



# From Despair to Civic Duty – Finding Meaning in America



A CIVIC Strategic Document

By Robert Porter Lynch · April 2026

– Abridged and Condensed Overview of a more detailed document –

Our nation is suffering from an epidemic of distrust, despair, and divisiveness. Voters know there is something very wrong with our democracy.

This overview of the Rushmore Compact addresses what’s wrong and what we must do about it soon.

*The main source of national power and national greatness is found in the nation’s average citizen."*

– **Theodore Roosevelt**, "Citizenship in a Republic," 1910

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*"Only those who have learned to serve are qualified to govern"*

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## Overview: Institutional & Generational Crises, One Strategy

America faces two converging crises that feed each other.

The first is an **Institutional Crisis**: Polarization, Distrust, and a *political culture that produces leaders more interested in power than in service.*

The second is a **Generational Crisis**: a Younger Generation — Gen Z, born between 1995 and 2012 — experiencing *epidemic loneliness, collapsed institutional trust, economic despair,* and a *profound absence of meaning and purpose* in their lives.

These two crises are closely related.

Our Republic has failed to transmit its own meaning to the generation that must carry it forward. And young Americans, sensing that failure, have retreated into cynicism and disconnection rather than engagement and building.

The **Rushmore Compact** — a unified civic framework drawn from the writings, speeches, and lives of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt — holds an answer to both crises simultaneously. CIVIC – Coalition of Independent Voters for an Inspired Congress – is designing a plan to set a higher standard for the leaders in America. And it offers the generation that will elect those leaders exactly what the research shows they need: a coherent reason to enter and engage their community arena.

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## Part I — Rushmore Strategy to Rebuild Trust in America:

America's plague of Distrust, Disillusionment, and Divisiveness, is descending our nation into darkness. The Rushmore Strategy aims to use the insights and wisdom of our four greatest presidents to rebuild our nation.

### Civic Duty: What Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln & Roosevelt Demanded of Citizens

No four Americans articulated the obligations of citizenship more powerfully — or more practically — than the four presidents of Mount Rushmore. Each spoke from a different crisis. Each arrived at the same covenant:

***Liberty is not a gift to be received, but a Fire to be Stoked,  
a Spirit to be Energized, and a Trust to be Protected.***

The Rushmorian believed a democracy could *thrive only* when people held their *Responsibilities as Citizens* as dearly as their *Individual Rights*. Rights and Duties are inseparable “dance partners” — *both must be in tune with the other*.

*"Rights without Duties are the Path into Despair; Duties without Rights are the Path into Despotism. The Republic must Thrive in the Balance."*



### The Five Foundational Duties

#### DUTY ONE — Character Before Citizenship

The Republic begins not in the legislature nor the courts, but in the character of each individual citizen. Roosevelt stated it most directly: *"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."* Washington grounded the same principle in his Farewell Address: *"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."* Lincoln called for civic character to be instilled from birth: *"Let reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap — let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges."*

#### DUTY TWO — Active, Practical Engagement

Civic apathy is not neutral — it is a form of civic failure. Roosevelt's 1883 verdict remains unsparing: *"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."* His prescription was equally practical: start at the district level, not the national stage. *"If he wants to reform the politics of his city, let him begin with his district."* Jefferson echoed this: *"Wherever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights."*

#### DUTY THREE — Honor, Disinterestedness, and Public Service Above Personal Ambition

The most penetrating agreement among all four: *the citizen entering public life for personal gain betrays their ability to serve the people*. Roosevelt named this quality — *disinterestedness* — as the supreme civic virtue: *"The one quality which he ought always to hold most essential is that of disinterestedness. If he once begins to feel that he wants office himself, with a willingness to get it at the cost of his convictions, his usefulness is gone."* Washington embodied this: his voluntary resignation of military command in 1783 — power returned to the people rather than seized — was called by King George III "the greatest act in the world." Lincoln put it simply: *"I freely acknowledge myself the servant of the people, according to the bond of service — the United States Constitution."*

## The Rushmore Compact – CIVIC DUTY – Finding Mission and Meaning in America

### DUTY FOUR — Vigilance Against Internal Corruption

The Republic's greatest danger always comes from within. Lincoln's warning in the Lyceum Address (1838) is among the most prophetic statements in American political history: *"At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reaches us, it will spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher."* Jefferson assigned citizens a corresponding permanent duty: *"It is the duty of good citizens to be ever on the watch, and if the gangrene is found, to apply the corrective."* Roosevelt added the specific warning about demagoguery: *"The phrase-maker, the phrase-monger, the ready talker...whose speech does not make for courage, sobriety, and right understanding, is simply a noxious element in the body politic."*

### DUTY FIVE — Unity, Education, and the Common Good

The Republic requires both an educated citizenry and a national identity that transcends faction, party, class, and origin. Washington's Farewell Address named faction the Republic's most dangerous disease: the "alternate domination" of parties is itself *"a frightful despotism."* Jefferson made education not a cultural luxury but a structural requirement: *"Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."* Roosevelt synthesized the vision: *"The name of American must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations."*

### Beware the Cynic

The Rushmorian reserved particular contempt for *cynicism* — not for the open villain, but for the sneer that substitutes for service. Roosevelt's "Man in the Arena" is the Republic's ultimate answer to cynicism:

*"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again...but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause."*

Roosevelt also warned: *"A cynical habit of thought and speech, a readiness to criticize work which the critic himself never tries to perform...are marks, not of superiority but of weakness."*

Modern research confirms his instinct: cynics perform worse on cognitive tasks, are less likely to vote or organize, and — most tellingly — have a greater desire for power driven by fear of being exploited, not genuine commitment to service. The cynic wants the veto, not the responsibility.



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***We can destroy ourselves just as quickly by cynicism as by bombs.***

*- Kenneth Clark "Civilization"*

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## Part II — The American Malaise: Documenting the Crisis in Our Youth

The data on Gen Z is not ambiguous. America's younger generation is experiencing a convergence of crises unmatched in modern history. These are not the complaints of a pampered generation. They are the documented symptoms of a Republic that has *failed to transmit its own meaning to the people who must carry it forward.*



### The Statistical Portrait of Despair

**Economic Pessimism:** By 2024, 30% of Americans said the American Dream was "out of reach" — up from 17% in 2017. More than half of Gen Z worry about their financial future, up from 30% in 2019. 70% of Gen Z adults believe they will never own a home; 31% doubt they will ever retire.

**Collapsing Institutional Trust:** The Harvard Kennedy School's Youth Poll — widely considered the gold standard of youth opinion research — documents an accelerating collapse. Only 19% of young Americans (ages 18–29) trust the federal government "most or all the time." Congress earns trust from only 18% — the lowest of any institution. Only 32% describe the United States as a "healthy democracy;" 64% describe it as a system "in distress or completely failing."

The institutions young people *do* trust reveal the remedy: their own peers and neighbors (74%), nonprofit organizations (65%), and local government (60%) — institutions defined by direct human relationships, tangible results, and proximity to daily life.

**The Mental Health Emergency:** 42% of Gen Z have a diagnosed mental health condition — nearly double the rate of Americans over 25. 61% have been medically diagnosed with anxiety. Among college freshmen, 40.3% have anxiety and 45.3% have depression.

**The Loneliness Epidemic:** 80% of Gen Z reported feeling lonely in the past 12 months — compared to 45% of Baby Boomers. 73% struggle with loneliness despite being digitally hyper-connected. 1 in 4 young men report feeling lonely *daily* — higher than any other demographic.

**The Meaning and Purpose Deficit:** Perhaps the most alarming finding: over half of young adults — 58% — say they experienced *little or no purpose or meaning* in their lives in the previous month, according to Harvard's Making Caring Common project. Only 13% cite serving others as a source of meaning. That second figure — 13% — is both the diagnosis and the prescription. The path out of the malaise runs directly through the Rushmorian door.

### A Generation Without a Story

Harvard Kennedy School polling director John Della Volpe captured the structural dimension of this crisis: *"Young Americans are conveying a clear message: the systems and institutions intended to support them no longer seem stable, equitable, or responsive to their needs. Their confidence in democracy, the economy, and even in each other is deteriorating — not due to apathy, but because they feel ignored and unprotected."* The younger generation has historically been one of energy and idealism. Their energy is not gone, it's suppressed, repressed, in need of productive avenues for expression.

The key phrase is "not due to apathy." The Deloitte 2025 Global Survey found that 89% of Gen Z consider a sense of purpose important to their wellbeing. The malaise is not an absence of desire for meaning. It is the presence of desire without a structure to satisfy it — *energy without direction, idealism without an arena.*

## Part III — Rushmorian Strategy: How Duty Cures the Malaise



The Rushmorian framework does not merely *address* Gen Z's crisis — it diagnoses it with precision and prescribes the exact remedy current research confirms is effective.

Gen Z Crisis	Rushmorian Diagnosis	Rushmorian Remedy
No purpose or meaning (58%)	"The man who does nothing cuts a sordid figure in history" — TR	Enter the arena; spend yourself in a worthy cause
Crushing loneliness (80%)	"No man can be a good citizen who is not a good husband and father" — TR	Civic community built on shared values and mutual service
Institutional distrust (81%)	"Whenever things go wrong, the people may be relied upon to set them to rights" — Jefferson	Active citizenship at the local level — reform from the bottom up
No political home	"The name of American must always exalt the just pride of patriotism" — Washington	Identity rooted in constitutional principles, not partisan tribe
Economic hopelessness	Human rights over property rights — TR	Demand leaders who serve the common good, not the powerful few
Mental health crisis	"The question of the quality of the individual citizen is supreme" — TR	Service to others as the proven path to meaning, belonging, and self-worth
Cynicism and disengagement	"The poorest way to face life is to face it with a sneer" — TR	Reject cynicism; enter the arena

### Why the Rushmorian Framework Speaks to Gen Z

Three qualities of the Rushmorian vision make it uniquely compelling to young Americans:

- 1. It is honest about struggle.** Civic Duty never promises easy victories. It celebrates the person who "errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming." Gen Z, raised on social media's highlight reel of perfection, is hungry for an honest account of what striving actually looks like.
- 2. It is non-partisan at its core.** Harvard polling data shows that young Americans distrust both parties equally and are searching for a political home that neither party currently offers. The Rushmorian civic framework — grounded in constitutional principles, not party platforms — provides precisely the non-partisan identity they are looking for. Its heroes include a Federalist (Washington), a Democratic-Republican (Jefferson), a Republican (Lincoln), and a Republican who broke with his own party (Roosevelt).
- 3. It gives meaning through responsibility, not entitlement.** The Rushmorian framework tells young people that the Republic is in their hands, that their choices matter, that the stream cannot rise higher than its source. This is not condescension — it is the highest possible form of respect.

### The Science Confirms What the Rushmorians Knew

Modern research independently validates the Rushmorian prescription. A UCLA study found that service participation is positively associated with all 35 civic and academic outcome measures — and more time devoted to service translates to stronger positive effects. Greater purpose in life correlates with significantly lower depression, 46% lower risk of premature death, and a consistent reduction in suicidal thinking across genders and age groups. Service-learning programs improve academic engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence — especially for underrepresented students.

The Rushmorian framework offers something that therapy alone cannot: *a civic architecture of meaning* — a reason to get up, show up, and stay in the arena, grounded in history, community, and constitutional principle. For a generation that is 58% purposeless and 80% lonely, that architecture may be lifesaving.

## Part IV — Rushmorian Clubs: Action in the Field

The idea of forming Rushmorian clubs in high schools and on college campuses is precisely the kind of practical, ground-level civic organizing that the Rushmorian themselves would prescribe. Roosevelt in 1883 was explicit: reform begins not at the national stage but in the local community — *"with a small band of committed citizens who are dedicated to the creation of real, meaningful value to others."*

A Rushmorian Club aims at orchestrating future leaders to transform anxiety into productive action. This can occur in high school or in college or university graduate schools.

### Club Structure

Component	Description
<b>Founding Document</b>	Each chapter adopts the Rushmore Compact as its founding document, with the Five Pillars as its organizing framework
<b>Study Circle</b>	Monthly reading and discussion of primary Rushmorian texts — Washington's Farewell Address, Jefferson's Notes on Virginia, Lincoln's Lyceum Address, Roosevelt's 1883 and 1910 speeches
<b>Service Project</b>	Each chapter undertakes a specific local service project each semester — chosen by members, executed by members, reviewed against Rushmorian principles
<b>Candidate Evaluation</b>	Using CIVIC's Five-Pillar endorsement criteria, members evaluate local and state candidates for character, constitutional fidelity, and public service record
<b>Arena Challenge</b>	Each member commits to one concrete act of civic courage per semester — speaking at a public meeting, writing to an elected official, registering voters
<b>Mentor Network</b>	Each chapter pairs with a CIVIC mentor — a community leader embodying Rushmorian principles — for intergenerational guidance
<b>The Lincoln Prize</b>	Awarded annually to the member who best exemplifies Lincoln's standard: <i>"I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true"</i>
<b>Pipeline to CIVIC</b>	Graduating chapter leaders become eligible for CIVIC's mentorship network and candidate endorsement process

### The CIVIC Rushmorian Club: Founding Principles

A Rushmorian Club is not a debate club, not a political club, and not an advocacy organization for any party or candidate. It is a **character formation and civic service organization**, organized around five commitments drawn directly from the Rushmore Compact:

1. **I will cultivate integrity, moral character, and transparency** in my own life before demanding it of my leaders.
2. **I will know and defend the Constitution** — not as a partisan weapon, but as the equitable framework of ordered liberty that protects everyone.
3. **I will seek unity over faction** — judging my fellow citizens by their character and conduct, not their tribe, party, class, or origin.
4. **I will serve** — locally, practically, and without personal ambition — because the Republic belongs to those who engage positively and productively inside their communities.
5. **I will demand fairness, justice, and the common good** from every leader I endorse, elect, or support — and I will hold them accountable to be trustworthy.

# The Rushmore Compact – CIVIC DUTY – Finding Mission and Meaning in America

## High School and College Models

In **high schools**, the Rushmorian Club will be best positioned as a character and civic leadership organization — not a political one. It is student-led with adult guidance, service-oriented, and non-partisan in its candidate evaluation focus. Every member presents one Rushmorian text to the broader student body annually. The "Arena Challenge" stretches each member's civic courage each semester.

On **college campuses**, the Rushmorian Society can go deeper — engaging with the full intellectual substance of the Rushmore Compact, producing public Five-Pillar evaluations of local and state candidates, and sustaining community partnerships with schools, nonprofits, and neighborhood and civic associations. Senior chapter leaders flow into the CIVIC network as the next generation of endorsed candidates and civic mentors.

## What Makes This Different

Many civic organizations already exist — Key Club, Junior State, Campus Compact. What distinguishes a Rushmorian Club is its unique combination of four elements no existing organization fully integrates:

1. **Deep philosophical grounding** — not just civic activity, but a coherent theory of *why* civic service matters, drawn from the most revered figures in American history
2. **Non-partisan character formation** — explicitly structured around the Five Pillars, which transcend party and ideology
3. **Direct connection to CIVIC's endorsement mission** — the club is the pipeline through which the next generation of CIVIC-endorsed leaders emerges
4. **Honest confrontation with the Republic's current crisis** — the Rushmorian texts speak directly to polarization, distrust, and demagoguery in terms that feel urgently contemporary

## Conclusion: The Fire Must Be Stoked

The convergence of these two themes — what the Rushmorians demanded of citizens, and what Gen Z is desperate to find — is not coincidental. It is the same human story told across two centuries. The desire for meaning, community, and purpose is not new. What is new is the absence of a structure — an *arena* — that channels that desire toward the Republic's renewal.

The Rushmorian Club is that arena. The Rushmore Compact is its charter. CIVIC's Five-Pillar endorsement framework is its standard of leadership.

1. **Integrity Above Ambition,**
2. **Constitution Above Party,**
3. **Unity Above Faction,**
4. **Service Above Self,**
5. **Justice Above Power**



Roosevelt put it best — and no framing could be more perfectly suited to recruiting the young American of 2026:

*"I wish that each of you would think seriously of the matter. I wish that you would consider that there is a field of political work open to all of you who have the will to undertake it, and there is very pressing need for this work to be undertaken."*

— Theodore Roosevelt, "The Duties of American Citizenship," 1883

The need has never been more pressing. The field has never been more open. And the generation waiting to enter it has never been more hungry for something worth giving themselves to.

# The Rushmore Compact – CIVIC DUTY – Finding Mission and Meaning in America

## Summary: From Malaise to Mission

Dimension of Malaise	Data Point	Rushmorian Remedy	Proven Outcome
No Meaning/ Purpose	58% report little or no purpose	"Spend yourself in a worthy cause" — TR	Service positively linked to all 35 civic and academic outcomes
Loneliness	80% felt lonely in past year	Civic community bound by shared principle	Civic engagement builds belonging, empowerment, and pride
Institutional Distrust	19% trust federal government	"Apply the corrective" at the local level — Jefferson	Youth trust local institutions 3× more than federal
No Political Home	Both parties distrusted equally	Non-partisan character framework	Rushmorian Five Pillars transcend party and ideology
Economic Despair	70% doubt they'll own a home	Demand leaders who serve the common good	CIVIC endorsement criteria holds leaders accountable
Mental Health Crisis	94% report regular challenges	"Enter the arena; dare greatly" — TR	Service reduces depression, anxiety, and loneliness
Cynicism and Disengagement	64% say democracy is "failing"	"The poorest way to face life is a sneer" — TR	Civic clubs build lifelong engagement habits

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***"Only those who have learned to serve are qualified to govern"***

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*It is in service to our fellow Americans where we truly learn the ever-widening wisdom that keeps us free, transforming our unique differences into bold evolutions for our nation.*



### References

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2. [Generation-Z-the-Rushmorian-Answer-From-Malaise-to-Meaning.docx](#) - --- title: "Generation Z and the Rushmorian Answer"