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WONDER LAND

Whence Came The U.S. Tradition To Give and Give?

The gift gauntlet can beat us down, but the Christmas spirit lives on.

BY DANIEL HENNINGER

Friday, December 24, 2004 12:01 a.m. EST

What is the wellspring for the American compulsion to give, especially at this time of year? We give to each other, to what we call charity and even give our lives to the world.

It would be nice to think it began with the Pilgrims, who debarked from their ships and noticed they were going nowhere beyond the high-tide line unless each among them started to cut, clear and build. If there is one thread that runs through American sermons from then on it is the Golden Rule.

The great American songbook, from World War I onward overflows with offers to help. George M. Cohan sounded a whole nation's commitment in 1917 ("And we won't come back till it's over, over there"), while James Taylor made it small and personal more than 50 years later ("When you're down and troubled, and you need a helping hand . . .").

Of course the material world is now very much part of what gives in the U.S. Arguably, the Christmas wrapping and exchange thing didn't get going until 19th century merchants built the giving machines known as department stores in lower Manhattan. Many believe the father of the department store is R.H. Macy, and how ironic it is that Macy's namesake store on Herald Square is no longer famous for "The Miracle on 34th Street" but for banning "Christmas" from its premises.

It takes more than timorous managers at mirthless Macy's to quell the Christmas spirit. After Target department stores (whose logo is red but should now be blue) told the Salvation Army's Christmas kettle ringers there was no room for them within range of the stores' front doors, Wal-Mart immediately offered to match the Army's holiday take up to \$1 million. God

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It is true that the Christmas gift gauntlet can beat people down, turning some into post-modern Scrooges--a person who now finds virtue in giving little or nothing. One post-modern Scrooge of my acquaintance announced that the holiday obligation to give had so debased the original idea and worn him out that this year he is giving no one anything (though I believe the family hasn't been left out of his will to cleanse the Christmas temples).

The marketing of materialism can get to anyone.

I myself was tempted to the logic of bah-humbug until a lady at a Christmas party set me straight on the true joys of last-minute shopping. "Not for me the cold tapping out of gift orders on the Web," she explained. "I love to get out there and block-and-tackle my way through jam-packed stores just days before Christmas." I wasn't quite getting it. She explained: The pleasure in giving is directly related to the hard work of getting.



AP Photo / Mary Altaffer

Christmas shopping as sackcloth and ashes--self-purification to make the holiday banquet better--also seems the kind of notion about giving one might find in America. Earlier in the week, when the Eastern U.S. got whacked with temperatures in the teens, one noticed that the figures still standing at their sidewalk stations were the Salvation Army ringers.

Organized American giving--philanthropy and charity--is almost wholly salvific. When we donate money (several hundred billion dollars annually), as individuals or institutions, we strive to ensure that someone gets uplifted.

Some years back, the Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal commissioned a thorough study of giving in the U.S. What is interesting is how different American giving is when done formally through institutions and when we're giving our own money directly.

Foundations give to many groups, but the largest amount, about 30%, goes to education, with 15% each to human services and health providers. The target for corporate giving is almost identical. But when individuals give, education, health and human services get only 9% each. The overwhelming amount of individual giving, 57%, goes to religious institutions.

And so it has come to pass that courts, managers and principals can kick creches and menorahs out of the public square, make "Christmas" a forbidden word and banish Bethlehem from the mouths of schoolchildren, but the American people will still pour most of their spare change directly into churches, synagogues and other religiously affiliated institutions. Maybe that outpouring is not in spite of official secularization but in response to it. The ACLU could be the greatest religious fund-raiser in history.

A colleague told me that she and her husband this holiday would be sending five boxes of goods to soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan via a group called www.anysoldier.com. This, too, is part of the American chain of giving. I suppose there is no more officially secular organization in the country than the U.S. military. Still, critics today deride American foreign policy as "messianic." They cavil that we try to "impose our values" on places like Iraq and Afghanistan. The news this week out of Iraq, however, suggests a different way of looking at this.

The soldiers from the U.S.--and its allies--who have been living and dying, over there, in Iraq and Afghanistan, will not impose anything. As in times before, they are offering formerly unfree people a chance to experience the value of freedom and political self-determination. I think my friend the department-store battler had it right in this instance as well. The effort and cost could

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not be higher. The gift, in turn, will be great.

Mr. Henninger is deputy editor of The Wall Street Journal's editorial page. His column appears Fridays in the Journal and on OpinionJournal.com.



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