

How Much Did You Give Last Year?

by Walter Shapiro

For all those who have chafed at the way Richard Nixon has tried to embrace small-town pieties it was the ultimate vindication. Buried amid the financial disclosures that marked the high point of Operation Candor was the revelation that this presidential apostle of voluntarism had contributed a grand total of \$295 to charity in 1972.

The reaction was swift and predictable. Art Buchwald had an apochryphal cab driver declaring, "From now on, when someone hits me for a donation, I'll just say I'm budgeted for charity at \$295, the same as the President of the U. S." Mary McGrory commented archly, "For someone who consistently urged that private charities should take the lead in helping the unfortunate, he set a rather miserable example." But it took an anonymous headline-writer for *The*

Philadelphia Inquirer to reduce the issue to its bare essentials: "Nixon Income: \$268,777—For Charity: \$295."

To counter this image of a presidential Scrooge, the White House made a major effort to point out that Nixon had donated \$13,000 to charity in his first three years in office. But what they neglected to mention was that this \$13,000 represented only slightly more than one per cent of the President's income. Moreover, Nixon, like most Americans, displayed a rather extreme reluctance to give directly to the poor. Instead, the bulk of the President's tax-exempt contributions went to such well-heeled institutions as organized religion, with \$4,500 alone going to Billy Graham's traveling salvation show, presumably to help defray the expenses of renting such temples of the faith as Shea Stadium. The other religious donations emanating from the White House were so ecumenical

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as to raise the possibility that a contribution to the Guru Maharaj Ji's Houston Crusade may appear on the President's 1973 tax returns. Not one to leave any spiritual stone unturned, the President made donations to Norman Vincent Peale's Marble Collegiate Church, the East Whittier Friends Church, the Baptist Community Hospital, the Holy Rosary Church, and the Southern California School of Theology.

It is beguilingly easy to continue to parse the President's tax returns and speculate about what prompted the Leader of the Free World to donate \$100 to the Orthodontal Society in 1969. But in a sense this is a way of avoiding a much deeper and more personal question. And that is whether our own charitable contributions could better stand the light of national scrutiny. I know my own couldn't—I gave nothing to charity in 1973. To me, institutionalized charity has always seemed a rarefied world of large contributors and society balls.* Never a believer in the "drop in the bucket" theory, I would feel almost as foolish contributing to the Red Cross as I would sending \$10 to a Nelson Rockefeller presidential campaign.

There are a number of other semi-convincing rationales I can develop for my own parsimony. Perhaps the most telling is that as a salaried member of the middle class, I, unlike the President, pay a disproportionate percentage of my income in taxes. Others may choose to tithe to their church, but the U. S. Treasury has determined that I must donate more than 20 per

*Researching this article did little to destroy these preconceptions. The national representative of the Boy Scouts of America confided that the key to successful fund-raising is to get your first contributor to provide 15 per cent of your goal (say, a \$1.5 million gift to a \$10 million campaign) and the next nine to ante up an additional 35 per cent. By implication, our nickels and dimes make up the difference. And during a visit to the Washington-area office of CARE, Inc., I spotted two copies of the *Green Book* (Washington's answer to the *Social Register*) and learned that CARE's major local activity is an annual dance at the Iranian embassy.

cent of my salary to such causes as the welfare budget and Social Security.

Admittedly, another reason for my niggardliness is that working in a small office I am free from institutional pressure to donate a "fair share" of my salary to such charitable conglomerates as the United Fund. Back in 1969, when I was working for *Congressional Quarterly*, a Washington news service with a critical mass just large enough to have its own United Fund quota, I was subjected to the only corporate dunning of my life. At that time a large percentage of the *CQ* employees were in their twenties, with, at best, fragile community ties to Washington. Not surprisingly, their pledges were not only below quota, but a number of people—including myself—pledged nothing. The managing editor, himself a recent refugee from *Nation's Business*, where such heresy was undreamed of, called a staff meeting to stimulate our flagging altruism. In a short speech, displaying how much he missed the supportive atmosphere of a Chamber of Commerce publication, he said in more or less these words, "All of you liberals have been complaining about America's failure to help the poor, well, here is your chance to put your money where your mouth is."

The ploy didn't work, but there was more than a germ of truth to his words. Liberals have been traditionally suspicious of charity, preferring institutional rather than individual solutions to social problems. It is difficult to shake the nagging fear that if private charity is too successful, it will drive the government out of the poverty business. But even more destructive of liberal generosity is the fear of being paternalistic. During the Depression there was a widely told story of a wealthy dowager who, after viewing a Bowery bread line, said to a nearby social worker, "Please find out what it costs, I'd love to have one." In our generation, a woman like this would have been right at home at Leonard Bernstein's party for the Black Panthers. Perhaps our fears of

being paternalistic really reflect a certain uneasiness about having any surplus money to give away. That's why it's so much easier to buy UNICEF Christmas cards or contribute to a political campaign than to give directly to the unfortunate, saying, in effect, "I'm better off than you are and I feel guilty about it."

Community Roots

These emotional delicacies that seemed so important during the late 1960s now appear rather dated. At a time when many of us have grown cynical about the ability of government to do much more for the poor than provide employment for middle-class social workers, there is something rather appealing about the directness of the person-to-person giving that characterizes traditional charity. At its best, charity doesn't establish cumbersome eligibility requirements to screen out "the undeserving poor," nor do its organizers worry unduly about "charity chisellers." Moreover, at a time when America's social conscience has given way to self-centered strategies to supplement a possible 35-gallon-a-month gas ration, it is relevant to ask whether liberals have any responsibility to the poor beyond ritualistically wringing their hands at the failures of the Nixon Administration.

Theoretically, private benevolence represents one way to partially bypass the bureaucratic rigidity that accompanies governmental efforts to fight poverty. For example, the drug-help agencies run by benighted fragments of the counter-culture in the late 1960s illustrate this kind of non-governmental flexibility. While the government was wasting millions of dollars annually in futile efforts to deal with the casualties of our own domestic cultural revolution, these make-shift operations were often surprisingly effective in ministering to the needs of the victims of the drug culture and developing the kind of rapport necessary to counsel alienated

youth. In contrast, government attempts were almost by definition self-defeating, because official piety meant that they couldn't wink at the use of marijuana and relatively mild hallucinogens to gain the confidence of the heroin addicts and "speed freaks."

Because I spent the late 1960s in the youth-oriented atmosphere of Ann Arbor, Michigan, I had first-hand knowledge of the effectiveness of these private drug-help agencies. In the same way, a resident of Charleston, West Virginia, may be struck by the good works carried out by the local Salvation Army, and someone from Lowell, Massachusetts, may be keenly aware of the performance of a local day nursery. Although none of these three cities is immune from urban problems, each is small enough so that charity somehow seems manageable. Non-religious charity is rooted in communities like these as a kind of concomitant to civic boosterism. In a sense, you give to charity so that you can say with pride, "Sure, we have a lot of poor in my hometown, but at least we see to it that no one goes hungry." There is something personal about charity like this—you are often solicited by someone you know, and you generally have some idea where your money goes.

But with the growth of our urban society, this kind of charity seems increasingly anachronistic, a remnant of that bygone America of church socials and gasoline price wars. That's why I feel somewhat sympathetic toward the official rationale for the meagerness of the President's 1972 charitable contributions. According to a White House spokesman, the \$295 that Nixon gave was not an adequate reflection of his habits "when he had more time to attend to personal matters." As self-serving as this explanation may be, it raises the point that giving to charity in a city like Washington is not easy. This is an old observation, since as early as 1698, Cotton Mather was warning urban parishioners in Boston "not to

abuse your charity by misapplying it." Today most of us are wary of beggars, remembering people like the legless man who got into a dispute with the IRS during the 1950s over the \$18,000 he was making annually pan-handling on the New York subways.

A healthy skepticism about many institutionalized charities is also becoming common. The faith of many was shaken a while back when it was revealed that Father Flanagan's Boys Town, one of the most popular mail-order charities of all time, had more money than it knew what to do with. More recently, *The Washington Post* told of charges that Boys' Farm U. S. A. (a Father Flanagan imitator with the slogan, "No person stands too tall that they can't stoop to help a kid") was spending 90 per cent of all its contributions on fund-raising. Government provides little protection against hustles like these. Even Pennsylvania, with the toughest charity laws in the country, still permits organizations to spend 35 per cent of their money on fund-raising and the rest on administrative expenses.

We are left with this dilemma: Either you contribute out of blind faith, or you have to invest large amounts of time measuring the cost-effectiveness of various charities. As the archetypal rootless American, Richard Nixon personifies for many of us what happens to our charitable impulses when we are denied any personal contact with an effective local charity. In cities like New York and Washington, charities are almost as bureaucratic as government itself, and fund-raising is almost as impersonal as the withholding of your income tax.

Too Much to Squander

Back in 1969, the President tried the short-cut of donating \$1,000 to Washington, D. C.'s United Givers Fund. In a sense, the United Fund is the Howard Johnson's of charity, a kind of guarantee of predictable

mediocrity. You can rest assured that your contribution is not paying for the Caribbean vacation of some bogus minister, but, at the same time, many of the Fund's member agencies provide little in the way of direct contributions to the poor. Instead, there is an almost unavoidable middle-class bias to this modern community chest, as a large portion of its funds go to such community-wide causes as hospitals, the YMCA, and scouting.

On one level, the appeal of the United Fund is somewhat analogous to that of a mutual fund that spares you the agony of sifting through corporate earnings reports. In reality, however, the motivation for many contributions to the United Fund and similar piggyback charities has little to do with altruism. Instead, many contributions are inspired by pressure at the office. While "I gave at the office" has long been one of those standard gag lines found in any comedian's repertoire, there is something significant about the growth of on-the-job charitable contributions.

Part of the reason for the change is demographic. Fund-raisers know that being solicited by a friend is far more effective than being dunned by a stranger. That's why many charities have traditionally relied on door-to-door solicitations in every neighborhood. But this tradition is dying as cohesive neighborhoods have given way to tract subdivisions, where few know who dwells in the next cul-de-sac. Moreover, the increasing number of women in the labor force means that the "lady of the house" is rarely home during the day when the Heart Fund or the Cancer Society comes to call. And evening doorbell ringing has fallen victim to the fear of crime and the general climate of suspicion that exist in so many neighborhoods.

As a consequence, large offices have become increasingly fertile territories for fund-raisers, with many employees contributing out of fear that stinginess will be remembered at promotion time. It is hard to assess how much direct coercion is involved

in these on-the-job appeals. United Fund rules expressly forbid direct pressure on employees to contribute, but in reality there is little that they can do to curb these inevitable practices. In fact, they subtly encourage corporate shakedowns by appointing the heads of large corporations to the Fund's board, making a company's failure to meet its quota a social embarrassment for the boss. One United Fund official recounted calling the head of a large department store to remind him that on-the-job blackmail was contrary to official policy and being told by the self-made executive: "You've given me a quota. And I guarantee you we'll make it. How we do that is my business. But let me tell you, I've never failed at anything in my life and I'm not going to start now." The official, in telling me the story, asked by implication, "What could the United Fund do? Not accept that company's contribution?"

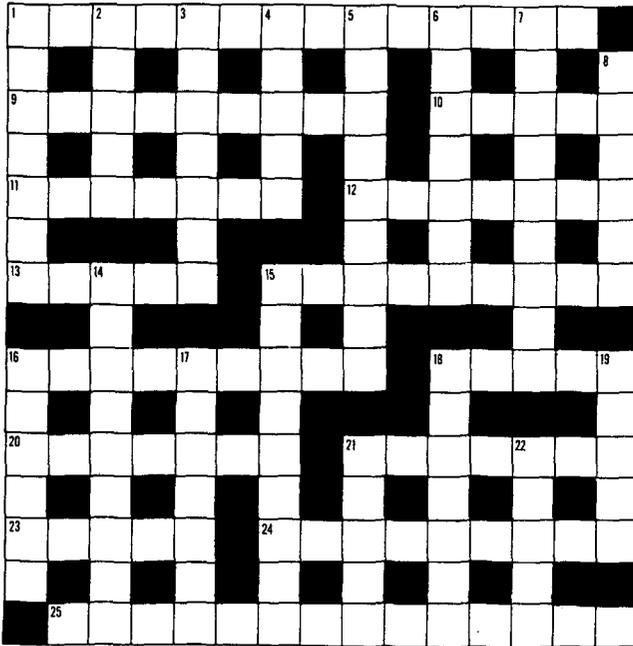
It is indicative of the changing patterns of American altruism that programs for the retarded and aid to the physically handicapped have emerged as some of the most popular charities. Although unquestionably worthy causes, mental retardation and physical disability, unlike social problems like poverty, are generally considered to be "acts of God" and cut entirely across class lines. No matter how insulated your neighborhood or how sheltered your life-style, virtually everyone knows someone who has the burden of caring for a retarded child. This means that we are apt to develop some sense of the effectiveness of various local agencies for the retarded through casual conversation. There is no greater incentive to contribute to a local charity than the knowledge that they are helping someone we know. That's why it is so much easier to support middle-class charities like the Boy Scouts or the Little League than to channel our aid to the increasingly anonymous agencies that have the unenviable task of caring for the poor. In an earlier era when neighborhoods were more heterogeneous, it was pos-

sible to know the names of poor families who were receiving the benefits of charity. Even in staunchly middle-class neighborhoods, the rigors of unemployment and sudden illness often made charity a real and tangible thing. But with the development of government programs like unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation, this kind of direct aid to stricken members of the middle class is increasingly limited to the victims of floods and other natural disasters.

With the poor increasingly out of sight and mind, it is very easy to inadvertently emulate the President's approach to charity—either by neglecting to give at all or by tossing coins mindlessly into the fountain of such middle-class causes as the United Fund. It is tempting to moralize and say we should each take the responsibility of investigating non-traditional avenues of charitable giving, but the absence of time to do this kind of research quickly becomes a convenient excuse to postpone writing any checks at all. Rather, private institutions, like foundations, should take the lead in developing mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of various charities. Foundations are mentioned with some trepidation because while they have more than enough resources to do the job comprehensively, there is the ever-present danger that their analyses may end up reflecting the values of McGeorge Bundy and John D. Rockefeller. More than just reviewing their fiscal affairs (some of the most effective store-front charities have financial practices that would make Maurice Stans blush), such an evaluation should emphasize the charity's impact in human terms on the community it purports to serve. America is rare in having developed such a widespread tradition of non-religious giving. At a time when liberal illusions about government's ability to eradicate poverty are fading, the more than \$16 billion Americans contribute to charity annually is far too important a national resource to squander.

the political puzzle

by John Barclay



Across

1. Rockefeller or Agnew, for example. (6, 8)
9. Tom scared them with his medical history. (9)
10. Small part of antithesis. (5)
11. Slanter of beach houses. (7)
12. Ace made dean's list here. (7)
13. Looks nimble in sunlit heroics. (5)
15. Responses to acorn site. (9)
16. Seethed when fender met fender. (9)
18. Who says I'm not in North Dakota? (5)
20. You can get mono by the bay. (7)
21. United Nations in 3002, all mixed up and at lowest level. (7)
23. What is Val to use to speak? (5)
24. The last Latin does not exist. (4, 2, 3)
25. A ghastly diving arrangement saves fuel. (8, 6)

Down

1. Union has DAR feel. (7)
2. This type is to the man-or born. (5)
3. Leave North Carolina completely surrounded. (7)
4. Pot between crab and hopper? (5)
5. Eyedrops, perhaps? (6, 3)
6. About pamphlet—pull it back! (7)
7. How ten-ton Tony spent nights out. (2, 3, 4)
8. Our editor fades. (6)
14. Was Miss Muffett disturbed by aunt and altar? (9)
15. Put particle in rank to spread supply. (9)
16. This arrangement of a sum is well-known. (6)
17. How can alley be half a confrontation? (7)
18. Home to Chet and Mike. (7)
19. Get mail moving, and some of this may disappear. (4-3)
21. Artist appeals to men, and women. (5)
22. Coming up from Florida I hurt people badly. (5)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 46.