

# GOVERNMENT VERSUS COMMUNITY: REFLECTIONS ON CORNUELLE'S "DE-NATIONALIZING COMMUNITY"

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In *Reclaiming the American Dream* (1993 [1965]), the work that first brought him to national attention, Richard Cornuelle introduced the term *independent sector* into the lexicon. This sector—not business, not government—Cornuelle saw as the voluntary, people-centric mechanism for reclaiming the American dream.

As Cornuelle ruefully noted, however, the independent sector's multifarious participants were not organized beyond their local sphere of operations, lacked a conscious sense of identity, and had little appreciation of the potential of their sector to ameliorate the problems faced by late twentieth-century America. Worse yet, he noted, the independent sector "is unreliable; it performs unevenly; its brilliant achievements stand in contrast to miserable failures, it often exhibits a stubborn backwardness" (1993 [1965], 45). Cornuelle's goal, of course, was to give identity, momentum, and prestige to this large, but little-noticed, sector.

Cornuelle's first book stimulated a national discussion and eventually spawned an organization named Independent Sector, founded in 1980 by John W. Gardner. More proximately, however, Cornuelle's thinking found its way into one of several remarkable national radio addresses by Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon in 1968. *Reclaiming the American Dream* had identified the danger of overgrown, centralized, stultifying government and the potential of the independent sector, and that thought found its way into Nixon's address entitled "Toward an Expanded Democracy," delivered on June 27, 1968.<sup>1</sup> In that speech, Nixon promised to create a Commission on Government Reorganization if elected. It would, said Nixon, "seek new ways to transfer functions from government to private enterprise, and also to the great, vital voluntary sector—to enlist the energies of those millions of Americans who stand ready and eager to serve and to help, in the best American tradition."

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On October 6 of that year, Nixon released a Cornuellean position paper entitled “The Voluntary Way,” in which he pledged the creation of a national clearinghouse for information on voluntary solutions. By then I was one of the candidate’s special assistants, and one of my tasks was to lay the groundwork for the clearinghouse pledged in that statement. I discovered a bright, young graduate student named Roger Feldman, and I charged him with finding a computerized database management program that could accept thousands of abstracts on successful voluntary problem-solving actions, and start loading them in. (This was a much larger challenge in 1968 than it is today!)

### ***Promise Unfulfilled***

Another assignment was to organize the President-elect’s task force on voluntary action. I called Cornuelle and asked him to be its chair. The only two members I can recall now—the task force documents have slid into the memory hole, alas—were Prof. Sebastian DeGrazia and John Kennedy confidant Richard Goodwin, whom Nixon had quoted in his June address. This promising sequence of events suggested that Cornuelle’s thinking was gaining ground in the national debate. With a new president seemingly persuaded of the importance of voluntary action in reclaiming the American dream, one would have thought that the independent sector would become a highly salient feature of emerging national policy. But one would have been wrong.

To the best of my knowledge, no one in the Nixon administration ever read the report of the Cornuelle task force, nor did anyone seek out Cornuelle for his counsel in reorienting national policy as the President had promised. Nixon delivered on his proposed commission to reorganize government—known as the Ash Commission—but its focus was exactly that: reorganizing the federal government. It had little or nothing to say about devolving responsibility and resources to the independent sector. The database project I had begun never found a home, and it vanished—only to be proposed again in 1981, as if nothing of its kind had ever happened before.

The one Nixon appointee who fervently believed in Cornuelle’s thesis and took it seriously was Housing and Urban Development Secretary George Romney, rest his soul. His four-year tenure at HUD, however, was unhappy, to say the least, and Nixon quickly came to see Romney as a chronic problem rather than an asset. If you look up the word “Nixon” in the index of Cornuelle’s book *Healing America* (1983), the most informative of the four references describes Nixon’s ignominious failure even to terminate the National Board of Tea Experts.

This recitation could easily be carried on through the public careers of the following four Republican presidents. Let me skip to my sorrowful conclusion from forty-some years of beating the drum for reclaiming the American dream through voluntary action: stimulating the independent sector to overcome America's problems remains a powerful concept. It has broad appeal. It makes good campaign rhetoric. But the unorganized voice of the independent sector is invariably drowned out by the plethora of organized interest groups that swirl about any national administration. Indeed, as evidenced by the faith-based initiative program of President George W. Bush, many of the organizations of the independent sector, once so skeptical about government programs and involvement, now too often see Washington as an ever-bountiful cornucopia of preferences and subventions, not as an obstacle to progress.

### ***Rebuilding a Sense of Community***

This brings us to Cornuelle's 1996 topic of "denationalizing community." Cornuelle's *Philanthropy* article begins with the central point that after the New Deal and Great Society, Americans came to a regrettable "conviction that the impulse to build a good society in a more complex and interdependent world would have to be expressed primarily" not just through government but "through the national state" (10).

The rationale for this conviction, Cornuelle argued, came from the thesis that only centralized, rational decision-making by specialized experts wielding coercive governmental powers could make a dent in the enormous problems facing the nation. An essential corollary is that ordinary people plodding through their petty, meaningless little lives lack any significant capacity for improving anything above the level of the local bike path or dog pound. "Thus was the secular version of the familiar doctrine of subsidiarity stood on its head," Cornuelle wrote (11). In addition, he argued, that the snatching of responsibility from ordinary people "is the real root cause of the evident loss of the feeling of cohesion and solidarity." "Community," he proposed, "results when people come together to accomplish things that are important to them and succeed" (11, 32).

Cornuelle's prescription—not at all surprising—is to turn away from expert-directed, know-it-all, centralized coercion and return to "the willing energies of working people: initiative, imagination, and their incomparably detailed knowledge of the particulars of the business" (32). He believed, in 1996, that people across the United States were reassuming responsibility, engaging in mutual aid, and demanding devolution of power from government back to the

independent sector. He concludes the essay with a call for a conscious effort to rebuild community.

Interestingly, although the word occasionally appears to refer to a place, the sociological concept of “community” is virtually absent from Cornuelle’s first book. Nor does it make a notable appearance in his third book, *Healing America* (1983). That book focused on what he then called “the continuing economic crisis,” and it purported to show how, through independent-sector activity, Americans can provide full employment and retirement security by “concerted action, national in scope but outside government” (173). *Community* is one of those venerable, evocative, but imprecise terms that admit of many interpretations—and distortions. To Aristotle, the concept applied to the *polis*, the city-state expansive enough to be self-sufficient, strong enough to defend itself, and appropriately sized—think nine miles square—so that every citizen (meaning, at that time, property-owning males) could survey and judge the characters, abilities, and reputations of his fellow citizens.

Today we carelessly refer to creations such as the Hispanic community, the evangelical community, the community of nations, the gay and lesbian community, and even, God forbid, the Facebook community, whose organic bonds are often “likes” registered by complete strangers. In truth, however, a human community consists of people we see, speak with, work with, trade with, play with, worship with, deliberate with, or otherwise recognize as fellow community members with a shared history and tradition. In Burke’s celebrated characterization,

To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind. The interest of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it; and as none but bad men would justify it in abuse, none but traitors would barter it away for their own personal advantage (1955 [1790], 53).

There are active communities, such as a hippie commune, a Jewish ghetto, or a small town in the mountains or prairies. And there are latent communities, ones that spring to life when forced by circumstances. The 9/11 attacks, for example, brought to life a community of almost all Americans, shocked by the attacks on their country. Literally millions of people across the nation volunteered, sent money, gave blood, or enlisted in the military in support of their fellow citizens, none of whom they had ever actually met, and most of whom lived in a place—New York City—often viewed with derision by their compatriots in the rest of the country.

Or consider, at the other end of the scale, fifty men and women coming together over a weekend in the summer of 1976, with tools and meals, to erect a new home for a burned-out farm family in my little town of Kirby, Vermont, population 350. We can all think of dozens more examples of human activity that easily fall within the expansive rubric of "community." These are the phenomena that Cornuelle proposed to "denationalize."

In this regard, one point I believe is beyond challenge: political leaders cannot invoke and manipulate any sort of "national community"—other than perhaps, temporarily, when all of us are involved as victims of a Pearl Harbor or a 9/11. Thus, unwise actions by politicians to centralize and manage human existence from state capitols or Washington, D.C., will ineluctably shackle and defeat community and the independent sector—and these actions will never be able to displace community upward to what we ironically call a higher level. There is no ongoing national community to be denationalized. Cornuelle saw "denationalizing community" as "devising ways to reinvolve people in solving the perplexing problems they see about them" (1996, 32). Instead of calling that "denationalizing community," I suggest renaming it with a term that captures the flavor of ceasing to throttle and oppress human life, and allowing the natural spirit of community to flower, wherever it will and in whatever way it will.

Cornuelle's books are full of examples of creative, effective, and inspiring projects, enterprises, and programs, hatched by business leaders, church leaders, and every other sort of leader who suddenly rose up and said, "Let's work together." I suspect some of these enterprises were included in the ill-fated voluntary action database project of 1968. Several revealing examples are provided also in *Peoplepower: An Alternative to 1984!* (1976), written by the late Morgan J. Doughton (a friend of both Cornuelle and myself). Doughton presents half a dozen case histories of the independent sector at work solving human problems. In every single case, as their efforts gained attention, an increasingly large part of their task was to circumvent or defeat the arrogant, stupid, venal, and sometimes vicious efforts of government and its minions to engulf, displace, supersede, prevent, license, regulate, tax, choke, and strangle their good efforts. Doughton's book vividly illustrates the fact that if Americans want to give community and voluntary action a chance to breathe and flourish, the first task is to get the government's feet off their neck.

A small but telling example took place just a hundred yards from the aforementioned house-raising in my little Vermont town. Our town meeting had voted to buy a new road grader. It was about five feet longer than the old town shed, so the road foreman couldn't get it completely inside to work on it during a cold

Vermont winter. The road foreman took an excavator and knocked down the ratty old shed. He had a town contractor erect a post-and-beam frame, and a local farmer rough-sawed siding for it from local softwood logs. One weekend about forty townsmen showed up with hammers and ladders. Up went the siding. On went the roof boards. Just when the job was all but finished, there appeared on the scene an officious little man from the state government. The workers gathered around. “Your town doesn’t have a permit under Act 250 to erect this new shed,” he ominously announced.

There was a moment of silence. Then selectman Donald Wood, a dairy farmer, pushed his John Deere cap back on his head, spat discreetly on the ground, and replied, “We’re not erectin’ a new shed. We’re just repairin’ the old one.”

The little man looked at the circle of men, most of them holding hammers, all of them nodding in agreement. He turned around, got in his car, and left without another word.

When the tale got around to the state capitol, where I was serving at the time, I was called upon to explain. “This was a victory for the liberals,” I explained. “The conservatives wanted to hold the guy hostage.”

Chalk up one small and all too rare victory for the independent sector. I am certain that if Cornuelle had known about this incident, he would have led the cheering section.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As it happens, I had a pipeline to Nixon’s speechwriter and idea man, Ray Price, and I used that connection to promote to him Cornuelle’s ideas about government overgrowth and the potential of the independent sector to counter the perceived need for such government expansion.

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