

National Service:
Healing a Divided Nation Through Servant Leadership

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"It may be laid down as a primary position, and the basis of our system, that every Citizen who enjoys the protection of a Free Government owes not only a proportion of his property, but even of his personal services to the defense of it."

-George Washington

George Washington believed citizen responsibility was so fundamental that it formed the "basis" of our democracy. To him, everyone who enjoys his individual liberties not only owed a portion of his property (taxes), but his personal services (time and talents). With over 229.2 million adult citizens in the United States, it is interesting to note that only a mere 25 percent volunteered in their community in 2006 and about 1.2 percent served in the military.¹ It is time to act! A federal law mandating national service would benefit the United States because it would create a more balanced citizen, and a stronger nation, while keeping the spirit of the all volunteer military intact.

Background

In the United States, the idea of national service has been around since our nation's founding when men were drafted to fill the ranks of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.² A military draft was used in the United States to maintain the manpower to fight WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War until it was finally abandoned in 1973 under President Nixon. Now, with a war on terror being waged in Iraq, Afghanistan, and various

¹ "Volunteering in America," *Corporation for National and Community Service*, 2008, <<http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/volunteering/index.asp>>, accessed 6 January 2008.

² "Conscription in the United States," Wikipedia, 15 December 2007, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscription_in_the_United_States, accessed 17 December 2007.

places around the world, a renewed debate on the need for national service has begun.

In January 2007, Rep. Charles Rangel of New York introduced the Universal National Service Act of 2007 proposing all residents in the United States aged between 18 and 42 carry out national service, and be available for conscription during wartime.³ Although the bill was soundly defeated, the idea of mandatory national service has started to gain some momentum and is supported by the presumptive 2008 republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain.

First, it is important to define national service and why it is needed. Simply put, national service is a program intended to provide a shared experience for all citizens which builds and encourages a sense of national unity. The national service requirement could be satisfied by participating in a qualified program for a specific period of time. Qualified programs could be organizations like AmeriCorps(emphasizing service within the U.S.) or Peace Corps(emphasizing service abroad). Additionally, the national service requirement could be satisfied by voluntarily serving in the armed forces or national guard.

³ "Universal National Service Act," Wikipedia, 27 November 2007, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selective_Service_Initiative>, accessed 17 December 2007.

Participation in a national service program should be apart of the rite of passage for full U.S. citizenship. Any bill set forth in congress should "establish a civil penalty rather than a criminal penalty for nonparticipation in the program."⁴ Thus, if one chose not to participate in the national service program he/she could pay an additional tax until his/her service is complete.

National service can be an important tool in bringing our divided nation together, closing the the widening gap between civilian and military culture, and promoting understanding of American values worldwide. National service can become a centerpiece for the United States in the 21st century, providing every American with common experience in building a stronger nation.⁵

Balanced Citizen

The citizen has always been important in making a democracy succeed. Today, America is a severely divided nation with many tough issues that it must resolve to move forward. It is from this growing divide national service could provide the "social

⁴ Richard Danzig and Peter Szanton, *National Service: What Would it Mean?* (Lexington Books, 1986), 147.

⁵ "The Petition," *EveryoneServes*, 9 December 2007, <<http://everyoneserves.org/petition>>, accessed 9 December 2007.

glue”⁶ to unite the citizenry. To this end, mandatory national service would build a more balanced citizen by increasing community engagement, instilling a sense of responsibility, and promoting understanding among different communities.

Robert Putnam recently “released a new study that showed the more diverse a community is, the less people care about and engage with that community.”⁷ Given the United States is becoming more diverse⁸, it is a nation’s responsibility to their youth to make sure they remain engaged. “A national study of high school students found that when youth reported a greater engagement in service-learning, they were more likely to become academically engaged and become attached to their school and community.”⁹ Instilling in children the sense of duty to fellow countrymen teaches them they are apart of something special and makes them more likely to stay involved with their communities.

A mandatory national service program would also build a more balanced citizen by instilling the sense of responsibility in citizens. Studies have shown that students who are involved

⁶ Robert E. Litan, “The Obligations of September 11, 2001: The Case for Universal Service,” in *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, ed. E.J. Dionne Jr., Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, and Robert Litan (Washington DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2003), 103.

⁷ Richard Stengel, “A Time To Serve”, *Time*, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1657256_1657317_1657570,00.html>, 8 December 2007.

⁸ Jennifer Cheeseman Day, “Population Profile of the United States”, *US Census Bureau*, February 2008, <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/natproj.html>>, accessed 17 February 2008.

⁹ “Impact of Service Learning,” *Americorp*, January 2007, <http://www.americorp.gov/pdf/07_0224_issubrief_servicelearning.pdf>, accessed 6 January 2008

in service-learning attend school more often, are less likely to be disciplinary problems, and demonstrate personal and social responsibility.¹⁰ Developing and reinforcing these characteristics at an early age will help curb the recent increase in violent crimes¹¹ and help fix the struggling education system in America.¹²

Finally, volunteer service exposes people to other cultures different to their own. "A survey of students from 10 different high schools found that youth who are given a voice through service-learning activities improve their self-concept, political engagement, and tolerance of others."¹³ The more we can understand other cultures, the more tolerant we will become as citizens of the differences that make us unique.

Stronger Nation

Citizen participation in a national service program will make the United States a stronger nation by promoting homeland

¹⁰ "Impact of Service Learning: A Review of Current Research," *Americorps*, January 2008, <http://www.americorps.gov/pdf/07_0224_issuebrief_servicelearning.pdf>, accessed 6 January 2008.

¹¹ "2006 Crime in the United States," *FBI*, January 2008, http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2006/offenses/violent_crime/index.html, accessed 6 January 2008.

¹² "Fast Facts," National Center for Education Statistics, January 2008, <<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=1>>, accessed 6 January 2008

¹³ "Impact of Service Learning: A Review of Current Research," *Americorps*, January 2008, <http://www.americorps.gov/pdf/07_0224_issuebrief_servicelearning.pdf>, accessed 6 January 2008.

defense, providing for the social welfare of its citizens, and fostering relationships with foreign countries.

The radical Islamic extremists that have waged a holy war, in recent years, have threatened the American way of life by attacking both military and civilian targets. As a result, the United States is committed to a long war on terrorism. To reiterate this fact, General Conway in his 2006 Marine Corps Commandant Planning Guidance wrote, "Our commitment to the long war is characterized by central campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as diverse and sustained engagement around the globe."¹⁴

This military commitment to the long war leaves the armed forces less able to respond to crisis and makes the United States vulnerable to attack at home since it is not designed to "wage sustained ground campaigns."¹⁵ Having trained citizen volunteers to help provide security at ports or borders would make the United States safer from attacks and makes the homeland security force stronger.

In addition to strengthening homeland security, the United States would be making an investment in the future by providing

¹⁴ Gen. James T. Conway, "CMC Planning Guidance 2006," United States Marine Corps, 2006, <<http://www.usmc.mil/marinelink/msn2000.nsf/34CMCGuidance.pdf>>, 6 January 2008.

¹⁵ Mark Thompson, "Would National Service Be Better Than the Draft?," Time, 28 August 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,29239,1657256_1657626_1656898,00.html>, 6.

for the social welfare of its citizens. Richard Stengel noted that 38% of fourth graders are unable to read at a basic level, 47 million people are uninsured, and their government responded ineptly to hurricane Katrina.¹⁶

First, the neediest in society benefit by the government encouraging citizens to volunteer their time in areas like education, health care, and law enforcement. Second, the volunteer gets valuable experience that could lend to further training and a long-term career in the field.

National service would help to increase the number of Americans participating in overseas programs like the Peace Corps and would go a long way in fostering relationships between the U.S. and other countries. Just as exposing U.S. citizens to differing local cultures would help create a more balanced citizen, so too would it help create more understanding worldwide by promoting freedom and democracy.¹⁷

Counter-Arguments

Whenever there is mention of a national call to service, top military officials get nervous. They have fallen in “love” with the all-volunteer force due to the quality of recruits and

¹⁶ Stengel, 1.

¹⁷ Alan Khazei, “A New Citizenship For A New Century,” in *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, ed. E.J. Dionne Jr., Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, and Robert Litan (Washington DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2003), 168.

the ability to push them farther than a non-volunteer can be pushed.¹⁸ However, national service does not have to be a competing ideal. It can very well prove to be complimentary so as long as it is not a requirement to serve in the military.

National service should be focused on the citizen making a contribution to the society. A person may choose to satisfy the requirement of service by joining the military. Fulfilling a national service requirement would have no effect on the length of enlistment and could serve as an incentive for more people to join military service.

What about personal responsibility? The argument can be successfully made that instead of mandating national service, the individual should be responsible for oneself. This is true! However, the United States Government has already enabled irresponsible behavior among its citizens. The latest example being the recent mortgage bailout of homeowners who made poor decisions on what they could afford.¹⁹

Franklin Roosevelt in his second state of the union address talked about how dependence upon government "induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the

¹⁸ Thompson, 5.

¹⁹ Jon Markhan, "Bush's mortgage bailout just might work," *Money Central*, 6 September 07, <<http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/investing/supermodels/bushmortgagebailoutjustmightwork.aspx>>, accessed 17 Feb 2008

national fibre."²⁰ Since the government, through its actions has produced this dependence, it is the government's responsibility to correct the expectations. The national service program can be the instrument to get it done.

Conclusion

Most Americans don't realize what is at stake in this global war on terror with respect to American freedom and democracy. Just like the Cold War, the Long War's stakes are high in this global chess match of opposing wills. It is imperative that the U.S. present a unified front to deal with the issues.

The NCO is the backbone of the Marine Corps, so too is the citizen the backbone of his country. Leaders have a duty to make sure a solid foundation is laid for future generations of Americans by teaching them the roles and responsibilities they have to the nation that provides for their defense. Building a strong citizen by teaching them civic responsibility could be the greatest accomplishment of this generation.

It is readily apparent the current war on terror is taking a toll on our military forces. The need to supplement our homeland security forces is real. Universal national service will provide the outlet to encourage more citizens to shoulder

²⁰ Franklin Roosevelt, "Second State of the Union Address," *Wikisource*, 14 Nov 2007, <http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Franklin_Delano_Roosevelt%27s_Second_State_of_the_Union_Address>, accessed 17 Feb 2008

their responsibilities on the home front as citizen soldiers, as well as in the military. So we must act now for the common good and a stronger nation.

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