

“Duties of American Citizenship” by Theodore Roosevelt Buffalo, New York, January 26, 1883

Of course, in one sense, the first essential for a man's being a good citizen is his possession of the home virtues of which we think when we call a man by the emphatic adjective of manly. No man can be a good citizen who is not a good husband and a good father, who is not honest in his dealings with other men and women, faithful to his friends and fearless in the presence of his foes, who has not got a sound heart, a sound mind, and a sound body; exactly as no amount of attention to civil duties will save a nation if the domestic life is undermined, or there is lack of the rude military virtues which alone can assure a country's position in the world. In a free republic the ideal citizen must be one willing and able to take arms for the defense of the flag, exactly as the ideal citizen must be the father of many healthy children. A race must be strong and vigorous; it must be a race of good fighters and good breeders, else its wisdom will come to naught and its virtue be ineffective; and no sweetness and delicacy, no love for and appreciation of beauty in art or literature, no capacity for building up material prosperity can possibly atone for the lack of the great virile virtues.

But this is aside from my subject, for what I wish to talk of is the attitude of the American citizen in civic life. It ought to be axiomatic in this country that every man must devote a reasonable share of his time to doing his duty in the Political life of the community. No man has a right to shirk his political duties under whatever plea of pleasure or business; and while such shirking may be pardoned in those of small means it is entirely unpardonable in those among whom it is most common—in the people whose circumstances give them freedom in the struggle for life. In so far as the community grows to think rightly, it will likewise grow to regard the young man of means who shirks his duty to the State in time of peace as being only one degree worse than the man who thus shirks it in time of war. A great many of our men in business, or of our young men who are bent on enjoying life (as they have a perfect right to do if only they do not sacrifice other things to enjoyment), rather plume themselves upon being good citizens if they even vote; yet voting is the very least of their duties, Nothing worth gaining is ever gained without effort. You can no more have freedom without striving and suffering for it than you can win success as a banker or a lawyer without labor and effort, without self-denial in youth and the display of a ready and alert intelligence in middle age. The people who say that they have not time to attend to politics are simply saying that they are unfit to live in a free community. Their place is under a despotism; or if they are content to do nothing but vote, you can take despotism tempered by an occasional plebiscite, like that of the second Napoleon... We should not accept the excuse of the business man who attributed his failure to the fact that his social duties were so pleasant and engrossing that he had no time left for work in his office; nor would we pay much heed to his further statement that he did not like business anyhow because he thought the morals of the business community by no means what they should be, and saw that the great successes were most often won by men of the Jay Gould stamp. It is just the same way with politics. It makes one feel half angry and half amused, and wholly contemptuous, to find men of high business or social standing in the community saying that they really have not got time to go to ward meetings, to organize political clubs, and to take a personal share in all the important details of practical politics; men who further urge against their going the fact that they think the condition of political morality low, and are afraid that they may be required to do what is not right if they go into politics.

The first duty of an American citizen, then, is that he shall work in politics; his second duty is that he shall do that work in a practical manner; and his third is that it shall be done in accord with the highest principles of honor and justice...

...In facing the future and in striving, each according to the measure of his individual capacity, to work out the salvation of our land, we should be neither timid pessimists nor foolish optimists. We should recognize the dangers that exist and that threaten us: we should neither overestimate them nor shrink from them, but steadily fronting them should set to work to overcome and beat them down. Grave perils are yet to be encountered in the stormy course of the Republic – perils from political corruption, perils from individual laziness, indolence and timidity, perils springing from the greed of the unscrupulous rich, and from the anarchic violence of the thriftless and turbulent poor. There is every reason why we should recognize them, but there is no reason why we should fear them or doubt our capacity to overcome them, if only each will, according to the measure of his ability, do his full duty, and endeavor so to live as to deserve the high praise of being called a good American citizen.

Questions

1. Predict the content of the speech from the title.
2. Describe the characteristics of a good citizen according to Roosevelt.
3. What must an ideal citizen be willing to do?
4. Why do you think he feels it is important to be “good fighters and good breeders”?
5. What does Roosevelt argue that citizens must do?
6. Can anyone be excluded from participating in number 5? Why or why not?
7. Does Roosevelt believe that people ought to sacrifice to the point of living boring lives?
8. Explain this quote in your own words as much as possible: “Nothing worth gaining is ever gained without effort.”
9. Describe the fate Roosevelt would give to those who claim not to have time to participate in government.
10. Why do you think he uses the example of the lazy businessman to explain the need for participation in the political system? Explain.
11. Restate the 3 duties of an American citizen in your own words as much as possible.
12. Is Roosevelt an optimist or a pessimist in your opinion? Explain.
13. If he were put in a time machine and transported to today, do you think he would be proud of a typical American citizen, according to his standards? Why or why not?

Answers

1. Predict the content of the speech from the title. Answers will vary but might say the requirements of a good member of American society.
2. Describe the characteristics of a good citizen according to Roosevelt. A good husband, father, honest, faithful, brave, and a good heart, mind and body.
3. What must an ideal citizen be willing to do? Fight and possibly die for his country.
4. Why do you think he feels it is important to be “good fighters and good breeders”? Must be able to survive in all circumstances and continue your line of people.
5. What does Roosevelt argue that citizens must do? Donate their time to government.
6. Can anyone be excluded from participating in number 5? Why or why not? No, no one is too busy to perpetuate the system he lives in.
7. Does Roosevelt believe that people ought to sacrifice to the point of living boring lives? Absolutely not, he believes in a balanced life approach.
8. Explain this quote in your own words as much as possible: “Nothing worth gaining is ever gained without effort.” Answers will vary but might include that working hard is satisfying and can provide huge rewards.
9. Describe the fate Roosevelt would give to those who claim not to have time to participate in government. They ought to live under a different form of government, a dictatorship or other non-democratic system.
10. Why do you think he uses the example of the lazy businessman to explain the need for participation in the political system? Explain. Because no one would ever pity a poor businessman who is too lazy to run his business and is broke; therefore no one ought to pity people who claim to be too busy to help American government.
11. Restate the 3 duties of an American citizen in your own words as much as possible. Be active in government, have a productive job, and be honest.
12. Is Roosevelt an optimist or a pessimist in your opinion? Explain. Answers will vary but might include that he is an optimist but is a realist and believes in taking stock of the situation and taking it on head on.
13. If he were put in a time machine and transported to today, do you think he would be proud of a typical American citizen, according to his standards? Why or why not? Answers will vary but need to back up their arguments.