

# Chapter 13 - Our Elite and Public Life

Chapter 13 - Our Elite and Public Life raises pressing concerns about the absence of capable and cultured individuals from American public service. Despite possessing the education, resources, and influence to guide national policy, many among the country's social elite shy away from governmental roles. One central reason is geography—unlike England or France, where power, commerce, and culture converge in one city, the United States splits its centers. Washington, D.C., holds political authority, while cities like New York or Boston command financial and cultural influence. For an ambitious, socially engaged individual, shifting to the capital often requires abandoning meaningful careers and personal networks. The result is a system where those best suited to serve are often least inclined to make the sacrifice.

Chapter 13 - Our Elite and Public Life also addresses the financial drawbacks of public office. Individuals accustomed to high earnings in private law, finance, or industry must forgo significant income to serve in government—a transition few are willing to make. This economic compromise is further complicated by residency rules, which require representatives to live within their districts. For many urban professionals who have moved away from their birthplaces for better prospects, returning to run for office becomes impractical. Moreover, the lack of financial incentives makes such roles unappealing for those who already contribute generously through philanthropy or civic work. Rather than public service being seen as an elevated calling, it becomes viewed as a step down—an inefficient use of one's potential. This perception continues to fuel the divide between those with influence and those actively involved in governance.

A cultural undercurrent further compounds the issue. The chapter recounts subtle examples of how high society treats political engagement with detached condescension. To serve in government is often perceived as abandoning one's refined life in exchange for the rough-and-tumble of public debate, bureaucracy, and partisan

bickering. Many elites, groomed for comfort and prestige, shy away from the perceived vulgarity of politics. This mindset inadvertently reinforces the notion that political service is a lesser pursuit—something best left to professionals or populists rather than those with cultural clout. In doing so, it creates a class that remains vocal in critique yet absent in action, effectively removing itself from the responsibilities of leadership.

The implications of this disengagement ripple across the political landscape. With capable individuals abstaining, the field becomes open to those less equipped but more willing—sometimes driven by ambition rather than qualification. The public, in turn, grows disillusioned by the quality of leadership, unaware that a more competent class watches from the sidelines. This cycle weakens civic trust and invites mediocrity into roles that demand excellence. The country loses not only skilled minds but also the balance and foresight that seasoned professionals could offer. Without broader participation from the elite, public policy becomes disconnected from the very standards of judgment, creativity, and experience that higher education and social privilege can foster.

Chapter 13 – Our Elite and Public Life calls not just for a structural shift but a cultural reevaluation of public service. The idea that governance is a noble responsibility, rather than a career detour, must be rekindled among those who have the luxury to choose. In nations with stronger traditions of public leadership from the upper classes, service is a rite of passage, not a detour from prosperity. American society must foster this mindset—not to restore aristocracy, but to ensure that its most capable citizens contribute meaningfully to democratic institutions. Encouraging early civic involvement, creating pathways that do not require geographic or economic upheaval, and rebranding political roles as prestigious and impactful can gradually draw new talent into the public sphere.

In recent decades, initiatives like public-private fellowships, policy-focused MBA tracks, and national service programs have attempted to bridge this divide. Programs such as the White House Fellows or the Harvard Kennedy School's public leadership development pathways offer models for integrating ambition with service. These

emerging trends suggest that with the right structure and incentives, a new generation of leaders could re-engage. Chapter 13 is less a lament and more a challenge—an invitation for those with the privilege of education and influence to step into roles that require both. If the best minds remain detached, the nation risks a future led by those with passion but no preparation.

