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Headline: Charity never faileth, unless it's politically incorrect

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Noblesse oblige abounds. Americans, 73 percent of them, gave \$190 billion to charity in 1999, the highest amount in 28 years. The dollars look good, but sources are revealing. Those who made under \$10,000 gave 5.2 percent of their income to charity. Percentage of income given decreases steadily as income goes up until you reach the worst crowd, those who make \$75,000 - \$99,000 per year, who give only 1.6 percent, and then climbs a bit for the \$100,000 + crowd to 2.2 percent. Vice president Gore gave a whopping \$353 of his \$197,000 to charity in 1997 and \$15,000 of \$240,930 in 1999. Vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney gave \$209,832 of \$22 million in income over the past 10 years, but assures he gave speeches for free.

More troublesome than wealthy Scrooges is their defiance of the qualities of charity. Charity is not puffed up, but today's philanthropists see it differently. There are the blow-hards whose businesses benefit from their gifts. Bill and Melinda Gates gave \$22 billion for computers in schools and wiring libraries, among other things. Couldn't hurt, training the young'uns on Microsoft, eh?

Then there are those billionaires who pick causes du jour and ride the wave of PR. While 43 percent of charitable gifts in the United States went to religion, not one of the top 12 U.S. donors listed a religious group as one of their donees.

There is nothing so pedestrian as faith. Let the under-\$10,000 crowd do the tithing. This group tackles media causes. Ted Turner pledged \$1.385 billion to the United Nations and environmental programs. Does his Captain Planet cartoon in which the characters chant of recycling whilst Earth hangs in the balance count as charity? Dave and Cheryl Duffield gave \$220 million to Maddie's Fund, an organization that finds homes for stray animals.

In the coal-mining hamlet of my youth, we lived in row houses and couldn't afford a movie. Packs of wild dogs ran free and we took turns feeding them left-over Spam and sauerkraut. They never needed a vet and lived longer than the

coal miners. Charity now vaunteth itself. One benefactor commented that the BMW may have been the status symbol of the 1980s, but having your own foundation is today's. Ted Turner opines, "Is it your ego, or is it the fact that it warms your heart?"

This new crop of givers, beyond seeking prestige, is also possessed of the charming quality of being control freaks. One manager at a Seattle youth outreach nonprofit noted that the young retired Seattle executives who come in to help "end up causing trouble," because they have "grandiose ideas of their own skills." In short, they can't shut up and just pitch in. Not content to mop floors, they want to do strategic plans.

In the ultimate act of control, the nouveau donors yank funds if their beneficiaries get out of line. Charity never faileth, but these days it comes with full revocation rights. The liberals have come up for air while swimming in their melting polar ice cap to declare that charities will be PC.

One morally prosaic move and these folks take their petty cash and go home. Enter the Boy Scouts of America. The BSA may have won its U.S. Supreme Court battle to exclude gay troop leaders but may well lose the moral war.

Charity does indeed seek its own; in this case, its own agenda. Levi Strauss, Wells Fargo, Textron and Knight Ridder, so far, have withdrawn their corporate support of BSA. Several United Way organizations have also banished the Scouts.

Here's a new policy statement: "United Way of Southeastern New England shall not discriminate on the basis of age, sex, color, race, veteran status, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or disability with respect to employment, volunteer participation, or the provision of services." Donees sign it or lose funds.

Even the federal government seeks to withhold the charity of the people. President Clinton's Executive Order 13160 bans discrimination in federal programs on the basis of "race, sex, color, national origin, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation and status as a parent."

The Department of Justice is now investigating whether the Department of Interior's policy of letting the Scouts use Fort A.P. Hill, an Army post at Bowling Green, for its jamboree (scheduled for July 2001) violates our boy president's proclamation.

Patrick Kennedy and Lynn Woolsey, with nine other members of the House, voted to strip the Scouts of their federal charter. Even Barney Frank declined to vote rather than sanction such totalitarianism.

During the first great wave of billionaires, Andrew Carnegie gave, in addition to funding for 2,811 libraries, Carnegie Hall and Carnegie-Mellon, organs to 7,689 churches around the country. He did so, he said, because he had "endured the childhood agony of unaccompanied singing." Carnegie was a free spirit who did not agree with the philosophies of these churches, but they were his beneficiaries, not his minions.

Charity suffereth long, even through the mopping and the less-than-strategic plans of nonprofits. Charity seeketh not her own. Particularly not her own views. Give the money, a decent sum, and be quiet. Philanthropy has turned ugly. Ah, for the days when donors were anonymous in name, silent in purpose, and irrevocable in their generosity.

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