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The Voluntary Path to Universal Service

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In just over a decade, AmeriCorps has proved its worth in communities around the country and has secured a small but vital beachhead in national policy. Its impressive track record, together with growing public and political support, points to the possibility of a breakout that could take national service to truly national scale.

National service ought to be more than a small demonstration project on the margins of big government. It must take a great leap forward or risk going the way of the Peace Corps and VISTA, noble endeavors that languished after an initial burst of inspiration and failed to reach critical mass.

Why is bigger better? The first and most compelling reason for expansion is to match the scale of America's unmet needs. Our country's "social deficit" is as daunting as our fiscal deficit. Compared with other rich countries, the United States has very high rates of poverty (especially among children), out-of-wedlock births, and youth violence, as well as a wide racial and ethnic gap in educational achievement. Add to these enduring social problems the new challenges presented by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and

the baby boom's retirement, and you have a "to do" list that overwhelms government's current capacities. We need to mobilize the nation's civic resources more broadly to tackle such urgent priorities as:

- Tutoring and mentoring disadvantaged children, especially those from broken families and those with parents in prison.
- Providing long-term care and other help for the elderly to help America age successfully as the baby boomers retire.
- Protecting our homeland against terrorist attacks.
- Sharing the burden of military service to our country.

AmeriCorps' New Democrat architects envisioned it in the late 1980s as a way to mobilize citizen volunteers to tackle national problems that neither government agencies nor private markets could solve by themselves. Since then, Americans have become more attuned to the possibility of tackling public problems through new partnerships between the formal public sector and the informal realm of civic and voluntary groups (including faith-based organizations). National service is a prime example of this new, hybrid form of public activism—a decentralized, non-bureaucratic way to grapple with a wide array of national challenges.

A second reason to expand national service lies in its unique character as a dual public investment in America's human capital. First, national service volunteers do work that helps to improve the lives of tens of thousands of needy Americans each day. Second, volunteers earn education awards that encourage them to attend college and defray at least some of its costs. Imagine how much a vastly bigger service enterprise, with a more generous education award, could magnify these social and economic returns.

There's a third reason to enlarge AmeriCorps: to give more Americans a chance to serve their country. The demand for service positions far outstrips the supply. Many of the best-known service programs, such as Teach for America and City Year, have large

waiting lists. Scaling up AmeriCorps would transform national service from an exceptional to a fairly common experience for young Americans. And, like the draft of old, it would be one of the few institutions in our increasingly stratified and segmented society that throw together Americans from different social and economic backgrounds. The experience of working together across racial, ethnic, and class lines to solve common problems hones the basic skills of democratic citizenship—the ability to see past stereotypes, to empathize with others, to negotiate and compromise, and to transcend our group identities. In political scientist Robert Putnam's term, it creates the "bridging" social capital essential to making a multiethnic democracy work.

FIVE WAYS TO SCALE UP NATIONAL SERVICE

Our ultimate goal should be to make national service a common expectation—a rite of civic passage—for young Americans on their way to responsible and productive citizenship. Here are five ways we can reach the next plateau in the evolution of national service:

Replace Selective Service with National Service

When Congress created the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, it kept one vestige of the old World War II-era draft: the requirement that all American males register with the Selective Service System on their 18th birthdays. Registration is a hedge against the unlikely, but hardly unthinkable, prospect that America may one day need to mobilize for full-scale war. With a little imagination, the Selective Service System could be recast as a recruiting device for voluntary national service, as well as a register of the nation's available manpower.¹ Specifically, we should replace Selective Service with a National Service System that recruits young men *and women* to serve their country in one of three ways: in the military's new, short-term "citizen soldier" enlistment program; in AmeriCorps; or in the Peace Corps, which should become a vital component of U.S. efforts to promote political and economic freedom abroad.

The new system would channel volunteers into these three streams of service and handle post-service education awards. As an added incentive to serve, public and private colleges should be encouraged to favor applicants who agree to perform national service over applicants who choose the registration-only option.²

Expand AmeriCorps

President Bush deserves credit for carrying through on his promise to enlarge AmeriCorps from 50,000 to 75,000 members. But while it's gratifying to see a Republican president leading his party toward a belated embrace of President Clinton's signature program, we shouldn't stop there. In their bipartisan Call to Service bill, Sens. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.) set a more ambitious goal: increasing AmeriCorps to 250,000 members a year, at a cost of about \$15 billion, spread out over eight years. In addition to investing more in the missions that AmeriCorps now tackles—tutoring students, constructing houses, vaccinating children, providing disaster relief—we should also test ways that national service can be harnessed to meet the daunting new challenges of homeland security.

As we expand service opportunities for young Americans, we should not neglect the coming wave of baby boom retirees. A recent opinion survey shows that the percentage of Americans nearing retirement who are interested in a year or more of service increases fourfold to almost 50 percent if they are offered a structured service environment, a small monthly stipend, and the choice of an education or health-care benefit.³ Building on the success of the Senior Corps and the Experience Corps, the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) has proposed organizing a large-scale “Boomer Corps” to enable the boomers to help themselves meet the challenges of healthy and successful aging and give something back to their country.⁴

Recruit More Citizen-Soldiers

In October 2003, the military began taking in its first recruits through the new “citizen-soldier” short-term enlistment program, the

most significant change in recruiting since the creation of the All-Volunteer Force.⁵ Conceived by Northwestern University sociologist Charles Moskos and shepherded into law by Senators McCain and Bayh, the citizen-soldier option is intended to help meet our growing personnel demands by offering America's youth a voluntary equivalent of the draft: a way to serve their country in uniform without choosing a military career.

The new option enables volunteers to sign up for 15 months of service on active duty followed by 24 months in the reserves—a radical departure from the four- and five-year active duty enlistments that are now the norm. A look at the initial class of 3,600 recruits suggests that the program is already beginning to fulfill its promise. The short-term program has a much higher percentage of college-educated and college-bound enlistees than traditional enlistment programs. It is also providing immediate relief to the active-duty military positions experiencing the greatest manpower shortages and is on track to deliver experienced soldiers into a reserve force stretched thin by frequent mobilizations since 9/11. National service advocates should urge the president and the Defense Department to support both a larger military and a more ambitious recruiting goal for this innovative program: Twenty-five thousand citizen-soldiers per year by 2008 and 75,000 per year by 2012.

Replace Work Study with Serve Study

The federal Work Study program helps nearly 1 million students pay for college at a cost of \$1 billion a year. According to Harris Wofford, former Pennsylvania senator and former chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service, Work Study was designed to provide low- and middle-income students with additional money to pay for college and increase the number of students participating in community service. Yet the overwhelming majority of Work Study students today do their service on campus, not in the community. In effect, they constitute an enormous pool of cheap labor for college administrators.

Under current law, only 7 percent of Work Study participants are required to work in community service. To its credit, the Bush admin-

istration has proposed boosting that to 50 percent by the end of the decade. That would mean an additional 250,000 students serving in their communities each year, at virtually no new cost to taxpayers.

This idea, however, has provoked scorched earth resistance from college administrators and the powerful higher education lobby, who claim a shift from campus-based work to service in communities would interfere with students' education. But a University of California-Los Angeles study conducted in 2000 suggests that part-time service activities, far from being a burden on college students, yield positive outcomes, including better performance in the classroom.⁶ National service advocates and the White House should join forces to insist that Congress not wait another year to begin the process of replacing mandatory on-campus jobs with real service opportunities for students.

Link Federal Student Aid and National Service

Finally, it's time to revisit a key principle of the original Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) blueprint: linking federal student aid and national service. As Moskos has pointed out, the United States today has "a GI Bill without GIs." That is, the federal government spends lots of money—about \$26 billion in 2005—on grants and loan subsidies for students. But, whereas the GI Bill rewarded returning World War II veterans for their service to the nation, college aid asks little in return, other than that students repay their loans.

At a time when college costs are rising faster than inflation and a college education has become a minimal credential for success in the knowledge economy, increased public support for families with modest means makes sense. But rather than give the aid away, we should make it an "earned entitlement." Specifically, Washington ought to emulate the GI Bill of Rights and add an element of reciprocity by requiring those who benefit to give something back to their country through national service, civilian or military. The DLC plan would have replaced federal Pell and other grants with a \$10,000 post-service reward and limited student loans to eligible

youths who performed (or committed themselves to perform) national service. In this way, the plan sought to spur large numbers of young Americans to volunteer to serve rather than conscripting them into a mandatory service scheme.

In a more recent variation on this theme, PPI has proposed consolidating various federal tax provisions into a single, turbo-charged College Tax Credit that would provide a \$3,000-a-year credit to students for four years of college and two years of graduate school, provided that they agree to perform service in return.⁷

If lawmakers do nothing else, they should at least fix one big flaw in the 1993 legislation that created AmeriCorps: The education award was set far too low. At \$4,750 for a year of service, it is not even enough to cover tuition and fees at a four-year public college, which now averages \$5,132. It's time for Congress to raise this paltry amount to at least \$10,000 a year so that two years of full-time service would cover the average cost of four years of tuition and fees at a public college or university. This would make service more attractive, especially to youths from low-income families. It also would help students avoid heavy borrowing and promote personal responsibility by reinforcing the connection between individual effort and reward.

CONCLUSION

If adopted, these five steps for taking voluntary national service to scale would move us closer to the ideal of universal service. And it would do so without raising the specter of conscription and all the practical, moral, and political questions it raises. By bringing tens, and eventually hundreds, of thousands of willing citizens together to meet the great challenges of our time, we will hasten the day when it will become routine for Americans to ask each other: What did you do for your national service?

Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.) has argued persuasively that the nation's leaders missed a historic opportunity after 9/11 to summons the "X and Y generations" to national service: "They are ready to do great

things. But we don't ask anything of them. They have not been challenged.”

It's not too late to rectify that mistake, by issuing a new summons to active citizenship through national service.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a detailed discussion of this proposal, see Magee, Marc, 2003, *From Selective Service to National Service: A Blueprint for Citizenship and Security in the 21st Century*, Washington: Progressive Policy Institute.

² This preference could be modeled on the veterans' preference in civil service applications. To reflect the greater risk inherent in military service, those who choose service in the armed forces could be provided with additional consideration. Participation by colleges and universities would, of course, be voluntary.

³ While only 13 percent of Americans 55 and older said they were interested in volunteering 15 hours a week or more during their retirement, the number increased four-fold to 49 percent for a national service program with a structured service environment, a small monthly stipend, and the choice of an education or health care benefit, according to a 2002 Hart Research Associates Poll cited in Civic Ventures, 2002, *The New Face of Retirement: Older Americans, Civic Engagement, and the Longevity Revolution*, Washington.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the Boomer Corps proposal see Magee, Marc, 2003, *Boomer Corps: Activating Seniors for National Service*, Washington: Progressive Policy Institute.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the National Call to Serve enlistment program see Magee, Marc and Steven J. Nider, 2002, *Citizen Soldiers and the War on Terror*, Washington: Progressive Policy Institute. For benchmarks on how to scale up this new program, see Magee, Marc and Steven J. Nider, 2003, *Uncle Sam Wants You! ... For 18 Months: Benchmarks for a Successful Citizen Soldier Program*, Washington: Progressive Policy Institute.

⁶ Asti, Alexander W., Lori J. Vogelgesang, Elaine K. Ikeda, and Jennifer A. Yee, 2000, *How Service Learning Affects Students*, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California-Los Angeles.

⁷ Weinstein, Paul Jr., 2003, *Universal Access to College Through Tax Reform*, Washington: Progressive Policy Institute.