at risk. Timberland will allow its employees to do 40 hours of service a year on company pay and company time. Coca-Cola has pledged money to train volunteers to act as mentors to disadvantaged children. The idea is that corporate efficiency will infuse the volunteer efforts; and that, with corporate prestige behind them, those efforts may last as long as is necessary to have a transforming effect.

The motivation is admirable, but such vaunting ambition seems bound to lead to disappointment. The summit organisers hope that volunteer mentors can help children growing up in troubled households, by providing the steady adult attention that they crave. But the truth is that America's volunteer army, no matter how fortified by corporate might, is not up to tackling this huge problem on its own. A mentor must see a child at least twice a week in order to be helpful; less than that may reinforce the child's sense of the fickleness of adults, and so actually do harm. At present, only 300,000 American volunteers have summoned that commitment; but there are 15m children, not 2m, who need help. Most will get it only from professionals, employed by charities or government, who are dedicated to efficiency and have the time to persevere.

There is also another irony, which says much about America's contemporary self-doubt. Bill Clinton, Philadelphia summitter, is the president who last year signed a bill for welfare reform, forcing single mothers to abandon the unpaid work of looking after their children in favour of paid work outside the home. Yet Mr Clinton is also the president who now launches a huge propaganda effort, exhorting paid workers to leave their offices to tutor poor children whose mothers must now work. Mr Clinton thinks work is a psychological necessity for welfare mothers, but this drives him to rely on volunteer part-timers to replace them at home. Volunteerism always carries with it hopes and echoes of a simpler, "better" age; but Toqueville's robust civic society, in which Americans relied on their own efforts first and the efforts of others later, was never anything like this.



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New York and San Francisco, bringing many of their employees with them. Nearly a quarter of the population was born outside the South and has moved to Charlotte in the past ten years. The town is generous about supporting the arts, and has just built a new \$62m performing-arts centre to house the Charlotte Repertory Theatre.

But Charlotte is also the home town of Billy Graham, the popular evangelist; and, where art is concerned, the natives and the newcomers sometimes find their tastes colliding. The conflict came to a head on April 1st. After a circus-like six-hour meeting in which citizens testified that they feared a "homosexual agenda" to eradicate family values, Mecklenburg County's board of county commissioners decided, in a 5-4 vote, to cut financing to the local Arts & Science Council to "protect children from exposure to perverted forms of sexuality".

Scores of children in Charlotte, it seems, were thrown into confusion by the Charlotte Rep's production of "Angels in America" last spring. This prize-winning play, by Tony Kushner, uses the AIDS epidemic and one character's insecurity about his sexual identity as a means of exploring political and moral issues. It includes a scene in which a character drops his trousers to be examined by a doctor, and a fairly explicit homosexual encounter. The county commission's ire was raised further when the unrepentant Charlotte Rep went ahead with its current production of "Six Degrees of Separation", which, although less explicit than "Angels", also features a gay leading character.

Mecklenburg County used to give \$2.5m to the Arts & Science Council for distribution to various arts organisations. Now such organisations will have to apply directly to the county commission, and it is fairly clear that, if the Charlotte Rep applies, it will be turned down.

This will not bother the Rep too much; it is financially stable, and receives only about 5% of its budget from county funds. If the theatre has to chop anything because of budget cuts, it will be student education programmes—which will bring a sigh of relief from those Mecklenburg County parents who fear the theatre is a haven for homosexuals seeking to "recruit children for experimenting sexually", as one county commissioner put it.

Some say the controversy has damaged Charlotte's image as a progressive city, and may even hurt its continued economic growth. Supporters of the new measure, in contrast, believe that by showing strong support for traditional family values Charlotte has improved its image among America's conservative Christians. But the larger question is why this happened in Charlotte, when many small cities have staged "Angels in America" without provoking anything more than a few indignant letters

to the local newspaper.

Memphis, Tennessee, for example, is larger than Charlotte but not nearly as prosperous. At first glance Memphis appears much more conservative than Charlotte. Yet Memphis's Playhouse on the Square has produced both "Angels" and "Six Degrees of Separation" in the past few years without any serious trouble.

One jaundiced commentator in Memphis says this is because Memphians are too ignorant and apathetic to cause a stink

about something as highbrow as the theatre. It may also be that Memphis has more crime, poverty and unemployment to contend with. The real point is that Memphis theatre productions are more modest, and therefore attract less attention. The anonymity of being a low-budget operation in a low-profile town like Memphis may give the Playhouse on the Square a freedom that the more successful Charlotte Rep, in high-profile Charlotte, will never know.

In memoriam FDR

AMERICA'S monument to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to be dedicated in Washington on May 2nd, does not show the great president in a wheelchair. This has made it controversial. Some have argued that Roosevelt, a victim of polio, should be shown with his disability. Others say that FDR, who insisted on concealing his affliction, would have been horrified by that. So far, the memorial is a halfway house: a series of outdoor rooms with statues of the president, seated but not disabled. President Clinton said on April 23rd that he would ask Congress for a "modification": yet another statue, with a wheelchair.

The question raised by the memorial is a simple one. What are monuments for? If their main purpose is to honour the dead, the sensibilities of the dead should be honoured too. If they are meant to move or inspire the living, the subject may indeed be shown with the obstacles he or she overcame. Yet if the purpose is something of both, as in this case, the recent history of American memorials suggests it is better to avoid physical representations altogether. The Mar-

tin Luther King memorial in Atlanta is simply fountains and flowing water. John Kennedy is remembered most poignantly by his flame in Arlington cemetery. FDR himself wanted only a desk-sized block of stone.

The country's most famous non-ionic memorial, the half-sunken wall to the dead of Vietnam, later acquired a statue of three soldiers. The same controversy attended that as has dogged the Roosevelt memorial. Different interest groups petitioned to make sure that the group of soldiers was ethnically mixed, and that their expressions suggested the perplexity the war engendered. But there was really no need for this set of bland imaginary faces; mourners at the wall had already discovered that the highly polished surface mirrored their emotions exactly.

The failure of the Vietnam statue should have informed the debate about Roosevelt's. What it proved was that physical representations, with or without disabilities, are beside the point. It is names, words and deeds that live; and it is these that deserve memorials.



Without the wheelchair