

Private Philanthropy and the Public Sector

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Although private charity and voluntarism are often understood as alternatives to state programs, in the United States government often acts through these formally private channels. In the face of national crisis and war, popular mobilization has been organized through membership in private, voluntary organizations. The practices of charity and voluntary donation have generated substantial financial and material support for state activities from foreign wars to the relief of domestic disasters. This pervasive entanglement of public agencies and voluntary practices is the central puzzle for my current book project, *Civic Nation: Voluntarism and the Governing of the United States*.

As one of the nation's largest private donors, the Rockefeller Family and Foundations were privy to the recurring debates over the proper relationship of voluntary effort and state action. During my second visit to the Archive Center, I focused on specific episodes when debates over the proper form of that relationship were particularly contested. For my analysis, the early years of what would become the Great Depression were particularly important as Herbert Hoover's approach to relief tested the capacity of philanthropic and business efforts to stave off the demands for government relief programs. At the request of the President's Emergency Committee for Employment, the Rockefeller Foundation made a grant to support "family food production" by employing agricultural experts to support gardening in mining regions and other "rural industrial" settings suffering from extensive unemployment and underemployment. At the same time, elites in the philanthropic center of New York City first stretched to meet unemployment in a traditional charitable manner and, as the depression persisted, moved to transform both the practices and organizational character of private social support. Long-standing charitable organizations, the Charity Organization Society and the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, merged and reinvented themselves as a recognizably modern non-profit social service agency. As the Roosevelt administration dramatically changed course from Hoover's associational strategy, philanthropists and proponents of private relief also revised their arguments for the virtues of non-governmental response to need.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Rockefellers' relationship with the American Friends Service Committee illuminates the multiple ways in which private gifts were

used to support and extend beyond military efforts toward the reconstruction of Europe. These conversations continued through the 1950s, culminating in the unpublished volume of Nelson Rockefeller's Special Studies Project on "the moral framework of American national purpose." The deliberations of this committee carried on a long-standing conversation about the appropriate role, as well as the inevitable limits, of private philanthropy in the face of economic development and the construction of a far more expansive system of local, state and national government.

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