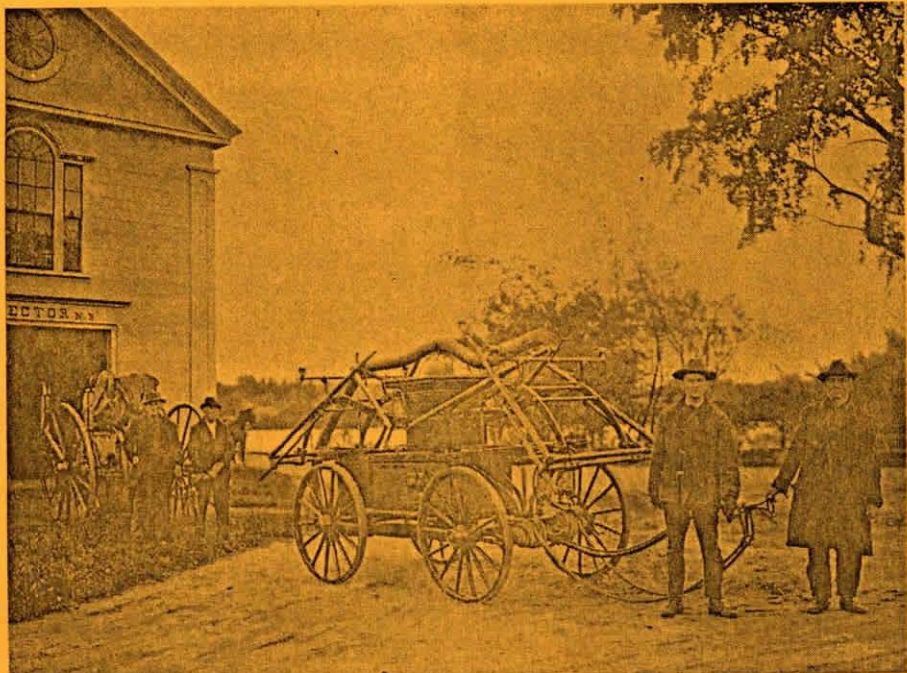


## A Vision of Voluntarism

*Calling for a return to a self-help society*

If Ronald Reagan's vision of a regenerated America could be painted, there is no question about which artist would best execute the commission: the late Norman Rockwell. The President's dreams for the future seem almost wholly derived from a sweeter, simpler, stout-hearted past. During his televised plea for a second wave of budget cuts last month, he seemed eager to finish with the drab statistics and demands for sacrifice, and get to the part where his idealism could shine.

the voluntarism project at the White House has been placed under the supervision of one of his top aides, Michael Deaver. Deaver foresees a two-pronged effort: first, to promote successful private-sector models of social service. Reagan cited a Philadelphia ghetto shelter for 500 street youths founded by David and Falaka Fattah. In spite of losing some federal funding, Falaka Fattah is resolute: "We didn't start with Government money. We're going on." The Administration further in-



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**The President's ideal: volunteer fire fighters in New England, circa 1910**

*"An essential part of our plan to give government back to the people."*

"I believe the spirit of volunteerism lives in America," the President concluded. "We see examples of it on every hand: the community charity drive, the rallying around whenever disaster strikes. The truth is, we've let Government take away many things we once considered were really ours to do voluntarily, out of the goodness of our hearts and a sense of neighborliness. I believe many of you want to do those things again."

Apparently they do. After the speech, the White House received hundreds of approving letters that specifically cited Reagan's hopeful exhortation to mutual aid. The President picked up the theme again last week, in a speech to business executives: "Voluntarism is an essential part of our plan to give Government back to the people. Let us go forth and say to the people: Join us in helping Americans help each other." Reagan said he would appoint a 35-member Presidential Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives.

As a sign that Reagan means business,

tends to help eliminate any bureaucratic impediments to voluntarism. As Reagan noted in last week's speech, "Mothers and grandmothers have been taking care of children for thousands of years without special college training. Why is it that certain states prohibit anyone without a degree in early childhood education from operating a day-care facility?"

Reagan does have U.S. history in favor of his new campaign. From Benjamin Franklin, organizing Philadelphia's fire department (even today 85% of U.S. fire fighters are volunteers), to the army of people who now donate their time to hospitals, schools, museums and town governments, Americans are predisposed to good works. In 1980 individuals donated \$43 billion to charity, on the average 1.8% of their incomes. One of every four Americans does some form of volunteer work.

There is evidence, besides those missives to the White House, that Reagan's plea for voluntarism struck a national chord. John H. Filer, chairman of the Na-



tional Alliance of Business, notes that 100 corporations immediately joined the N.A.B.'s first major fund-raising drive to explore ways of reducing chronic unemployment, and that top executives of 65 life insurance firms gathered two weeks ago to discuss possible corporate solutions to social problems. In Denver, six coalitions of volunteers have quietly formed to seek ways of helping people hurt by the budget cuts.

In explaining Reagan's goals, Deaver emphasizes that voluntarism is not a surrogate for slashed federal programs. Says he: "It is something that should stand on its own merits." True enough, but inevitably there are those who see voluntarism as a Reagan antidote to the shocks of budget cutting, and therein lies a problem.

The trims that went into effect on Oct. 1 mean that every day there are roughly 100 million fewer federal dollars to spend on social programs and the arts. The cuts have set off a scramble among nonprofit groups, from museums to soup lines, in search of new benefactors. Says Brian O'Connell, president of Independent Sector, a coalition of 335 corporations and philanthropies: "I'd hate to turn off a President who's trying to encourage voluntary activity, but he should not exaggerate: we can't pick up all the slack."

**B**usinesses and foundations, which together account for only 10% of all U.S. philanthropy, are being pressed hard for greater generosity. Says Eugene Wilson, executive director of the Atlantic Richfield Foundation: "New people are calling us, and we're getting requests for double and triple the dollars from organizations we've funded in the past." Boston's Digital Equipment Corp., among many companies, is similarly besieged, with a doubling of grant requests since March. Says Digital's Nancy Dube: "We can't be all things to all people."

Beyond writing checks, unpaid labor is at voluntarism's heart. "I think people are turned on to help," says Tom Aglio, director of the Orlando (Fla.) Catholic Service Center. "I think the troops will come through." Yet a mob of green troops may not be the answer. "We've already had an explosion of voluntarism," says Winifred Brown, executive director of the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center in New York City. "Institutions many times are not ready for them. Voluntarism needs to be planned for." Brown recommends employing a paid coordinator of volunteers. Officials point out that there are many jobs, such as drug-abuse counseling, that are beyond the capacities of nonprofessionals.

Even expertly managed private altruism cannot fill all the sudden gaps in federally funded social services. But now the citizen's obligation to help unfortunates, while no greater than before, is more compelling.

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