

(Chicago, Indiana, 1941)

The Civic Group in American Politics

THE CITIZEN'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE POLITICAL
PARTIES IN HIS COMMUNITY

To talk of the world today is to talk of each person in the local community. To talk of world politics is to talk of community politics.

No man is an Island, entire of it self;
every man is a peece of a Continent, a part of the maine;
if a Clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse,
as well as if a promontorye were, as well as if a Mannor of
thy friends or of thine own were;
any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde,

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

This is the age of crisis states, where each nation exerts its most remote and unused muscles to the utmost in achieving its national designs. The smallest group in the local community is smitten by the national force, and made to readjust its practices and to reorient its future. The process of readjustment has hardly reached the civic organizations as yet, but the evidences from other fields point to the immanence of such changes. I shall try here to describe the meaning of these evidences, and to plot the alternatives which lay before you.

You representatives of civic groups to whom I am speaking today have long been in the struggle against the evils of our political system, and the first part of my paper will treat of your efforts, with those of your fellows throughout the nation, to bring justice and order out of the chaos of local government in the politics of yesterday. But the times move in unexpected and awful fashions, and the second part of this talk will present a redefinition, in part, of the role of civic groups in the

state of the present and near future.

At all times when I mention the activities of civic groups, I wish you to understand that my examples are taken from the whole country and that some things which you have not found feasible in Indiana have better fitted the conditions of other states. Moreover, some groups are better fitted for some techniques than others. It would have been improper and quite amusing if Carrie C. Catt had adopted the methods of Mrs. Pankhurst in the movement for Woman Suffrage.

Let us describe first the needs of American local life which brought forth the legions of citizens. Then we will describe the nature of the ensuing organizations, their typical objectives, their leadership, methods, and techniques. When we have done these things, we can examine the new needs of today and tomorrow. And, if I may have your indulgence, I shall venture into the realm of prediction, visualizing what changes in organization, objectives, and methods would be necessary.

You know the needs and frustrations of local politics as well as I do. But I shall outline them again. ^{Role of Civic Groups} There are ten gaps in the effective functioning of democracy in American localities, not all of them found everywhere, of course. In the first place, many otherwise enlightened people are cynical about party politics, political machines, and bosses. Many people will engage in civic work and aid civic organizations who abhor politics and political meetings. Secondly, political parties seldom espouse governmental reforms when they don't have to do so. Thirdly, machine bosses, in county, town, or city generally put partisan advantage above the public welfare. Fourthly, the reformer and crusader gets his

greatest sympathy and support outside of the political framework and among the mass of independent citizens. In the fifth place, it is to the interest of the political machine to squelch the budding of progressive movements. They know "a sleeping dog never bites." A sixth need for civic groups lies in the backwardness of American communities in such matters as charters, budgetary systems, accounting, auditing, planning, and in the extension of the civil service merit system. In combination with the refusal of parties to undertake reforms, this need has caused the greatest flowering of civic groups. In the seventh place, men and women cannot rely on the governments to promote research in better governmental methods, nor on the Universities which haven't the funds and facilities to go everywhere with their science of public administration. Eight, despite the fulminations of educators on the subject, little is done to encourage the promising exponent of good government to go into politics or to provide a bridge so that the scholastic student can become imperceptibly and naturally a civic student once he has left the academic cloisters. Ninth, due to the frequent tie-up between the politicians and the sources of information (such as the newspapers), the civic group furnishes an unbiased source of information and is a clearing house for neutral but interested persons. And finally, no one has ever done a thorough job of indicating the role the civic groups fill in creating the impression of community solidarity and that the commonly observed vices of democracy are in no sense an inevitable concomitant of the American nation.

These needs, varying in intensity with the particular locality, brought about the rise of agencies devoted to the cause of good local government. The typical civic group is non-partisan, non-profit-making,

and permanent. It is an institution for adult civic education and an agency for the molding and expressing of public opinion. It is not a political party, though it may perform similar functions, nor does its membership include public officials, public employees, or their representatives. Neither is it a taxpayers' association or a Chamber of Commerce. It is interested in promoting a cause but a public rather than a private cause. Lord Bryce once said of the American party system: "The great parties were like two bottles. Each bore a label denoting the kind of liquor it contained, but both were empty." The civic group has been, on the contrary, a full bottle without a label.

In promoting its ends, the civic group takes many cues from the professional promoters in politics and business. It prospers, unlike many enterprises in politics and business, because it has no fear of facts. Its primary and most substantial contribution to public enlightenment is found in the numerous reports, pamphlets, and press releases which it publishes. If it can find the ear of the press, it has accomplished much. If it must fight the press, that too must be accepted realistically and other channels of communication must be developed. The pulpit and the radio are open to truth and any monopolization of these channels by any party or interest should be fought tooth and nail. The group can make use of posters, hand-bills, banners, and pennants. It gathers its forces behind symbols of national unity such as the flag, patriotic music and the observance of patriotic holidays in ways which point to the connection between these symbols and the movement of the group. Some groups have wisely fostered civic education in schools and universities; others have assisted character-building organizations such as the Y. M. C. A. and the Boy Scouts. Forums,

group meetings, mass meetings, civic festivals, pageants, conferences, and even the theater have their use in pushing the program of the civic organization.)¹

Some of the techniques of civic organizations have been the ceremonies which have inducted new members into the organization, and the pageantry sometimes used in initiating young voters into the duties and privileges of voting. That primitive tribes and primitive modern-day dictatorships go to extremes in matters of ceremonialism should not blind one to the values of these devices in creating a spirit of group cohesion, of esprit des corps. The bestowal of civic honors and awards and the posting and publicizing of a civic roll of honor are valuable in giving members of the organization and outsiders a sense of belonging to a group outside and above the party, namely the citizenry.

That the methods of the civic organizations of American communities have frequently been narrow and shortsighted need not be told you. That successes have often been too few to keep up heart among the rank and file is also known to you. But that these devices have been used frequently and sometimes with as much vigor, generalship, and acumen as ever a politician has played the great game of politics is emblazoned across the pages of American history in the past few decades.

At his best, the civic leader has been not so much a muckraker

1. It is unfortunate that partisan drama is monopolized in America by leftist groups to promote their ends, and that playwrights have not been found to depict with strong emotion the countless heroic struggles in American local history between the public-spirited citizens and the corrupt holders of power.

as a competent student and investigator. He has been positive and constructive. He has encouraged and inspired his fellow workers. He has been patient and persistent, and able to combine the practical with the ideal in the solution of current problems. He has always emphasized agreement and minimized the differences between people and between policies. He let those who would take the credit for the success of the policies of his group. His was the acute and quick perception of the course of action which was vital to the success of the community movement. His civic interest was no self-seeking prelude to entrance into politics. He avoided the ballyhoo, the blither, and the buncombe of the machine politician.

This, and very abstractly put I am afraid, has been the role and the techniques of the civic leader.¹

But the times change and wait for no man. The next few years will tell a story different in many episodes. The gods of war are ringing down the curtain on an era. And the fight between the acts goes on. When the curtain again is raised there will be many innovations, and those innovations will affect the acts of the civic workers in the smallest community as much as the actors at the front of the world stage. The civic organizations which are characteristic of American communities today are

1. Data to supplement these statements may be found in a number of references. Two recent sources may be cited here: C. W. Patton, The Battle for Municipal Reform, Mobilization and Attack, 1875-1900 (Washington, D. C.: The American Council on Public Affairs, 1940); National Municipal League, Citizen Organization for Political Activity: Cincinnati Plan (New York, 1941). One should also be referred to the excellent articles by Professor Howard M. Kline which appeared in the National Municipal Review, Vol. XXX, October and November, 1941, entitled "Citizen Groups in Review."

certainly not immune from the cataclysmic events which are changing the face of our political, economic and social system.

Three solutions of the present world situation are possible, though we may wish for a fourth or even a fifth. We are actively engaged in what is at present an economic and semi-military war against Fascism and Nazism, with prospects of wholesale participation in the near future. One possibility is that the war will come to a victorious conclusion after one or two years. A second possibility is that the ultimate victory may take several or even ten years, culminating in complete victory. And a third possibility is that a Fascistic reaction may occur in America which will cause our making terms with the conquerors of Europe or that we may be defeated or stalemated on the field of battle.

Each one of these possibilities has far-reaching consequences for the person who wants to preserve all that is good in the non-partisan, civic organizations of the local community.

If the first possibility materializes, the changes which we would expect would be less wholesale than if the second possibility materializes. For war is a catalyst to the social process. It speeds up change. What would have come about in fifty years is accomplished in five. The new situation in the first case would present the following facts for you leaders of the civic movement to face:

1. The parties after the short conflict will be based more on class and ideological lines.
2. Government controls over private activities will be increased in number and intensity.

3. There will be new functions to add to the functions already performed by civic groups.
4. The emphasis of government will change and civic groups will face the Federal government more and more and will have to develop new techniques to cope with the remoteness of government.

The party system already shows signs of rather basic changes.

Public opinion polls by the hundreds in the past few years show that the Democratic Party is more the party of the lower income and educational groups and the Republican Party is more and more the party of the upper income groups. The chief significance of this as far as civic groups are concerned is that their job of cutting across class and party lines will be made more difficult. As they have been constituted in the past, they did not need to take in many people from the lower income levels in order to get both parties represented. But they may then become almost exclusively representative of one party. What this means when the opposition party is in power is obvious. Civic groups will be looked on as the Republican Party masquerading under a different name.¹

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1. A recent widely read book points up this transformation sharply: "The New Deal has further curbed the masses by tying the popular organizations closer and closer to the state. This development is characteristic of the managerial revolution in all nations. It is strikingly illustrated in the United States by the history of the labor movement during the New Deal period. . . . The A. F. of L., as a result, is abandoning its stand-off policy. Moreover, the history of the New Deal relations with farmers' and consumers' organizations parallels the labor movement tendencies. The examples of Russia and Germany have already taught us that the early forms of managerial society require fusion of the popular organizations with the state. The bureaucrats in charge of the popular mass organizations, in fact, take their place among the managers. This tendency, like the other managerial tendencies, is conspicuous in the New Deal. (James Burnham, The Managerial Revolution [New York: John Day, 1941], pp. 259-60.)

To complicate matters, even while obsessed with this problem of remaining a political neutral, there will occur a shift in functions of the civic groups. More and more of the government controls which are being exercised today are controls by the Federal government, not the state and local government. These are, I am compelled by the facts to warn you, permanent changes. Thus, in order to be more useful or even to keep up its old standard of usefulness, the local civic group will be concerned with the workings of the national government.

Let us take three examples, two permanent and one more transient.

The first example concerns the matter of the body of civil servants. One of the great rallying cries of local civic movements in the past has been "turn the rascals out of the city hall." Get rid of the political appointees! The passage of time has brought more and more success to the movement and perhaps in a very few years we will have a body of civil servants who are trained, and permanent.

Will the task of the civic groups be then completed? No, for there are great but subtle dangers in a bureaucracy which will be mostly federal. Popular control will be more difficult because the source of appointment will not be in local politicians who can be "turned out," but will be in some remote board or official. Elections may be lost and won on the promise to create many new jobs in a community, and where that trend stops will be a matter of great concern to civic groups. A permanent civil service, though ostensibly non-partisan, may, as actually happened in Germany, be a bulwark of the status quo. The old type of patronage

may be replaced by a new type and the new money power of government will be a formidable opponent once it is affiliated with any single political party. Civic groups will have to contend with forces in their community whose source of authority lies in distant places difficult of access and control.

The second example concerns the methods of controlling the exercise of the numerous powers and duties of the increasing governmental agencies. Today, those methods of control are political; that is, they are not usable by private agencies. Not only are they political, but they are inadequate. The troubles we are having with conducting an efficient job of defense administration shows that fact clearly. These controls are mainly by the executive, the congress, and the judiciary. None of these agencies has grass roots; none of them gets down into the local community where the activities of government permeate. The executive is liable to be biased and not see its own mistakes. The Congressional Committees of investigation are better but also politically inclined frequently, and Congress would be overwhelmed by the task of investigating continuously and everywhere. The judiciary is probably better than either of the other two, but it is limited by its nature to a mostly negative and prohibitive activity. It can review acts after they occur and the judiciary too may be overburdened.

There remains a heavy responsibility, and the civic groups may be able to do a great deal about it. I can, if you will permit me the license, foresee a civic group which is so organized as to be an excellent instrument for the supervision of the exercise of governmental functions,

with perhaps committees on social security, committees on government-owned utilites and others.¹

The third and more transient example of what the civic groups will be concerned with, is the partial assumption of the burden of defense, home defense or civilian defense, or whatever it may be called. Civic groups in the community are the bulwarks of civilian morale. They are the symbol of community unity without taint of party prejudice. They will furnish the driving force behind civilian effort in war as in peace. They will furnish the personnel and the leadership of the unity drives. If any invasion ever occurs, they will be called upon to plan and make effective air raid protection and evacuation schemes. The British furnish us an admirable example of what has been done in defense by organized women.

These are examples of changed functions which will not, of course, completely rule out the previous tasks. But in the event the war is long and the suffering great, whether we win or lose, the specter of violence will plague the land. There will be many who are unwilling to compromise their differences. If those persons command the situation there will be no civic groups, just as there will be no private or fraternal groups which are not members of the omnipotent and totalitarian state. The examples of

1. In the discussion following this talk, one woman voiced her despair at the magnitude of this task. She pointed out that a woman had other things to do besides working for her civic group. The president of the League of Women Voters may have had this in mind when she spoke in her presidential address lately of "too much program." My reply was threefold: better organization of the civic organizations for superintending government activities; the amount of work needed for this new function is not as great as it may seem; and there will be a decline in those of the old concerns which were superficial.

Italy, Germany, and Russia justify this conclusion. Nothing is outside the state, nothing is against the state, and everybody must be for the state. That is Hitler's and Mussolini's idea of politics which goes down to the smallest hamlet of the land. Or, as the American political boss puts it (and the resemblance is more than coincidental), "whoever ain't for me is against me."

The role of the members of civic groups in the community, then, is clear. It is to adapt itself to the changing functions of government and to fight with just bitterness and just rancor those who would try to destroy their neutral, judicial function. No state can destroy them easily if they know from the beginning "for whom the bell tolls."