

## On the Corner

*by Robert Docter –*

We are visible at Christmas. There are more red shields showing on more corners. There's a greater effort to get space and time in the media. We are deeply concerned about making sure people know we're around.

Some will say immediately: "It must be the bucks." Wrong!

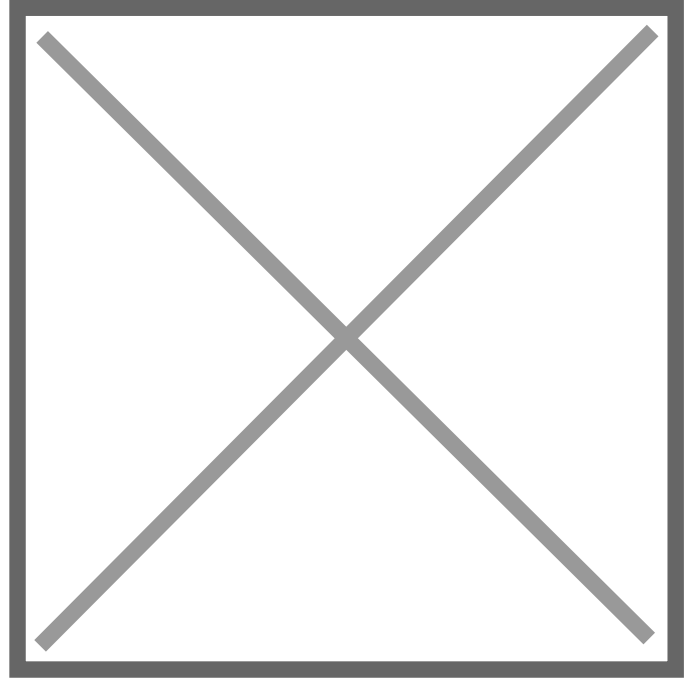
Of course we want people to be able to donate. Those signs over the Christmas kettles asking people to share with others—the sound of a silver bell—trigger nostalgia and good feeling. That bell rings to alert people to the opportunity to donate; you see, we want to give their money away. We want to be accessible to them, so we take our "boiling pot" to the street corners. We are simply the collection point.

Unfortunately, too many "collection points" are now on private property—deep inside a parking lot or locked away behind the closed doors of a mall. The energy of altruism is weak enough without making it more difficult for people to share their affluence with others. Malls worry about precedent. You know—"if we let you do it, then we have to let anybody else who asks do the same thing."

That's nonsense.

The Christmas kettles alongside stores is part of Americana. Not to have it there changes the whole feel of Christmas. That bell says a lot more than "place money here." It says "Christmas is here." It broadcasts the meaning of Christmas. It reminds us that there are people in our communities who are considerably less well off than we are. It says there are families experiencing tension and stress right around the corner from where you live, and you can help them by donating. It provides opportunities for people to feel better about themselves—about their world. It changes the way they perceive themselves. Giving makes us feel connected.

To deny individuals that opportunity takes something from them.



Of course, the next point in the argument is that entities other than the Army can provide those thoughts and feelings as well. True. But what's the track record of these other "entities"? How long have they been serving the nation's poor?—over 100 years? What are they using the money for? How much of the income goes to "overhead," and how much goes to the cause for which it is collected? The Army can provide those data.

I'd be disappointed to learn that any Army unit collected any money at Christmas which was not used to support the poor. I recognize that not all of it may be given away at Christmas—that it might spin out in support of poor people throughout the year. That's okay. I just want to see the total collected equal to the amount given away. I always look at those figures very carefully on the corps council on which I serve. I hope you do, too.

I also get disappointed when that bell ringer presents the Army in a poor light. I know that many corps hire poor people to ring the bells. Great. If that is the case, we need to provide them with some kind of jacket that says "Army"—and maybe a red shield baseball hat. Also, we need to provide them with an orientation as to appropriate behavior while working. I've heard about and seen some real "horror stories." Maybe you have, too. What have you done about it?

Yes, we're visible at Christmas, all right. Don't you wonder why we're so much less visible the rest of the year? The ratio of program implementers to PR pushers in the Army is really skewed in favor of program people. We don't seem to bother "broadcasting" our good works. If anyone wishes to know, we'll tell them, but we sure don't go out of the way to make it easy for them. We say with some pride that we're so busy doing good we don't have time to tell people about it. I'm kind of a PR type, myself. I think we could be doing a whole lot better in this area without sacrificing our service to the poor at all. What do you think?