

The Rise of the New Civic Revolutionaries: Answering the Call to Stewardship in Our Times

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In the mid-1700s, a grassroots movement began as leaders in small communities across the American colonies recognized their common destiny as an independent nation that was based on the revolutionary principle of liberty. Coming together through "committees of correspondence," future leaders of the American Revolution, including Ben Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, began to share their thoughts. The voices of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and other colonies joined; they spoke first through the Declaration of Independence and later through the Constitution and *The Federalist Papers*. These leaders from local communities were not looking for greatness, but greatness was thrust upon them at a critical moment. We remember the heritage of these American revolutionaries.

Similar grassroots movements have occurred periodically in American history. Local leaders first discuss ideas in their communities and then join together to create sweeping change for the nation. This practice was true during the debate about slavery before the U.S. Civil War and the debates about the role of trusts before the Progressive era of the early 1900s. The civil rights movement was preceded by community organizing across the South in the 1950s. The environmental movement was inspired by Rachael Carson's book *Silent Spring* in the 1960s and local efforts to fight pollution.

A new grassroots movement is under way in the regions of the United States today. Once again, a movement is beginning in communities across the nation, urged ahead by leaders who see the need for fundamental change in how their regions define and solve problems and ultimately how they are governed. They represent a new kind of regional civic leadership attuned to the economic and social realities of our times. Traditional, top-down leadership styles and stovepipe government models simply do not work in the fast-paced, global economy and diverse society of today. Business, civic, and government leaders know that the old way of governing is simply not working anymore in solving critical economic, social, and environmental challenges, especially as these issues become more interdependent. Although the old model is failing, new models have not yet fully emerged to take their place. We are in an uncertain time of transition, similar to the 1760s, 1850s, 1900s, and 1950s, just before major change.

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In particular, a generation born after World War II—tempered by the social turmoil of the 1960s, the political disruptions of the 1970s, and the economic turbulence of the 1980s and 1990s—must now rise to the challenge. Many people who are part of the large baby boom generation have a commitment to place that is based on the communitarian values of the 1960s, combined with an entrepreneurial spirit

forged by the realities of the emerging new economy. Many people of this generation are responsible for igniting the beginning of the grassroots revolution in the regions of America during the 1990s.

Just as Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson found each other to forge the America Revolution; just as Abraham Lincoln melded the forces of antislavery to save the Union; just as Teddy Roosevelt rallied the elements of an emerging progressive movement to fight the trusts; and just as Martin Luther King, Jr., coalesced the civil rights movement, the next decade may find the coming together of new civic revolutionaries to write the next chapter in the American story. We may need new “committees of correspondence” among our regional civic leaders, a “Regionalist Papers” to marshal the intellectual arguments for new forms of distributed governance, and new kinds of dialogue with lasting impact—like that of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, who debated slavery, or like that of generations of civil rights leaders who raised the consciousness of the nation at important times during American history.

This time, new “regional stewards” may seek to achieve the moral imperatives of freedom, equality, and opportunity through more decentralized means than through centralized national government because conditions have changed. We need flexible, innovative responses rooted in collaboration that meet real community needs, rather than the simple top-down, “mainframe,” one-size-fits-all models of the earlier Progressive era. In fact, centralized means left over from that era have themselves become captive of special interests, often leading to gridlock. Although the ends may remain the same, the means must change to meet new economic and social realities.

In our book *Civic Revolutionaries: Igniting the Passion for Change in America’s Communities*, we describe the journey of some of these new civic revolutionaries, working on promising experiments in

regional stewardship. They are practicing a new style of civic leadership because it is working. As “visionary pragmatists,” they see the value in working more collaboratively to solve complex problems on the basis of fundamental principles and shared values. Together, they may change how our country solves problems—one region at a time, and then joining together as streams become rivers, building to a tidal wave of change across America.

Guiding Principles for Civic Revolutionaries: Reconciling Competing American Values

Following the example of the nation’s founders and subsequent generations, these new civic revolutionaries are grappling with the timeless tensions of the American Experience. The struggle between competing, positive values (such as the individual and the community) is as old as the nation itself, but every generation must address it anew. The task of every generation is to seek and find the “points of reconciliation” between these competing values—enabling the American Experiment to move forward.

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The new civic revolutionaries are driving promising experiments in regions across the country—efforts to reconcile important American values in their communities in our time. Taken together, these efforts are clarifying the practical challenges and the type of transformation necessary to achieve reconciliation among these American values. Their work is beginning to help us answer the question, “What does success look like for our time?” In other words, what are the guiding principles for reconciliation of important American values? Given their experience so far, the work of these new civic

revolutionaries suggests a number of principles for reconciliation, an answer to the question of what success may look like.

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Create Common Purpose, to Reconcile the Values of Individual and Community

- People voluntarily exercise their freedom to build a community of place, believing they will gain more in social benefits than they give up in individual liberty.
- Competing interests form working relationships that are based on complementary values and roles.
- Complex problems transform into manageable tasks, and independent efforts are channeled into collaborative action grounded in simple but elegant guiding principles.

Build Webs of Responsibility, to Reconcile the Values of Trust and Accountability

- Both strong expectations and authentic opportunities exist to participate in civic affairs through open and influential organizations as well as inclusive and catalytic processes.
- Written agreements formalize the basic lines of accountability among stakeholders, creating a foundation for building trust and confidence in the system.

Strengthen the Vital Cycle, to Reconcile the Values of Economy and Society

- Businesses prosper as part of the fabric of communities by being both globally competitive and deeply rooted to place.
- The economy is considered an essential part of the community and operates in a productive relationship with people and the environment.

- The economy is an expanding source of opportunity and mobility for all, rather than a fixed source of opportunity for some and not for others.

Make the Creative Connection, to Reconcile the Values of People and Place

- People and places are on a shared pathway to better living standards.
- People and places feed off each other in a creative interaction that fuels economic and community vitality.

Create a Vigilance for Renewal, to Reconcile the Values of Change and Continuity

- The community expects constant, dynamic change, seeking to leaven the negative impacts and leverage the positive benefits while preserving core values.
- The community is purposeful about filling its leadership pipeline, expanding the sources of leaders and excusing no one from service.

Build a Resilience of Place, to Reconcile the Values of Idealism and Pragmatism

- The community generates powerful ideas that renew core values in light of current circumstances, providing the glue that joins idealism and pragmatism.
- The community has an environment that encourages individual leaders from all walks of life to answer the call to stewardship, to make a long-term commitment to place and play their role in the continuing American Experiment.

Practical Roles for Civic Revolutionaries: Igniting the Passion for Community Change

Civic Revolutionaries explores sets of competing American values, from their historic revolutionary roots to their contemporary effects, and shows how the current generation is trying to reconcile them for our time. We do not presume to offer an exclusive list of competing values, nor offer a set of choices between “good and evil.” Although clear-cut, black-and-white choices will always exist, much of what

happens in communities today is more complex, operating in a gray area where no one can stake claim to the moral high ground, where reasonable people can disagree. However, even in this gray area, a case could be made for other sets of competing values—and it should be made if those values need to be reconciled for a community or region to move forward.

Our purpose, instead, is to suggest that Americans can find ample common ground in the process of reconciling positive American values—values that compete with each other and can clash in a struggle for supremacy, creating a cascade of negative consequences for people and communities. By focusing on how to reconcile and maximize the positive impacts of these American values, civic revolutionaries can ignite the passion for community change.

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Our purpose is also to identify practical insights from the field of experimentation, strategies and techniques that might be useful to civic revolutionaries in regions across the country. On the basis of these experiences, and rooted in the experience of the nation's founders, we believe there are three major roles that civic revolutionaries play in igniting the passion for change and navigating the process of experimentation in their communities. These roles mirror the experience and beliefs of John W. Gardner, for whom life was a continuous cycle of reflection, decision, and action. For today's civic revolutionaries, like those before them, change is a continuous cycle of *discovery*, *decision*, and *action*.

Discover: They Build a Convincing Case for Change

Civic revolutionaries build a convincing case for change in their communities, accumulating informa-

tion, ideas, and allies in the process. They diagnose the challenges facing their communities, the tensions between competing values that must be addressed in new ways. They creatively describe, reframe, measure, and connect issues and root causes. They try to understand what is working, what is not working, and what might work. They seek out the experiences of other communities, to expand the view of what's possible and to find other civic revolutionaries who might be able to help them frame problems or develop solutions. At the same time, they seek out and discover allies in their communities, individuals who can help make the case and become part of the coalition for change.

Decide: They Make Critical Choices in Experimentation

Civic revolutionaries use what they learn from the discovery process to make decisions. They make choices from among the many actions they could take to tackle their challenges. Although they may consult with those in other communities and tap into national sources of research and ideas to consider options for action, they themselves sort through different ideas and decide on how best to apply what they have learned. They decide about focus, scope, and priority in designing experiments in community change—immediate actions connected to an overall vision (or story) of change that will create opportunities for continuous feedback and adaptation.

Drive: They Mobilize Allies for Change

Civic revolutionaries are relentless in their drive for change. They are thoughtful and reflective in preparation and in decision making about what to do, but they neither succumb to “paralysis by analysis” nor engage in an endless search for the perfect solution. They embody the spirit of experimentation; they reflect, decide, and act, then reflect on initial results, make more decisions, pursue new actions, and start the process again. They drive a realistic, opportunistic, and adaptable experimentation process.

Renewing America's Social Compact to Meet the Challenges of a New Era

By playing a practical role to advance core principles of reconciliation, today's civic revolutionaries are, in effect, renewing America's social compact. Through their actions, they are redefining the relationship between Americans and their communities, regions, and nation—to better meet the challenges of a new era. In fact, we may have reached a stage similar to the period before the American Revolution, the Civil War, the Progressive Era, and the civil rights movement where a new social compact will emerge from experimentation at the grass roots. What shifts have to be made to create a new social compact that is founded on the promising experiments of civic revolutionaries across America? They are redefining the relationship between the values of:

- *Individuals and community*—shifting from compromise, conflict, and chaos to choice, complementarity, and cohesion
- *Trust and accountability*—shifting from skeptical bystanders and unclear responsibilities to engaged shareholders and mutual accountability
- *Economy and society*—shifting from short-term speculation to long-term investment, from uneven access to universal mobility
- *People and place*—shifting from separate paths to shared destinies, from common places to creative environments
- *Change and continuity*—shifting from stability as an expectation to change as a given, from leadership roulette to leadership renewal
- *Idealism and pragmatism*—shifting from wishful thinking to visionary pragmatism, from diverse leaders to regional stewards

To complete these shifts in turn requires additional changes: movement from top-down to decentralized solutions, interest group politics to public engagement, and widening inequality to shared prosperity. It won't happen overnight, and it won't be easy. But the seeds are germinating in communities across America.

A new social compact will have to include both rights and responsibilities; as John W. Gardner was fond of saying, "Freedom and responsibility, liberty and duty. That's the deal." Harvard professor Michael J. Sandel claims that a new political movement requires a new public philosophy, one that draws on stronger notions of citizenship and civic virtue than those informing present politics. Central among these notions is an emphasis on the civic consequences of economic arrangements, what he calls the political economy of citizenship.¹ Such a public philosophy would be driven by a set of simple rules, based on ethical principles, that help guide complex behavior to address the economic and social challenges of today.

Are we on our way to a new compact? In the 1990s, we went too far with our faith in the marketplace, losing touch with Adam Smith's original vision of the importance of "moral sentiments" (or sympathy for others) as a guiding principle behind the invisible hand of markets. According to author Peter Dougherty, a new civic economics is emerging, one that involves "the construction of a civic infrastructure that attracts and stimulates markets, the economics of large scale public enterprises (such as the GI Bill) without large bureaucracies, the economics of expanded assets and property ownership."²

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Perhaps the new compact will hark back to the famous nineteenth-century Cambridge University economist Alfred Marshall, who pronounced in an address to the Royal Economic Society in 1907 that the "age of chivalry is not over. . . . No one can lay his head on his pillow at peace with himself, who is not giving some time and substance to diminish the

number of those who cannot earn a reasonable income and thus have an opportunity of living a noble life.”³

What makes the creation of a new social compact possible? The American Revolution, the U.S. Civil War, the Vietnam War and other conflicts have helped to mobilize the nation and bring forth new leaders. Ben Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and others were not heroes prior to the Revolutionary War, but they found each other during those fateful years and created a nation based on fundamental principles that constitute the foundation for the American social compact. The Civil War brought forth the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, who reconciled the promise of the Declaration of Independence with the practicality of the Constitution and renewed the nation’s social compact.

Economic crises and excesses can also spur change, as with the downturns of the late 1800s and 1930s, which stimulated new progressive movements and the environmental movement in the 1970s. Demographic shifts and social forces can also stimulate change; they helped give rise to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the women’s movement of the 1970s. According to Ted Halstead of the New America Foundation:

America has so far experimented with three social contracts, each of which reflected the political forces of its time. The purpose of the first . . . was to found the nation. The goal of the second was to put it back together after the Civil War. The third—first articulated in FDR’s New Deal and later expanded in Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society—sought to build a mass middle-class society by relying on ambitious government programs and new economic regulation. It is now time for a fourth American social contract. To fit the post-industrial age, it must be able to reconcile competing demands of flexibility and fairness [and] will require new roles and respon-

sibilities for all three parties to the contract: government, business, and citizenry.⁴

In the early years of the twenty-first century, a series of disruptions have opened a window for change. In rapid succession, we experienced the implosion of the Internet bubble, followed by the hard new realities of economic slowdown. These events created a wake-up call after a decade of prosperity. The events of September 11, 2001, have stimulated a new sense of communal urgency, while the collapse of Enron and other corporate scandals have created a crisis of confidence in business. Taken together, these disruptions may stimulate a new willingness to leave behind old structures and experiment with new approaches grounded in core values. It could hasten the renewal of America’s social compact.

Renewing America’s social compact was a core concern of John W. Gardner during his long and distinguished life. It is in his memory and with the purpose of continuing his work that the national Alliance for Regional Stewardship has launched the John W. Gardner Academy for Regional Stewardship. The purpose of the academy is much like that of Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum: it will explicitly link principles with practice, reflection with action. It will be based on the idea that public philosophy should be an active way of life, not simply a way of thinking or discourse. Along with others, it will help civic revolutionaries renew America’s social compact—first community by community and region by region, and then ultimately between Americans and their nation. Near the end of his life, Gardner issued this call to action:

Most Americans welcome the voice that lifts them out of themselves. They want to be better people. They want to help make this a better country . . . what you can do is to awaken them to the possibilities within themselves. Awaken them to what *they* can do for their country, the country of their children and their children’s children.

So those who have not succumbed to the contemporary disaffection and alienation must speak the world of life to their fellow Americans. It is not a liberal or conservative issue. It is not Democrat versus Republican. It is a question of whether we are going to settle into a permanent state of self-absorption or show the vigor and purpose that becomes us. We don't want it said that after a couple of great centuries we let the American Experiment disintegrate.⁵

Following in the footsteps of the founders and later civic revolutionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the time has come for this generation of Americans to take its place as stewards of the American Experiment.

NOTES

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2. Dougherty, P. *Who's Afraid of Adam Smith? How the Market Got Its Soul*. New York: Wiley, 2002, p. 16.

3. Marshall, A. "The Social Possibilities of Chivalry." (Address to the Royal Economic Society, London, 1907.)

4. Halstead, T. "The American Paradox." *Atlantic Monthly*, Jan. 2003, p. 124.

5. O'Connell, B. *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999, p. xv.

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