

## HOW AMERICAN SOCIETY REALLY WORKS

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A conservative commentator said that some African-Americans are wrong to blame their problems on the failures of government. The argument is that African-Americans, like everyone else, share responsibility for their problems.

“Blaming all bad outcomes on government policy is like blaming all disease on doctors.” (Does the author mean we should blame some disease on doctors?)

For a moderate -- sometime moderate liberal, sometime moderate conservative -- that's very appealing. My “theory” of how American society works puts a lot of weight on self-help.

The theory contends there are, in fact, four elements at work all the time: self-help, mutual aid, government assistance, and philanthropy. Self-help is fundamental because there are some things we simply have to do for ourselves. Much as we want to be taught by brilliant teachers, for example, we can't learn unless we make a personal, private, sometimes lonely, individual effort. Self-help is as basic as that. If I'm going to lose weight, I have to do it. Even if I'm going to enjoy a movie, I have to go to the trouble to see it; I can't send someone in my place and have the same result. That even applies to rich people. Self-help comes first.

Most of us are rarely left to our own devices, however. We wouldn't grow up at all if it weren't for others looking after us -- people who are responsible for us in some way. Families come first on that list, of course, but there are many others: the associations we join that range from credit unions to burial societies. Mutual aid, mutual benefit, mutual interest, perhaps even mutual funds. Self-help becomes collective.

In addition to self-help, then, there is mutual aid. Self-help and mutual aid are often not enough for some of the most important things in life. Some things cost too much for individuals and families to pay for, and sometimes there are natural disasters like the floods last year along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. There are some things government must do, too, some things like flood-control systems that only taxes will pay for.

It is not surprising that we find government assistance mixed in with self-help, mutual aid, and philanthropy. There is a long history of government assistance to the poor, the homeless, the elderly, the unemployed as well as the unemployable, and the unfortunate and unlucky, like those flood victims. Self-help and mutual aid often don't work, and philanthropy isn't sufficient. Government assistance has its place, too, although some would have us think otherwise.

Public aid has always been supplemented by voluntary charity, and charity or philanthropy -- voluntary gifts of money and service -- is the fourth dimension of American society. Although the media have yet to discover it, there are far more regular contributors to charity than there are to political campaigns.

Every political discussion of large public issues involves a debate over those four contributions to the work of the society. In the current debate about health care, for example, we are at bottom trying to decide how much of the cost should be met by each of us (self-help), how much by those who share the responsibility for us (mutual aid), how much by all of us together through taxes (government assistance), and how much by some of us who think we should share our surplus with others (philanthropy).

Unfortunately, the difference between Republicans and Democrats, between liberals and conservatives, is usually reduced to one question: How much government assistance? That reductionism causes us to ignore or minimize the other three questions. Liberals neglect the importance of self-help and mutual aid; conservatives downplay the role of government assistance; liberals understate the importance of philanthropy and conservatives overstate it.

Each of us has some concern for the well-being of others. For some that reaches beyond the family and even beyond friends and neighbors to concern for strangers. The impulse or habit to care for others is universal, a characteristic of human nature.

But each of us also has a strong self-interest. It is in our short-term and narrow benefit to be free riders on the generosity of others. The economists refer to the “free-riders;” “free-loader” fits as well. It is in your personal self-interest, some will say, that you not pay taxes if you can legally get away with it. The problem is that the broader and longer-term needs of the community and the society can't be met that way.

Floods and famines and the economic and social distress caused by racial prejudice, as well as more ordinary problems of a healthy democracy, call for all four sources of strength: self-help, mutual aid, government assistance, and philanthropy.

Fortunately, America works because all four elements are at work all the time, along with our self-interest and our concern for others. The discussion gets distorted whenever we forget that.