

## A Call to Civic Action

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, September 3, 2003

Memorial Day and Labor Day are lively bookends to a now fading summer vacation season, but these holidays represent more than barbecues and beach days. These celebrations recognize the crucial contributions of our citizenry: one honors the workers of war, the other the warriors of work.

Work warriors is an apt term. Americans are among the hardest working of any nationality. International Labor Organization statistics reveal that we work up to 12 weeks more per year than the Europeans, and our vacations are the shortest in the industrial world. While this productivity has certainly led to national prosperity and economic gain, it has come with a price—community involvement has significantly declined as our work hours have increased. Just as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams predicted, it's hard to be both an engaged citizen and an overworked one. Without an active and involved citizenry, are we the kind of democracy we want to be?

Bill Moyers, veteran documentary maker, television host, and social critic, emphasizes the importance of citizen effort in a democratic society. "Civilization happens," he claims, "because we don't leave things to other people. What's right and good doesn't come naturally. You have to stand up and fight for it—as if the cause depends on you, because it does."

Americans have stood up to this challenge in the past, creating successful popular movements that have pressured the government and society to change. Social transformation has required commitment, persistence, and dedication to the cause, as reform doesn't come quickly or without struggle. The efforts to achieve women's suffrage lasted nearly three-quarters of a century, from the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls in 1848 to the passage of the 20th Amendment in 1920. The civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s represented a coalescing of African-American frustration almost a century after our 14th Amendment promised them full rights.

Achieving these victories often required enormous personal sacrifice. Many women's suffrage leaders spent months at a time on trains and in carriages, moving from town meeting to lecture hall, away from family and friends. During the mid-50s Montgomery Alabama bus boycott, members of the black community relied on each other for rides during an entire year without the public transit system.

So have we arrived? Social justice isn't achieved in any one movement, however heroic. Despite the great courage of civil rights workers, inequality still abounds. Discrimination based on race, religion, gender, income, and lifestyle continues. The rights of workers, that same group we celebrate this week, are being eroded. Government programs such as Medicare and social security, that have long ensured all Americans a basic safety net, are threatened with privatization.

It's easy to think of some oh-so-powerful leader as the force who'll make everything right. But no figurehead can come close to the changes we as citizens can make. It's up to each of us to pick up the work. We used to call it moonlighting, that second job to make ends meet. Today, the ends that aren't meeting aren't just personal finances; they're threads in the fabric of our society.

Some of us are in the streets demanding safe neighborhoods, writing letters to Washington about prescription costs, or organizing neighbors to save a school. For others, there's no time to attend meetings and marches. But there is one thing we all can do to make a difference. We can exercise our right to vote. If the last presidential election taught us anything, it was that every vote-and voter-counts.

In national elections since World War II, the U.S. has ranked a dismal 103rd in voter participation out of 131 democracies, according to a recent study by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. In 2000, less than 40% of eligible Americans went to the polls, as reported by The Center for Voting and Democracy; less than one in three adults voted for the U.S. House member who represents them.

Watch the series of Democratic presidential debates beginning this week. Visit government Web sites regularly, such as ones for the White House, Congress, or your hometown. If we spent as much time on politics as we do box office ratings or baseball statistics, our electorate would be one of the most informed instead of one of the least. We'd have the know-how to take on the job at hand: running the most powerful nation in the world.