

Background

No. 2063
August 20, 2007



Published by The Heritage Foundation

Longing for Belonging and the Lure of the State

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English poet and essayist Samuel Johnson once said, “To be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition.”¹ In referring to happiness at home, Johnson was identifying a goal that one does not pursue privately, but rather together with members of an intimate body. The wisdom of Johnson’s claim lies in its recognition of a fundamental human longing for a sense of membership or belonging. People draw identity from their participation in communities of purpose, whatever form they might take.

What is the proper relationship between the national government and this longing to be a part of a meaningful body? For the past several generations, the United States government has become increasingly involved in the everyday lives of citizens as it has absorbed functions and authority that used to lie with smaller social institutions. Consequently, the sense of belonging and status once found in those smaller groups risks also being transferred to the state.

Since the colonial period, multitudes have come to America because of a hope that their families, churches, and other forms of community could thrive within its borders. Americans have long valued and given allegiance to this nation precisely because they valued other institutions and forms of life that flourished under freedom. Citizens therefore rightly unify in appreciation of the U.S. government for protecting the local institutions and communities with which they most identify.

However, looking too expectantly to the state as a source of identity and social solidarity—that is, as a

Talking Points

- The desire to be a member of a purposive community is fundamental to human nature. People tend to give loyalty to those communities perceived to be most relevant and effective in meeting their basic needs.
- As the national government absorbs functions and authority that used to lie with local institutions, the sense of belonging and status once found in those smaller groups risks also being transferred to the state.
- Progressive policies and rhetoric tap into man’s desire for a sense of membership and belonging and capitalize on it to promote an expansive role for the federal government. Language that positions the government as the centerpiece of a national family risks projecting unhealthy expectations and hopes onto the government.
- The case for limited government can be strengthened by acknowledging man’s fundamental longing for belonging and recognizing that local participatory communities are best equipped to meet this need.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/bg2063.cfm

Produced by the Richard and Helen DeVos
Center for Religion and Civil Society

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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single national community centered on the federal government—can erode the sense of America as a nation of communities centered on family, friendships, and faith.

Man's search for membership, belonging, and community identity plays a major role in his relationship to the federal government. Whether that government is expansive or limited will depend on whether or not citizens' longing to belong is met through other communities.

The Search for a Sense of Belonging

The federal government provides and U.S. citizens have come to rely on an increasing number of services, including education, physical safety, roads, housing and food for the poor, and medical care for the elderly. Less obvious a need, but just as important in people's lives, is a sense of community membership or belonging. Advocacy for expansive government taps into this basic drive within human beings.

The desire to be a member of a purposive community, to be on the inside of a meaningful group, to participate in something larger than oneself is fundamental to human nature. Robert Nisbet refers to this drive as "the quest for community."² Community membership is indispensable because it gives people a sense of identity and status, a sense of connection with the larger social realities of life. Without meaningful groups in which to participate, individuals usually experience not just loneliness, but a lack of fulfillment and a deep sense of alienation.

Community Function and Members' Devotion

According to Nisbet, the communities to which people direct their loyalties are those that are perceived to be most relevant in meeting the basic needs in life.³ Thus, from a pragmatic perspective, those

communities that are best able to achieve meaningful goals are the most likely to receive long-term allegiance from their members. As the early 20th century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote, "[P]eople do not live together merely to be together. They live together to do something together."⁴

Before the rise of the modern state, informal networks and local institutions played a large role in meeting people's basic needs. Small, intimate, participatory groups like the family, neighborhood, and local church exercised great authority over their members and provided most of the functions of everyday life, including education, child care, economic production, medical attention, and even ecclesial (church) courts to settle disputes. They therefore not only attracted and held the devotion of their members, but also grounded their sense of identity. People gained a sense of meaning and belonging in the world through their membership in particular families, estates, churches, guilds, and other voluntary associations. They usually related only indirectly and distantly to the king or emperor in whose realm they happened to live.

Expansion of the State

With the growth of the modern state, however, things changed. "The whole tendency of modern political development," according to Nisbet, "has been to enhance the role of the political State as a direct relationship among individuals, and to bring both its powers and its services ever more intimately into the lives of human beings."⁵ Today, important roles in production, education, welfare, and justice administration that were once exercised primarily by families, churches, and other local institutions are now deemed functions of the state.

America's Founding Fathers vested only a specified list of limited powers in the federal government, preferring that most authority reside—and

1. Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* No. 68, November 10, 1750, at <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/rambler68.html> (August 14, 2007).

2. Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1990), p. 29.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

that most needs be met—at the local level. However, in the 20th century, political leaders began to reverse the balance created by the Founders. Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism, Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal transferred significant social and political responsibilities from states and local communities to the federal government.

A Crisis of Community

With fewer and less significant tasks to perform, the social role of local institutions such as families and religious congregations has become weaker. People still expect these institutions to provide personal intimacy, emotional refuge, and spiritual health,⁶ but as Nisbet declared in the mid-1950s:

[They] have manifestly become detached from positions of functional relevance to the larger economic and political decisions of our society... [T]he whole network of informal interpersonal relationships have ceased to play a determining role in our institutional systems of mutual aid, welfare, education, recreation, and economic production and distribution.⁷

Smaller, traditional forms of association are therefore less able to evoke the loyalty and allegiance that they once did.

The result is a modern-day “crisis of community” among lonely Americans. Drawing on evidence including nearly 500,000 interviews over the past quarter-century, Professor Robert Putnam argues that people have become increasingly disconnected

from family, friends, and neighbors, impoverishing their lives and communities.⁸

Today, especially among young adults, a widespread search is taking place for a deeper sense of shared purpose, identity, and connection with others. Many Americans desire to belong to a community that they perceive as relevant and effective in meeting the needs that they see around them, and they increasingly turn to the federal government to meet those needs.⁹

The Federal Government as National Family

Progressives have capitalized on this deep-seated desire for membership in a participatory group and, as their language reveals, have used it as a point of connection with the national government. For example, Franklin Roosevelt couched the goal of his New Deal programs in terms of extending “to our national life the old principle of the local community.” Such rhetoric, notes William Schambra, was typical of early progressive liberals, such as Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, and Theodore Roosevelt, who advocated the growth of the federal government in the name of “national community.”

That same vision would also inspire the expansion of the centralized state in John F. Kennedy's New Frontier and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Johnson spoke of America as “a family,” as did Walter Mondale during his 1984 presidential campaign: “My America is a community, a family, where we care for each other,” he exclaimed, and it is the President's most important task to “make us a community and keep us a community.”¹⁰

6. See Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8.

7. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, p. 48.

8. For example, Putnam found that, on average, Americans attend club meetings and entertain friends at home only about half as often as they did a generation ago and that virtually all leisure activities that involve doing something with someone else, from playing volleyball to playing chamber music, are declining. See Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, description of Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), at <http://bowlingalone.com> (August 14, 2007). The Saguaro Seminar describes itself on its Web site as “an ongoing initiative of Professor Robert D. Putnam at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University” that “focuses on expanding what we know about our levels of trust and community engagement and on developing strategies and efforts to increase this engagement.”

9. For a discussion about how young adults are leaving traditional churches because of boredom, lack of opportunity to serve in ways that make use of their skills and knowledge, and the desire to make a greater impact on the surrounding community, see George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005).

National Community vs. Nation of Communities

To be sure, Americans are united by particular bonds, and they share an important identity as Americans. Some degree of unity—a certain sense of membership and responsibility for fellow citizens—is essential for the health of this country. A concept of national ideals and purpose is particularly important as America acts on the world stage.

Yet when addressing the needs of individual Americans, rhetoric of a “national family” or “national community” can place unhealthy expectations on government to fulfill longings for status and belonging that are best met by other forms of association. A better conception of the state’s relationship to citizens is conveyed in George H. W. Bush’s memorable phrase “a nation *of* communities,” of “tens of thousands of ethnic, religious, social, business, labor union, neighborhood, regional and other organizations...a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky.”¹¹

There is a significant difference between conceiving of America as a national community and conceiving of America as a nation *of* communities. In a single national community, citizens look principally to government to provide basic needs, including a sense of belonging and moral purpose. In a nation *of* communities, people value their political status and membership as American citizens, but their obligations and identities are grounded most deeply in traditional associations founded upon kinship,

faith, or locality. As President George H. W. Bush acknowledged, “Government is part of the nation of communities—not the whole, just a part.”¹²

Why Conceptions of Community Matter

The trend toward enhancing the significance of people’s relationship to the national government along with weakening other forms of personal connection is corroding social well-being and freedom. Personal bonds and fellowship fostered within participatory groups provide more than just warm feelings; they foster trust and social connections that have been linked with improved child welfare, higher educational performance, lower crime rates, and better physical and mental health.¹³ Moreover, the existence of a diversity of authoritative local institutions is an indispensable safeguard against government tyranny.¹⁴

Political rhetoric can play an influential role today, as it did among early progressives, in shaping public attitudes toward the role of the federal government in daily life. Language about the government as the centerpiece of a national family runs the risk of projecting unhealthy expectations and hopes onto the government.

The slogan of choice among some 2008 presidential campaigns seems to be “We’re all in this together.” For instance, on May 29, 2007, Hillary Clinton declared that “[it’s] time to reject the idea of an ‘on your own’ society... I prefer a ‘we’re all in it together’ society.”¹⁵ Six days later, Barack Obama used a virtually identical phrase, explaining that his

10. William A. Schambra, foreword to Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, pp. xi and xiv.

11. George H. W. Bush, “1988 Republican National Convention Acceptance Address,” New Orleans, August 18, 1988, at www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/georgehbush1988rnc.htm (August 14, 2007).

12. *Ibid.*

13. See Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

14. Nisbet has demonstrated the importance of man’s deep-seated desire for community membership in making sense of the most pernicious totalitarian movements of the 20th century. For example, he notes that the Communist Party in Europe became more than a political party. It became “a moral community of almost religious intensity, a deeply evocative symbol of collective, redemptive purpose.” Hitler also recognized the powerful desire in people for moral community. As Nisbet argues, this desire among many disenchanted and alienated Germans helps to explain why millions eagerly accepted Nazi doctrine. The same is true of Marxism, which offered “status, belonging, membership and a coherent moral perspective” to so many people. “For the first time they ‘belong to’ something, to a ‘cause’—good or bad as it may be, but something at any rate which transcends their narrow personal interests and opens up a world in which each has his part to play and all can ‘pull together.’” “The Hungry Sheep,” *Times Literary Supplement*, March 30, 1951, quoted in Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, p. 32.

“starting point as president is to restore that sense that we are in this together.”¹⁶

Such phrases are not inaccurate, but they can represent different conceptions of the relationship between government and citizens. Which vision of society is this slogan promoting? Who is the “we” in “We are all in this together”: a number of local, participatory communities in which members exercise mutual responsibility for each other or a crowd of individuals looking to the national government for personal meaning, a sense of belonging, and effective moral action? If used to justify policies that increasingly transfer authority and functions from local institutions to the federal government, an otherwise innocuous slogan can become the water that helps Americans swallow an unhealthy pill.

Conclusion

The story of the growth of the modern state is also a story of the quest for community. Progressive liberal leaders have tapped into man’s desire for a

sense of membership and belonging and have capitalized on it to promote an expansive role for the federal government.

Citizens who give loyalty to and gain identity from a variety of associations are likely to depend less on the state. Healthy political relationships go hand in hand with healthy relationships based on kinship, faith, and locality.

The case for limited government can be strengthened by acknowledging the fundamental human longing for a sense of belonging and recognizing that local participatory communities are best equipped to meet this need. The national government has an important role in protecting such communities, which includes preserving rather than absorbing their rightful authority and functions.

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15. Hillary Clinton, “Economic Policy: Modern Progressive Vision: Shared Prosperity,” May 29, 2007, at www.hillaryclinton.com/news/speech/view/?id=1839 (August 14, 2007).
 16. Barack Obama, in “Special Edition: Sojourners Presidential Forum,” *The Situation Room*, CNN, June 4, 2007, at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0706/04/sitroom.03.html> (August 14, 2007). The same is often heard from John Edwards. “There is a hunger in America—a hunger to be inspired again,” he argues. “People want to believe we are a national community.” John Edwards, in Ken Black, “Edwards Touts Poverty Eradication During Visit,” *Times-Republican* (Marshalltown, Iowa), April 10, 2006, at www.johnedwards.com/news/headlines/marshtr20060410/index.html (August 14, 2007).