

A photograph of a set of blue double doors with silver handles. Each door has two rectangular windows with green mesh screens. A white sign with black text is posted on the upper right window. The background shows a concrete floor and a glimpse of a building with more windows.

**PTA MEETING  
CANCELLED**

# Are We Undermining Civil Society?

*By Kim Holmes*

*In his recently published Rebound: Getting America Back to Great, Kim Holmes makes the case that America is no longer the great nation it once was. He further contends that the reason for this diminution is that the counterculture that began in the 1960s has waged war on core values like hard work, self-reliance, and individual responsibility. Holmes is optimistic, however, that by examining our history, we can recover the values that made America great and can make it great once again. Holmes is not calling for a return to the 1950s so much as a remembering of a few things we once knew. He writes: “We love America’s traditions not because they are old but because they are ever new—because they are wise and best suited for the future. In other words, we love them because they are truly modern.”*

*One consequence of the shift in values that Holmes traces is that Americans are now more likely to rely on government to fix problems than to take responsibility themselves. The welfare state has crept in where the institutions of civil society have receded. Why bother helping a neighbor who’s having hard times? Isn’t that what we pay taxes for? Why attend PTA meetings? Isn’t the federal government making sure all public schools are measuring their progress? The more we rely on centralized government, the courser our politics become and the less free we are.*

*Social scientists have been tracking this problem for decades. What we need now is for more people to write about the problem the way a popular historian does—the way Kim Holmes does. Getting more Americans engaged, both intellectually with the issues and personally in their communities, is surely part of the solution. To that end, we present for you an excerpt of Holmes’s chapter on the decline of American civil society.*

—Editor

## **TWO WOMEN LIVE ON A BARRIER ISLAND.**

Both are baby boomers.

One, Jennifer, had worked for the state’s Department of Environmental Protection for 25 years. She belongs to a local chapter of the Sierra Club and is active in local politics. Divorced, she lives alone in a modest house and is often joined by her children to promote her “causes.”

Then there is Mary. She had owned a chain of hair salons. She’d done well and with her husband built a beautiful house on the island. She is active in her church, and though her children live some distance away, they visit whenever they can. They tease her because she doesn’t pay much attention to politics.

Both women love the island. It is peaceful and pristine, but it has two problems. It is a wildlife refuge for a protected species of sea turtle, with all the

attendant regulations and subsequent penalties for businesses and homeowners that go with that designation. Jennifer, with her background and contacts, landed an appointment as the island’s chief volunteer turtle watcher. Her “job” is to make sure they aren’t disturbed when they come ashore to lay their eggs, chiefly by coordinating the volunteers who come from near and far to witness this event and help count eggs.

The other problem is dog poop. Their interest in the matter is not just that it’s an eyesore; they don’t like stepping in it. There’s an ordinance that pet owners must clean up after their animals at all times, but Mary doesn’t believe that badgering people or issuing them citations is neighborly.

One night, as the sun slipped down, Jennifer approached a sleeping man. It was turtle egg-laying season, and he was not supposed to be on the beach



after dark. She quietly tied a warning “ticket” to his big toe, trying very hard not to wake him. If he comes back and she catches him again, she can call the police, who will impose a hefty fine. As she slipped away quietly, she felt satisfied. A job well done!

Meanwhile, down the road apiece, Mary and some neighbors had been talking about what to do about the island’s prodigious amount of dog poop. Mary had decided to organize patrols to deal with the problem. She had asked for volunteers and three signed up, two elderly women and a young man with nothing better to do. One patrol decided to take the west side of the island. Another took the east. Before long, they made sure not a single stool was left on the entire island.

The little island was pristine for another night. Not only that, but the turtles and their eggs were not disturbed by light or snoring.

Such is the tale of two volunteers—one a community organizer of a civil platoon, the other a volunteer agent of the state; one bringing the community together to solve a problem, the other dividing it by acting like a volunteer policeman.

## WHAT WENT WRONG

This island community is but one of hundreds of thousands in America today. Its issues are unique. But despite its unusual preoccupations, it shows some of the problems with American community today. It reveals a fragmentation over politics that sinks deep into the society. Not only has America’s famous “art of association”—its penchant for volunteerism—been radically changed, but also its practice of civic virtue has been corrupted by political ideologies.

For centuries Americans had thought that if given enough freedom there was no limit to what they could achieve in life. Sadly today many no longer believe this. Broken communities, divided politics, and a failing economy are draining the hope out of the American people. Even as President Barack Obama began his second term in 2013, Gallup

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reported that Americans were “as negative about the state of the country and its prospects going forward” as they were in 1979. So many people seemed to be losing hope because they had lost faith in their political leadership.

What went wrong? Why is a nation that grew so fast now content with years of slow near-recession levels of economic growth? Why is a civil society that was once so vibrant today so fragmented? Why is the political system so incapable of solving these problems? And perhaps most sad of all, why do Americans have such low standards for their government?

The answer is straightforward. The United States of America has been drifting away from the principles and formulas of success that made it a great nation. It allowed civil society to atrophy, strangled by the tentacles of the administrative state. It per-



mitted the size and spending of the federal government to expand to such an extent that the economy barely grows anymore. It imposed heavy economic regulations and other government interventions, weakening American competitiveness and dragging down what was once one of the greatest free markets in the world. Its people sat back while their once-cherished constitutional form of government was replaced by a bureaucratic administrative state—one that is managed by unaccountable government workers and sanctioned by courts that too often exceed their authority.

For America to rebound from this sorry state of affairs, its people will have to come to terms with what went wrong. The first lesson of correcting any problem is to understand its causes accurately. Once that is done, mistakes can be undone and a way forward can be found.

## THE CRISIS OF COMMUNITY

Something is indeed dreadfully wrong with American civil society today. There are as many scholars studying the problem of community in America as there are theories about what ails it. Experts on the right think that there is too much government and not enough civil society. Those on the left believe there is a need for even more government. Whatever the cause or the solution, American society today lacks what experts like political scientist Robert Putnam call sufficient “social capital,” that is, those “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” that make society more dynamic and efficient. Basically, there was a time—just 60 years ago—when there was a great deal more social capital than there is today, and America is suffering for want of it.

Americans attend church less; their informal socializing is less purposeful; friendships are not as deep, long lasting, or satisfying; and volunteerism is down. Although lots of people interact these days, they do so mainly in highly insular and fleeting social networks, some of which exist only virtually on Facebook and other online sites. Neighbors can go months or even years without talking to one another. They may not even know each other at all. The many informal bonds of trust that had once cut the “transactional costs” of America’s high-octane market economy and leveled the class distinctions of its democratic society are threadbare.

Putnam described the decline of community life in his seminal book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). His conclusion was that “Americans have been dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally.” As an example he cites the fate of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). The percentage of parents nationwide that joined the PTA more than doubled between 1945 and 1960. However, after 1960 there was a dramatic decline in membership. By the late 1990s, levels had plummeted to what they had been in 1943. For the quarter century after 1960, an average of over 250,000 families a year were dropping out of the PTA.

The social space once occupied by civil society is being rapidly filled by government. Welfare and other social-benefit programs are crowding out social networks, taking over the functions and responsibilities once performed by churches, families, volunteer associations, and friends. Civic associations still exist, of course, but they lack the vibrancy and pervasiveness they once had.

The growth of the welfare state has played a heavy role in the decline of civil society. Political economist Nicholas Eberstadt documents the explosion of entitlements in *A Nation of Takers* (2012). The outlays for government entitlement programs were nearly 100 times greater in 2010 than in 1960. Nomi-

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nal growth for these programs grew an average of 9.5 percent per year, far faster than the economy. About four in 10 Americans received aid from Washington in 2012, which means that over 128 million Americans now rely on federal dollars. Almost one out of every seven Americans receive food stamps, compared to one in 50 in the 1970s.

However well intentioned government welfare may be, it creates a dependency that changes the social dynamic of a community. For many people, the most important connection is not to their family, employer, neighborhood, or town, but to the government on which they depend. The social bond of trust is therefore vertical, not horizontal. An individual depends on and therefore must trust the government on high. At the same time, the space of mistrust is horizontal because people compete politically with each other. They are no longer neighbors





or fellow citizens, but some potentially competitive class, race, or gender group competing for government benefits.

Is it any wonder that the stakes in American politics are so high? A jig or jag in this or that political direction in an election can literally change someone's life. Once a man has become dependent on a federal disability payment, for example, he has already adjusted his life so that he cannot live without it. What do we expect him to do? It is not as if he would welcome losing a government check and moving back in with his elderly mother. He votes for continuing and even expanding government benefits as if his life depends on it, because that's the way the system is set up.

The weakening of civil society is clearly not good for the country as a whole. It makes our democracy coarser and our public life less large in its aspira-

tions. But it has been particularly devastating to America's lower-income people.

No one has chronicled this sad story better than Charles Murray, the W.H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. In his recent book, *Coming Apart* (2012), he documents how, starting around 1960, America's "founding virtues"—marriage, industriousness, honesty, and religiosity—started to falter. Divorce rates skyrocketed in the wake of the sexual revolution. Work habits began to diverge along class lines. Integrity and honesty declined. So, too, did religiosity. "Our nation is coming apart at the seams," Murray concludes, "not ethnic seams, but seams of class."

According to Murray, while all classes of white Americans from 1960 to 2010 became more liberal, not all of them were affected the same. Upper income people either moderated or modified their

countercultural values from the 1960s to protect their status and income levels. The lower classes did not. Instead, they began to divorce more; work less; have more out-of-wedlock births; and exhibit higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and crime. By dropping the old virtues without putting new disciplinary habits in their place (as the upper classes were doing), the lower classes were living the countercultural life all right, but they were paying a very steep price for it.

The fraying of the American community is indeed tragic for America's least advantaged. Rich people can escape the pitfalls of social isolation by living in multimillion-dollar high-rise apartments or in gated communities. Poor people, on the other hand, are stuck in cramped and run-down housing. *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson described the plight of African Americans: More than half of inner-city young black men are dropping out of school, and only 37 percent of black children are raised in two-parent families.

Whatever you say about America's welfare system, which after all was intended to *help* the community, it did *not* stop the deterioration of the black family and its neighborhoods. Many experts believe it actually aided and abetted it. Even the 1990s reform of the American welfare system did not reverse the decline of the communities for the nation's poor. The damage had been done. The welfare state tried to substitute a check for a father, a social worker for a caring mother or grandmother, and a slew of civil rights organizations for the neighborhood church.

Many experts in fact believe that disparities in income are caused by declining marriage, out-of-wedlock births, and other social factors—all things caused in part by the welfare state itself. In other words, despite the redistribution of income and decades of social engineering, the very efforts to make people more equal not only have made them less so, but in all too many cases have also made them worse off.

Equality is not the only American value undermined by modern liberalism. So, too, has been the vaulted civic-minded patriotism of the American tradition. Liberalism divides Americans by class, race, and gender, which is what its adherents mean by diversity. Overlooked is the ideal that every individual should be treated equally not because of race, gender, or income, but because he or she has individual rights and is an American citizen. Ignored is the fact that the strongest socializing agents are families, churches, neighbors, and friends; not the local or federal assistance office.

This brings us back to the turtles on that island. The dominant "civic" virtue of Jennifer is to protect the turtles from people. It's not really about how to make the community better for both the people *and* the turtles. While protecting turtles is a nice thing to do, Jennifer takes it far beyond that. Her neighbors are wary of offending her about anything, not just turtles, and they are absolutely dumbfounded by the authority she thinks the state has given her. She operates the way a finger-wagging old pastor did in the 19th century; but, unlike a pastor, she believes she has the weight of the state behind her. That "power" has transformed her into a government sanctioned antisocial force in the community.

Her story, unfortunately, is no longer that unusual. It represents a momentous change in the politics of American civil society. Political "virtue" (some call it "political correctness"), as opposed to private virtue, has become the new shaming ritual. Private virtue has been replaced with a state-endorsed ideology backed up in some cases by legally enforceable social norms. Sometimes it's about the environment. Other times it's about race, gender, and increasingly sexual preference. Regardless, the focus on political virtue turns neighbor against neighbor and transforms even small community conflicts into power struggles. The fairly wide radius of trust that once eased the mutualism of American civil society is now much, much smaller.





Civil society is not the key to everything good about America. But it is hard to imagine what *is* good without it. It worked reasonably well for over two centuries lubricating the interactions of a democratic people on the make.

That is not the case today. There are still many small towns and neighborhoods where the old spirit lives. There are to this day many outstanding community leaders across America. But there are also many places where so-called community leaders prey on their constituents and turn them against one another. There are neighborhoods where social

trust has completely broken down, either because of crime and poverty or because of discord over the spoils of politics.

This is hardly an inspiring vision for America's future. It certainly is not what made the country great in the first place.

*Mr. Holmes is a Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation. This article is an excerpt from his book Rebound: Getting America Back to Great, published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Copyright 2013 by The Heritage Foundation.*