

Huda Haque, Panther Creek High School, Cary, North Carolina

Remembering Responsibility: The Duty of an American

When the Founding Fathers penned America's Constitution, the primary intention of the United States was to grant unalienable rights to its people in the face of monarchical rule. While this more passive aspect of American citizenship is undeniable, the active responsibilities of citizens have characterized the nation's tenacity and devotion to the rule of law. This principle is the same reflected in John F. Kennedy's famous inaugural call to action, and it is the same one that has continued to reinforce the rule of law in America.

Perhaps the most obvious responsibilities of citizenship are the mandatory ones. Americans are required to pay their taxes, serve on a jury if summoned, register with the Selective Service, and overall, obey all federal and local laws. Adhering to these basic requirements of citizenship not only permits a basic level of peace, but it also promotes equal coordination amongst all Americans. [1] In doing so, citizens prove the efficiency of laws that exercise power uniformly in lieu of a single authority when it comes to maintaining society.

Yet, the voluntary responsibilities of citizens also reinforce the rule of law in an even more robust manner, especially when they are denied to certain Americans. The duty of voting, since the establishment of the country, has been fought for by groups such as women and African Americans. For decades, this responsibility was not designated to many Americans, even as they lived as full citizens in their country. However, this duty's roots were found in the basic ideals of democracy, as well as the rule of law, seeing as democracy strives to uphold the equality of all citizens in the representation it offers. Many women such as Alice Paul and Lucy Burns saw their

denial to vote as a denial of their status as Americans who contributed to the country. [2] Additionally, African Americans, who had been robbed of their 15th Amendment rights as the South circumvented the Amendment with poll taxes and grandfather clauses, were similarly outraged, with one Georgian in the 1930s stating that he had “never voted in [his] life”, [and had] never been able to express [his] right as a citizen because of the poll tax”. [3] The fact that it was not a mere accessory, but rather an obligation that was being taken away, propelled groups to reinforce the rule of law through activism and protest. Paul and Burns faced imprisonment, physical assault, damaging force-feeding, and more in order to push the women’s suffrage movement on a national scale, their efforts eventually culminating in increased equality before the law through the 19th Amendment. [2] Additionally, African-Americans and organizations, including Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, withstood racist, violent attacks to pressure Congress into passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a step towards the elimination of discrimination (via the banning of literacy tests and poll taxes) against a large portion of citizens under the law. [4] Therefore, the presence of the voting responsibility eventually led to a more just rule of law.

Additionally, another onus of citizenship lies within furthering the common good for a community. The concept of a common good may be defined as the achievement of ideals such as happiness and justice for all. A recent example of this duty being carried out can be seen in activism for same-sex marriage. The right to marriage and a publicly recognized relationship can easily be classified as one afforded by the common good, yet court cases like *Baker v. Nelson*, which upheld the denial of a marriage license to a gay couple, the passage of anti-LGBTQ marriage in over half of the country, the 1993 Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Bill (DADT), which

prevented LGBTQ members of the military from serving openly, and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) which defined marriage as being only between a man and a woman, obstructed this notion for many. [5] As it is the responsibility of citizens to actively pursue the common good for all, many Americans took to the streets in order to challenge this lack of basic rights. In the face of increasing pushback from both major political parties, activists ignored the idea that the rights of LGBTQ Americans were simply for states to decide, and in March of 2009, hundreds of thousands of Americans carried out their responsibility by protesting. [6] The event no doubt resulted in a ripple effect, the main one being that the matter of LGBTQ rights became one of greater importance on the national scale, not an issue to be overlooked. In fact, soon after, both DADT and DOMA were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, and on June 26th, 2015, same-sex marriage was legalized in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. [5] Clearly, the matter of LGBTQ rights in America was pursued due to an obligation on behalf of its citizens, and as a result, people under the law were held to equal levels of dignity and justice.

To be an American citizen allows a person to enjoy many rights, yet the responsibilities of this citizenship are similarly crucial for ensuring the strength of American law. Primarily, these commitments serve to create a society that may enjoy equity, and in doing so, they ultimately reinforce the rule of law by making it exercise a righteous amount of power upon citizens. When observing the relationship between the commitment of an American and the law, it is also pivotal to keep in mind the many Americans who have both dedicated and sacrificed their lives in the name of strengthening this relationship for future generations of citizens, citizens who must never take these responsibilities lightly themselves.

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