

**B233. "How About a Bill of Responsibilities?" Chicago Tribune, (July 4, 1993). Also published: "Not Only the Rights, But Responsibilities" The Philadelphia Inquirer, (July 4, 1993), p. D5. "To Bill of Rights, Add a Bill of Responsibilities" Houston Chronicle, p. 1F. "Matching the Bill of Rights" The Cleveland Plain Dealer, (July 3, 1993), p.7-B.**

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The Founding Fathers did not bother to write down a bill of particulars for our social responsibilities to match the Bill of Rights. In the days of closely knit communities and religiously committed individuals, one's responsibilities were all too clear, it was rights that needed enshrining. However, as public opinion polls keep reminding us, it seems we have come full circle: Rights are now taken for granted while responsibilities are shirked.

A study has shown that young Americans expect to be tried before a jury of their peers but are rather reluctant to serve on one. A survey of youth conducted by the People for the American Way found that when asked what was special about the United States, young people responded: "Individualism and the fact that it is a democracy and you can do whatever you want." And: "We don't really have any limits."

Even more striking is the general deterioration of the social and moral fabric of our country. The extent to which the American fabric is frayed is highlighted by a recent study that compared the problems high school teachers reported. In the 1940s the top five problems identified by teachers were: talking out of turn, making noise, cutting in line, littering and chewing gum. In 1992: drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide and rape headed the list.

What if we were to convene a second constitutional convention to draft a corresponding Bill of Responsibilities? A Bill of Responsibilities could start with the elementary expectations: Vote regularly, do not try to evade the payment of taxes due, and certainly prepare to serve on a jury when called.

Next, one might record that Americans ought to try to resolve conflicts through mediation and arbitration rather than "sue-you" at the drop of a dime. This would serve to remind us that while we do have a right to sue one another, a responsible citizen does not take this right lightly and attempts to work out differences with co-workers, neighbors and others in ways that keep the underlying relations intact rather than under attack. (U.S. senators are said to be particularly good at being able both to work out differences and remember that they are members of one "club," that tomorrow they will still need to work with one another as members of one responsible community. They hence "grapple" with one another as if one hand were tied behind their backs.)

Many would include in the Bill of Responsibilities a clause about stewardship toward the environment. It would state the we have a responsibility to leave the Earth to those who follow us in no worse a condition than we have found it. (The fact that we are not living up to his elementary moral tenet might be a good reason to elevate it to the level of a constitutional principle.) Others would expand the notion of stewardship to include all worldly goods, and hence would argue that we require a constitutional amendment prohibiting the accumulation of deficits.

Other responsibilities are difficult to fully couch in legal terms. How do you state that if one plans to spring children on the world, one must grant them more than custodial care, do more than ensure that they will not run into the street or set the place aflame? That one is

expected to educate them, help them acquire fundamental values and learn about social responsibilities? And perhaps we should add to the list a commandment the Independent Sector (a coalition of voluntary associations) recently has been promoting, that each of us give "five" a week, that is five hours and 5 percent of our income, to good causes?

The latter ideas serve to remind us that ultimately responsibilities are a matter of inner commitments, of moral sensibilities, of a sense of obligation. If Americans have lost these, casting responsibilities in legal terms will do little good. And if they are reacquired, new laws will barely be needed.

So let's dedicate the 4th of July to a dialogue with one another about what we expect to do for our community and our country. Once this is clearly reestablished, we may ask whether these commitments must be codified in a new Bill of Responsibilities, or whether such legalism is no longer called for.