
AN EDITORIAL

We've Got to Help Ourselves

This magazine has always celebrated New York. The core of this city's greatness, despite its host of afflictions, lies in its scope: whether you find the good life in beautiful possessions, in the exhilaration of a furious pace, or in listening to a free Bach concert, you will find it here best. As this issue demonstrates in its pages, we still believe that the pursuit of happiness is a principal purpose of a city like New York.

But now this city is under siege—in part from the consequences of its own past, in part from the sorry spectacle of a president who has declared war on the first city of his own country. Whether New York meets its financial obligations in the days ahead, one fact is inescapable: we cannot meet all our public obligations from the public treasury alone. Either New York's financial overseers or a federal bankruptcy court will be presiding over spending reductions that will last for years. And those reductions will diminish the quality of our public life at its roots—from safety to health to learning.

The meager resources of this city must go to the maintenance of the most critical services: police and fire, sanitation, emergency wards of hospitals. But does that mean that we must shut our libraries and museums, abandon our parks to vandals and decay, eviscerate our school system? It does not. New Yorkers can keep this city's head, heart, and spirit alive, if we have the will and the wit to use our strongest weapon: ourselves.

We are talking about the mobilization of New Yorkers to assume—voluntarily—public responsibilities for which there is no money. We are not talking about charity lunches and fashion shows or masked balls for some disease of the month. We are talking about using New Yorkers of every neighborhood, every class, every political persuasion, to do necessary work we can no longer pay for. For too long, too many of us have believed that if we do not pay for someone's work, that work has no value. That system of measuring worth must be discarded. And we must begin to make the obligation of citizenship mean something more than a vote and a tax check.

The possibilities are limitless. Opportunities exist in every neighborhood of New York for people with and without special skills—given the cooperation of the city's political and labor leaders. Fifty people, each working a few hours a week, can keep a branch library open. A few dozen art lovers can provide the eyes and ears necessary to give a museum enough security to stay open. It takes no special training or testing to help keep a neighborhood park clean. And the more who help in such work, the less any one person need do.

There are also thousands of retired New Yorkers, including experienced civil servants, whose pensions provide money, but whose lives may lack purpose. Who better to staff day-care centers and after-school programs? Who better to help organize volunteers to use their time efficiently and usefully? Hundreds of thousands of other New Yorkers head families supported by welfare. Do we still believe the myth that these people cannot function as school-crossing guards or paraprofessionals? Is it really "scab talk" to urge that this work be done for free, rather than not at all? We are not talking about the production of ball bearings or kitchen stoves; we are talking about work that directly touches the lives of 8 million people.

New York has the greatest collection of talent in the world; people who have built empires out of dreams, people who have changed how the world sees, buys, and thinks. In normal times, this talent is channeled into largely personal pursuits. But these are not normal times. It is, instead, time for us to take to the streets, not for a meaningless protest march, but to take on a share of public responsibility.

And this is, perhaps, especially true of those New Yorkers who have gained a substantial share of the good life through their minds. If the current crisis in New York means one less dinner party or movie-screening or night out a week, if it means a few hours of plodding but essential work in a neighborhood park or recreation center or hospital, that is a small price to pay to sustain the life of this city.

We happen to believe that a mobilization of thousands of New Yorkers just might kindle the sense of community that this rootless, atomized, anonymous city has lacked for so long. Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness" was located as much in the sharing of public work as in the indulging of private pleasures; and for New York, that sharing has become a necessity. It may also provide a missing sense of purpose and exhilaration for many of us.

This mobilization to help save New York will take hard work. The city bureaucracy must forget how to say "no" and, instead, find ways to put willing New Yorkers to work. Municipal labor leaders must put aside their ideologies long enough to realize that in the public sector, we, all of us, are the "bosses."

Whatever it takes, the mobilization must begin. There is work to be done here, to keep New York alive, and there are 8 million of us, most of whom can share some of that work. It's time to start saving ourselves.

—*The Editors*