

Excerpt from Chapter 12, "The Past Is Prologue," from [*By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers, New Century Edition*](#), by Susan J. Ellis and Katherine H. Campbell (Energize, 2005), pages 353-5.

Volunteerism is both reactive and proactive. It is a response to current events, social problems, and community needs that volunteers are often the first to identify. Volunteers can take action before institutions and government are willing to offer services. As such, volunteers are pioneers and experimenters, unlimited by the restrictions of tradition, public statutes, need to make a profit, or availability of initial funds. By creating or urging others to create programs, volunteering challenges the status quo. This is the inherent political side of volunteer work. The irony is that pressure in one direction elicits pressure in the other; whenever one group of volunteers works toward change, another group often reacts to preserve tradition or advocate yet another alternative. This is why volunteers will continue to be found on both sides of an issue-and at all points along the political spectrum.

Another irony is that, as voluntary agencies mature, they lose the ability to react quickly and take risks-the very hallmarks of their founding volunteers. So society will always need volunteers: to be on the cutting edge challenging the causes of a problem as well as providing services to those experiencing its symptoms.

A cyclical pattern can be discerned in the influence of volunteers on the formation of institutions and professions. First an individual or small group becomes involved in a cause. Soon other volunteers are brought in, and strategies are developed to take specific actions. Once the activity gains momentum, the group seeks funding to support both the cost of materials and other expenses. Employees become necessary as the group evolves into an organization, agency, or unit of government-not because volunteers could not do the job, but because the magnitude of the work grows beyond what part-time volunteers can handle. Employees provide continuity and coordination, and so, at some stage of growth, volunteers are displaced as primary service providers. This is also the stage at which professionalization occurs. In the most mature organizations, volunteers continue to be utilized mainly as fundraisers and policy makers (boards) and in limited support roles. Frequently, by this point, the founding volunteers have moved on to other causes, to initiate the process anew.

This cycle, traceable through history, can be interpreted in several ways. One interpretation is that the ultimate measure of the success of a volunteer effort is the creation of paid positions to institutionalize that response to a need. This contradicts the convenient belief that volunteers can be used as a substitute for adequate budgeting; history proves that the greater the number of volunteers who become involved in services, the greater the chance that stable financial resources will be developed.

Another interpretation of the cycle is that volunteers move from being founders to being assistants-and that this is somehow denigrating. It is important to realize, however, that it is rare for individuals to change from one role to the other. Those whose talents make them reformers and innovators move on to other causes once they have seen the cycle pass its initial phases. At that point, new people come in to volunteer in support roles because they are more comfortable in maintaining services than in initiating them. Part of the decision to become a volunteer rests on choosing which part of the cycle best suits one's personal preference.

One of the values of understanding this cycle is that it explains the various types of volunteering evident at any given time: agitators, founders, fundraisers, maintainers, revitalizers. Each volunteer group evolves at its own pace-some become institutions or professions in just a few years, others remain as small clusters of devoted volunteers for decades, while still others shine for a brief period and then fade away. Most of the societal institutions we take for granted-hospitals, colleges, town government-had their roots in a small group of volunteers even if today volunteers have only a minimal role.

While this book is unapologetically pro-volunteer, it is important to be objective about the limitations of volunteering.

First, though it is always possible to record much volunteer activity, it would be mistaken to conclude that all volunteering is effective, appropriate, or successful. As with any human endeavor, there have been some regrettable incidents, examples of poor judgement, and outright failures. Not all volunteers have been equally skilled, and some well-intentioned efforts may have backfired. From the perspective of this book, however, the point is not necessarily the success of all volunteering but the attempt to accomplish something.

Another characteristic of volunteerism past and present is that it is often exclusionary. Self-help and religiously-affiliated groups, in particular, are inherently limited in membership and in whom is served. This is an argument in favor of government involvement in the provision of basic services. Only the government is mandated to be nondiscriminatory and all-inclusive; it is the right of volunteer groups to focus on a narrower constituency.

Competition and duplication are also part of volunteerism. The freedom to create any type of project leads to many variations. Only time can weed out the less effective or less popular ideas and methods. There are periods in which people's energies are diffused and resources are wasted. But this is the price to be paid for social innovation. Democracy implies choice. In socialist countries, volunteering is perceived as anti-state; the government knows best and provides all that is needed. While it can be argued that the very proliferation of volunteer activities in the United States causes fragmentation that can be counterproductive, it is this very variety that incubates progress. "American

values have set much store on process, rather than on the finished product: the assumption has been that America is creative, not merely traditional and imitative." (1)