

## PATRIOTISM BEGINS at the Ballot Box

by George Mitrovich (58)

“**I**n the end, more than they wanted freedom they wanted security. They wanted a comfortable life, and they lost it all – security, comfort, and freedom. When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society, but for society to give to them, when the freedom they wished for most was the freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free.”

– Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

Growing up in a family of six kids, I learned that calling someone an “idiot” was unacceptable. My mother thought profanity a more serious offense than invoking the idiot word, but not by much.

But in ancient Greece the term *idiotes* was used to define people who did not participate in the civic life of their nation. By the Athenian definition, America today is burdened with more than a 100 million idiots (mother, forgive me). The 100 million are those “citizens” of eligible voting age who in the 2004 presidential election did not vote. In one of the most important presidential elections in American history, they took a walk. When it came to the highest and most fundamental act of citizenship, they were missing in action.

This November, we face yet another critical election,

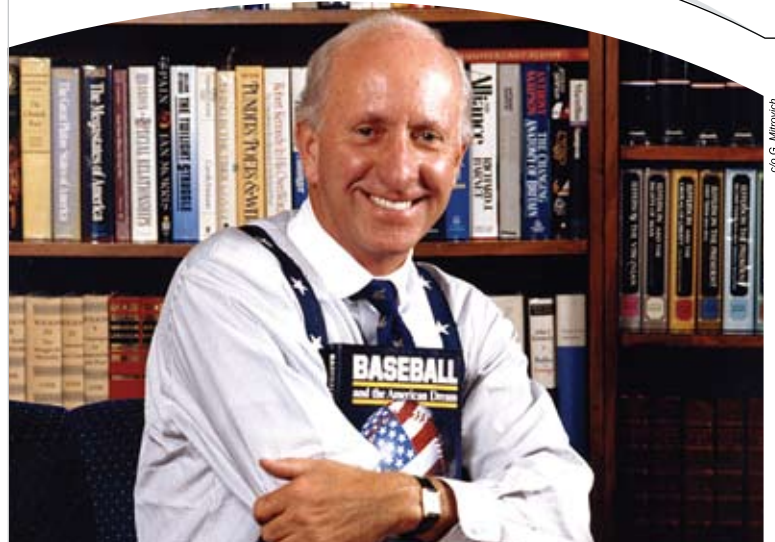
exceeding in importance, most experts agree, the last one. It’s a perilous time for the United States, and what happens November 4 will resonate until century’s end – both here and in the wide world beyond.

There are great issues before us – Russia, Iraq, Iran, terrorism, the Middle East, an economic depression (some say), the housing boom gone bust, energy woes, a government budget crisis, and runaway debt (76 trillion dollars!), skyrocketing medical costs, Social Security and Medicare funding, massive infrastructure problems, and the continuing collapse of public education, to name but a few.

A rational person, looking at this Everest of problems, might be forgiven for asking, “Can we reach the top? Can we climb this mountain?” But the question begs among the vox populi an assumption of concern invalidated by the evidence.

How? With each succeeding election, fewer Americans vote. And the “idiot” equation is not merely those who fail to register and don’t vote, but those who do and still don’t!

In the 2004 election, the abandonment of so basic an obligation of citizenship stands



© G. Mitrovich

as a monumental indictment of all who say they value freedom while choosing to ignore the duty to vote.

This stunning dereliction was nowhere more evident than by the fact that the highest percentage of non-voters in '04 was the 20-something generation. We have to think about that, because their generation has the most to lose – oh by a lot. I know beyond reasonable doubt the future isn’t about my generation of Americans – it’s about theirs.

The cynics among us will argue our votes don’t count, that elected officials don’t care what we think, that politics is corrupt, that government is controlled by a privileged elite, obedient to the corrupting powers of Wall Street, but they ignore a larger, more brutal, and, in the end, unforgiving reality.

Here it is: If we don’t vote, we don’t count. If we don’t participate, we cannot effect change. Politicians fear many things. They don’t fear people who don’t vote.

In the real world, there are no rewards for failing to protect our interests. If we don’t vote, don’t participate, ignore what’s going

on in the world around us, then at what moment in our state of denial, ignorance, and apathy do we expect things to improve?

That doesn’t mean if we vote things will go our way; that’s not the real world either, but at least we will have demonstrated our concern. No less important, we will honor the memory of the brave men and women who died defending our right to vote.

Gibbon, in writing his extraordinary work of history, understood well that the ultimate collapse of all great civilizations begins when fundamental duties of citizenship are ignored and taken for granted. Voting is a fundamental duty – and I would argue, from a Christian perspective, a moral duty.

On the first Tuesday this November, make certain you vote.

*George Mitrovich (58) is president of The City Club of San Diego and The Denver Forum, two leading American public forums. In addition, he chairs for the Boston Red Sox, The Great Fenway Park Writers Series. He can be reached at: gmitro35@gmail.com. ☎*