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What Citizenship Means

Check your favorite source of news. Real news, not “fake news.” And you will likely conclude that, as a nation, we are cursed by the shallowness of our leaders.

We call them many things: ignorant, self-serving, petty, ego-crazed, deceptive, condescending. When we use these words, the names and images of our favorite “least favorite” leaders immediately come to mind.

No question: we should expect more from our leaders. But perhaps we should take a moment to reverse our perspective and ask: “what should we expect from ourselves?”

How well do we perform our own roles? Not so much our role as followers but, our more crucial role as citizens. How skilled are we at practicing citizenship? Not citizenship in the narrow legal sense. Rather, citizenship in a broader sense: membership and participation in a community with its linkages and responsibilities, its contributions and accountability to a larger enterprise.

Too often in America today, we confuse consumerism and citizenship. We have come to think of citizenship as being about our access to rights and entitlements and privileges and civic bargains as if citizenship was similar to COSTCO membership. Clearly, citizenship means more than that.

Citizenship is about responsibilities and not just rights. About obligation, not just entitlements; and about the willingness to sacrifice and not just the willingness to claim privileges.

Citizenship involves an accounting of what we owe not just a calculation of what we can get.

The basic requirements of citizenship are simple. First, be well- informed rather than thoroughly indoctrinated. Obey the law. Vote thoughtfully. Be willing, along with everyone else, to pay your fair share of taxes. Serve on jury duty. Be willing perform military service if

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you are able. Consider some other type of voluntary service if you are not. (Some form of mandatory national service for young people is, in my opinion, a good idea.)

But we should not limit ourselves to these very basic requirements. We should look for other obligations to undertake in gratefulness for what America offers us and in testimony to what we owe this country, our community and the people around us. Being satisfied to practice only some of our obligations or doing the barest minimum will cause America to stagnate and frustrate our hopes for better leadership.

The jaundiced view of our leaders may have as much to do with our own sense of privilege or our own disengagement as with our leaders' wrong-headedness. We are often overly focused on whether their rhetoric and actions benefit our own individual interests in the short term. And we may carelessly ignore whether their words and actions will serve the wider interests of the nation in the long term.

All of us know, or should be able to recognize, the truth of the old maxim "there is no free lunch." In the words of the colonial era patriot Thomas Paine, "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men (or women), undergo the fatigue of supporting it." The problem is that, as a nation, we have become extremely "fatigue averse."

So as we shake our heads at leaders throughout the political spectrum and level criticism at them, let's not try to shake off our own responsibilities and obligations. It is appropriate to expect much more from many of our leaders. But to see those expectations realized, it will be necessary to expect much more from ourselves.