National service has long been a favorite utopian theme. Earlier this century, William James wrote of the need for a "moral equivalent of war," which would require all young men to work for the community. In succeeding decades, a host of philosophers, policy analysts, and politicians offered their proposals for national service. Now President Clinton suggests allowing perhaps 150,000 or so people to work off student loans through government service.

The scheme has a certain superficial appeal, but at base it assumes that citizens are responsible, not to each other, but to the state. Moreover, advocates of national service seem to believe that "public" service, such as shelving books in a library, is inherently better than "private" service, such as shelving books in a bookstore.

Still, proponents of national service rightly point to the problem of an entitlement mentality, in this case the idea that students have a right to a taxpayer-paid education. The solution, however, is not to say that people are entitled to an education as long as they work for the government for a year or two, but to eliminate the undeserved subsidy.

Imagine the bureaucracy necessary to decide which jobs are "service," sort through labor union objections to "unfair competition," match thousands of participants with individual posts, and monitor the quality of people's work. The incredible fraud, misuse, and waste endemic to other so-called public service programs hardly augur well for yet another, even larger, federal effort at social engineering.

National service, despite its persistent allure, would be no bargain. Clinton's proposal would create a nightmarish bureaucracy and waste billions of dollars at a time when he is asking the American people to pay more in taxes. National service is an idea whose time will never come.
decades of peace. Congress also created a variety of volunteer service programs--the Civilian Conservation Corps as part of the New Deal and the Peace Corps and ACTION in the 1960s.

Five years ago the Democratic Leadership Council, to which Gov. Bill Clinton belonged, advocated a citizens corps of 800,000 or more young people that would clean up parks and handle police paperwork.[3] The system would be run by a corporation for national service, which would set the level of benefits for participants and offer them vouchers for education or housing. Underlying the proposal was an assumption of mass moral decadence that had to be rectified by the federal government. We live in a "prevailing climate of moral indolence," contended the DLC, where "such venerable civic virtues as duty and self-sacrifice and compassion toward one's less fortunate neighbors are seldom invoked."[4]

Candidate Clinton was too interested in being elected to criticize the voters in those terms, however. He used more positive rhetoric to propose allowing perhaps 250,000 or so people to work off their student loans through approved government service. He explained that his initiative would allow everyone who wanted to go to school to do so, in return for giving something back to the community. Superficially, at least, it sounded like a win-win proposition. In practice, however, any such program would almost certainly pour billions of dollars into make-work jobs and reinforce the entitlement mentality that pervades our society.

What Is National Service?

National service has always generated strong approval in opinion polls, largely because it means different things to different people. The concept--service to the nation-- seems difficult to fault, and people imagine that the service will be provided in the manner they prefer. Thus, a century ago Edward Bellamy used his novel Looking Backward to propose drafting both men and women into an industrial army for life; in 1910 William James urged conscription of young men into the most unpleasant work of the time, such as construction, fishing, and steel making. The so-called preparedness movement pressed for mandatory military training and service before the onset of World War I. The radical writer Randolph Bourne opposed U.S. involvement in that war but later proposed forcing young men and women to provide two years of service before the age of 20. Universal military training received widespread endorsement after World War II, and Congress reimposed military conscription after only a one-year interregnum. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara proposed tying civilian service to the draft in the early 1960s. Sociologist Margaret Mead advocated a universal program that "would replace for girls, even more than for boys, marriage as the route away from the parental home."[5]

Since then the proposals have come fast and furious. Don Eberly of the National Service Secretariat has spent years pressing for a service program, while carefully side-stepping the question of whether it should be mandatory. Charles Moskos of Northwestern University, who pushed a civilian adjunct to the draft before the creation of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, has more recently proposed a detailed voluntary program.[6] Moskos, an adviser to Clinton, nevertheless retains his preference for compulsion, admitting that "if I could have a magic wand I would be for a compulsory system."[7] (Also mandatory, though in a different way, is the service requirement for high-school graduation now imposed by the state of Maryland and roughly 200 local school jurisdictions.)[8] In the 1980s a raft of legislation was proposed to create commissions, hand out grants, reestablish the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration, create new service agencies, and pay part-time volunteers. Most serious was the DLC's initiative, which Congress turned into an omnibus grant program and the Commission on National and Community Service.

Thereafter, the issue lay dormant until last year, when the Los Angeles riots caused observers from the late tennis great Arthur Ashe to Newsweek columnist and former colonel David Hackworth to Bush campaign aide James Pinkerton to press for different forms of national service. More important, candidate Clinton began inserting it into his stump speeches.

Clinton's Scheme

According to President Clinton, "You could bet your bottom dollar" that his program would "make it possible for every person in this country who wants to, to go to college."[9] He proposed, as one of his five top priorities, creating the National Service Trust Fund. All young people, irrespective of their parents' income, could borrow for their
educations; they would repay their loans either through federal withholding from future wages or by "serving their communities for one or two years doing work their country needs."[10] After the election, some advisers, including Moskos, pressed the president to also consider the alternative approach of allowing high-school graduates to earn college tuition vouchers through community service.[11]

Deficit concerns have caused the administration to initially back away from President Clinton's most ambitious campaign musings. However, explains White House spokesman George Stephanopoulos, the president "intends to fulfill his commitment to build a national service plan."[12] In a speech at Rutgers University on March 1, the president proposed starting with a pilot program, to be expanded to as many as 150,000 or more participants who would receive two years' tuition for every year's work. Apparently, students could work either before or after attending college. Total benefits--and whether participants' salaries would all be the same or would reflect differences in total aid received and forgiven, which would obviously be much greater for someone attending an Ivy League school than for someone attending a state university--remain unspecified. In return for some level of government educational assistance, explained President Clinton:

We'll ask you to help our police forces across the nation, training members for a new police corps, that will walk beats and work with neighborhoods and build the kind of community ties that will prevent crime from happening in the first place; we'll ask young people to work to help control pollution and recycle waste, to paint darkened buildings and clean up neighborhoods, to work with senior citizens and combat homelessness and help children in trouble.[13]

There is nothing compulsory about the Clinton proposal, but coercion could follow later. Proponents of a mandatory, universal system, such as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), see voluntary programs as a helpful first step and would undoubtedly press for mandatory service once national service became the law of the land. A move to compulsion, though perhaps not very likely, is certainly possible. Consider the scenario in which national service leads to a draft as sketched by David R. Henderson, associate professor of economics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

National service attracts few kids from higher-income families. Its advocates then argue that the only way to get broad participation across all income classes is to make national service compulsory. With the voluntary-service network in place, and with an existing constituency of organizations that benefit from the artificially cheap labor, the next step is compulsory service.[14]

Clinton's proposal to set loan repayment as a percentage of income largely involves an attempt to ease the burden on poorer college graduates. There is nothing wrong with the idea in theory, but it is not easy to implement. Congress established and then abandoned a pilot program of that sort in the 1980s, and it authorized further experimentation with that approach when it passed the Higher Education Reauthorization Act last year. Moreover, colleges that have attempted to guarantee repayment in that way have had similar difficulties (do you count a spouse's income, for instance?).

The more important and controversial issue involves the second idea--allowing repayment through "service." Service is obviously a good thing, which is why so many people feel warm and fuzzy when politicians propose "national service." The issue, however, is service to whom? All government programs ultimately assume that citizens are responsible, not to each other, but to the state. The proposals suggest that as a price for being born in the United States one "owes" a year or two of one's life to Washington. Mandatory, universal schemes unabashedly put private lives at the disposal of the government, but most of the voluntary programs, too, imply a unity of society and state, with work for the latter being equated with service to the former.

Yet Americans have worked in their communities since the nation's founding, and opportunities for service today abound. Some 80 million people, roughly one-third of the population, now participate in some volunteer activities.[15] Businesses, churches, and schools have taken the lead in helping to organize their members' efforts. In a cover story Newsweek reported that "many of the old stereotypes are gone. Forget the garden club: today working women are more likely than housewives to give time to good works, and many organizations are creating night and weekend programs for the busy schedules of dual-paycheck couples. Men, too, are volunteering almost as often as women."[16]
Much more could be done, of course. But it would be better for government officials to lead by example than to concoct multi-billion-dollar schemes to encourage what is already occurring. True compassion is going to be taught from the grassroots up, not from Washington down. The underlying assumption of the Clinton program—that there is a debilitating dearth of service that can be remedied only through yet another raid on the taxpayers—is simply false. Moreover, the Clinton program, while cloaked in public-spirited rhetoric, nevertheless relies heavily on economic incentives.

A second bias held by advocates of national service is that "public" service is inherently better than "private" service. Yet what makes shelving books in a library more laudable or valuable than stocking shelves in a bookstore? Many workers in the private sector provide enormous public benefits—consider health care professionals, medical and scientific researchers, business entrepreneurs and inventors, and artists. Working in a government-approved "service" job neither entitles one to be morally smug nor means one is producing more of value than the average worker in the private workplace.

**Entitlement Mentality**

Still, proponents of national service rightly point to the problem of an entitlement mentality—the idea that, for instance, students have a right to a taxpayer-paid education. Why should middle-class young people be able to force poor taxpayers to put them through school? The solution, however, is not to say that students are entitled to do so as long as they work for the government for a year or two, but to eliminate the undeserved subsidy. People simply do not have a "right" to a university education, especially not a professional degree, at taxpayer expense.

Advocates of national service respond with shock. Education, they argue, will be increasingly important in an increasingly technological age. True enough: the greatest divergence in incomes in the 1980s reflected the gulf between those with and those without college degrees. That increased earning potential primarily benefits the students themselves, however, and the probable lifetime gain of $640,000[17] should allow them to borrow privately. The interest rate may be higher than it is with today's federal guarantees, but that hardly seems unfair given the added earnings students can expect.

Nevertheless, Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), an advocate of the Clinton program, contends that even middle-class families can ill afford to send their kids to college. That contention is now accepted as a truism, but it is not obviously correct. More than three-quarters of the best students currently go on to higher education.[18] More than half of New York City's high-school graduates eventually enroll in just one college—the City University of New York—and many others, of course, go to other institutions. Qualified students unable to get a college education because of finances are few. What President Clinton, Senator Dodd, and others seem to envision is luring additional, marginal students into the university, but those advocates are exhibiting the worst sort of elitism by assuming that everyone needs a college degree to find fulfillment in life. Some young people are not academically oriented or interested; others have found more satisfying ways to spend their lives. The federal government should not be pushing them to go to school.

Anyway, the fact that higher education, especially at elite private universities, strains many family budgets is hardly surprising, since the dramatic increase in federal aid to education has helped fuel a rapid rise in tuition. Further flooding the educational system with money is likely to benefit administrators more than students. The point is, if there is more money available for schools to collect, they will do so.

Moreover, it is because of free-spending legislators such as Dodd that government now takes roughly half of national income, which makes it difficult for families to afford higher education. Politicians worried about middle-class taxpayers should cut federal spending, not hike costs by billions of dollars by instituting a national service program. In short, while the jump in federal educational assistance in the 1970s undoubtedly helped more students attend college, there is no reason to assume both that the majority of those marginal attendees benefited more than the cost of their education and that they could not have afforded school had tuition not been artificially inflated and their families' incomes been so sharply and unnecessarily reduced by taxes.

The problem with national service is not just theoretical, however. Like every other national service plan, the Clinton proposal would break down in practice. Of course, it is hard to evaluate the specifics of the system because they do not yet exist. Admitted the president shortly after his election: "I feel very passionate about" national service, "but there are
a lot of factual questions that have to be asked. How much money should everybody be able to borrow a year? What contributions should people's families be expected to make, if any? If you put this into effect, how are you going to keep the colleges and the universities of this country from using it as an excuse to explode tuition even more?"[19] Good questions all, and all go to the viability of any program.

The implementation problems are likely to be enormous. First, President Clinton says that he will not allow any job displacement, which guarantees that participants will not perform the most valuable work to be done. The DLC's proposed program had the same feature--to forestall opposition from organized labor, the group promised that its program would neither impair existing contracts nor limit the promotion possibilities for existing workers. The latter promise, however, is virtually impossible to keep: if national servers end up in local school districts as teachers and teachers' aides, will the districts hire as many other teachers and teachers' aides in the future? Almost any job that might be performed by a municipal union member is likely to be excluded from any national service program or, if it is not, generate significant political opposition.

Even assuming that problem can be overcome, national service is not likely to produce significant social benefits. What work would participants do? Past government "service" programs have always been very limited in scope. Advocates of national service like to point to the Peace Corps and VISTA, but those two programs, along with more than 60 state and local programs, involve only some 18,000 people. Even during the military draft the government had little use for the labor of conscientious objectors, placing only 30,000 in service jobs from 1951 to 1965. What will even 150,000 people a year do?

Meet current "unmet social needs," advocates of national service respond. Previously, proponents of national service have glibly estimated the number of jobs that need to be done at as many as 5.3 million. According to one study, for instance, libraries need 200,000 people, and education needs six times as many.[20] But as long as human wants are unlimited, the real number of unfulfilled social "needs," as well as unmet business "needs," is infinite. Labor, however, is not a free resource. Thus, satisfying most of those "unmet" needs is simply not worthwhile. One of the great benefits of the market process is that it balances benefits and costs throughout society, using wages as a signal that activities warrant undertaking. National service would treat some jobs as sacrosanct and ignore disfavored, but more socially worthwhile, alternative tasks that could be performed instead.

Opportunity Costs

Indeed, opportunity costs may be the crux of the national service debate. Paying young people a generous compensation--they will receive tuition relief plus salary and health care benefits--for painting darkened buildings, one of the president's ideas; or doing police paperwork, something proposed as part of the DLC's program; or performing other "service" entails forgoing whatever else could be done with that money. Moreover, it entails forgoing whatever else those young people could do. "Public service" has a nice ring to it, but there is no reason to believe, a priori, that a dollar spent on national service will yield more benefits than an additional dollar spent on medical research, technological innovation, or any number of other private and public purposes. Indeed, the Clinton program would delay the entry of tens of thousands of people into the workforce every year, an economic impact that the president and his advisers appear not to have calculated. Yet the relative value of labor may rise in coming years as the population ages.[21] As a result, the opportunity cost of diverting young people into extraneous educational pursuits and dubious social projects could rise sharply over time.

Another potentially important opportunity cost is that of diverting top-quality men and women from the military.[22] The end of the Cold War has sharply cut recruiting needs, but it has also reduced some of the allure of volunteering as well as the perceived national need. As a result, by summer 1992 the Army, which typically has a more difficult recruiting task than the other services, was about 10 percent behind in signing up recruits for 1993. Observed Gen. Jack Wheeler, head of the Army's recruiting effort, "I'm not panicking, but the numbers are disturbing."[23] The military has even seen recruiting fall off in such traditional strongholds as northern Florida and other parts of the South. Yet various programs of educational benefits have always been an important lure for attracting college-capable youth to the military. Providing similar benefits for civilian service may hinder recruiting for what remains the most fundamental form of national service--defending the nation. The military rightly fears the potential impact of national service on a system that has been working well. Observed Thomas Byrne of the private Association of the U.S. Army
after the DLC proposal was unveiled, "We don't want high-caliber people who might otherwise join the Army off planting trees instead."[24] The result, again, would be higher costs: economic, as more money would have to be spent to attract quality people; military, as the armed forces might become less effective; and moral, since military service would lose its preferred status, warranted by the uniqueness of the duties involved.

Still, there are undoubtedly many worthwhile tasks that people could do. The problem in many cases, however, is that government effectively bars private provision of such services. Minimum wage laws effectively forbid the hiring of dedicated but unskilled people and inhibit rehabilitation programs, such as the one run by the Salvation Army. Restrictions on paratransit operations limit private transportation for the disabled. Licensing, zoning, and other unnecessary and often nonsensical regulations increase the price of day care.[25] Similar sorts of restrictions harm private voluntarism as well. Health regulations prevent restaurants in Los Angeles and elsewhere from donating food to the hungry, for instance. In short, in many cases important needs are unmet precisely because of perverse government policy.

To the extent that serious problems remain, narrowly targeted responses are most likely to be effective. That is, it would be better to find a way to attract several thousand people to help care for the terminally ill than to lump that task with teaching, painting buildings, and a dozen other jobs to be done by a force of 150,000 or more. Talk of millions of "unmet social needs" is meaningless.

In any case, local organizations are not likely to use "free" labor provided by the federal government efficiently: staff members would face an almost irresistible temptation to assign hated grunge work rather than more suitable tasks to national servers. There are good reasons many tasks that are not performed today are not performed, a fact ignored by advocates of national service. In fact, a similar problem of perverse incentives has been evident in federal grant programs that allow states to use national money for projects to which the states contribute little. Observes David Luberoff of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, "One of the lessons of the interstate project is that in general . . . if you don't require that states put up a reasonable amount of the cost, you run the risk of building stuff that is probably not that cost-effective."[26]

Real voluntarism, in contrast, works because the sponsoring organizations offer valuable enough work to attract well-motivated volunteers. But the Clinton program would simply assign people, people whose motivation would likely be working off a school debt by "serving." In fact, the government risks subverting the volunteer spirit by paying loan recipients too much. The DLC suggested that its program would promote sacrifice, yet University of Rochester economist Walter Oi estimated that total compensation-- salary, health care benefits, and untaxed vouchers for education and housing--for "serving" was the equivalent of $17,500 annually after taxes, well above the mean earnings of high-school graduates. The Clinton administration has estimated the per participant cost of its proposed program to be at least $18,000 annually, but that figure is probably low. Two years' tuition--the reward for one year's service--alone could easily run $20,000, in addition to nearly $9,000 in minimum wage compensation plus health care and other benefits. As a result, students will see national service as a financially remunerative job option, not a unique opportunity to help the community.

Further, imagine the bureaucracy necessary to decide which 150,000 or more jobs are "service." Who would sort through labor union objections to "unfair competition," match participants with individual posts, and monitor the quality of people's work? Could national service workers be fired? What if they refused to do the work assigned to them? What if they showed up irregularly or performed poorly? And so on.

**Unwieldy Bureaucracy**

Those are not minor problems to be solved after the program is in place. To the contrary, the specifics go to the heart of the viability of any national service proposal. One possible model is the old DLC proposal. A corporation for national service would make grants to states and local national service councils, and state governments would establish national service plans. Local national service councils, composed of community groups and local government officials, businessmen, and representatives of unions and education, would hire staff, prepare plans, and oversee their implementation.

That sort of unwieldy bureaucracy is not likely to promote inexpensive and innovative ways to meet human needs.
Unfortunately, controls and regulations will inevitably follow federal labor and money. It is fear of just such consequences that has led the Guardian Angels, cited by national service advocate Moskos as one of the most "striking examples of civic-minded youth volunteers,"[27] to reject federal grants. So does Habitat for Humanity, the Christian organization supported by former president Jimmy Carter, that constructs housing for poor people.

Even worse, federal involvement is likely to politicize much of what is now private humanitarian activity. Members of Congress would oppose efforts to close local government offices; interest groups would lobby to twist social programs to their own benefit; labor unions would mobilize to block proposals to contract out work. A program offering the free services of thousands of young people would provide a massive honey pot that would attract the worst sort of political infighting.

Such battles could spill over into the courtroom. Religion pervades the volunteer sector--could churches and parachurch groups participate in the Clinton program? Equally problematic is the issue of controversial political, sexual, and social lobbies. One can imagine volunteers, backed by Democratic party interest groups, wanting to treat work with Act-Up and Planned Parenthood as "service." The Clinton administration's attitude toward would-be volunteers at church day-care centers and nonliberal public-interest groups such as the National Taxpayers Union would probably be quite different. Those considerations bring us back to the basic questions, what is service? and who decides?

The larger the federal program grows, the more cumbersome it is likely to become. Small programs under charismatic leaders, such as the San Francisco Conservation Corps, have performed well, but their objectives are more limited, better defined, and more manageable. Moving from a few hundred to a few hundred thousand is no easy task. Alas, the incredible fraud, misuse, and waste endemic to other "public service" programs, such as those of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, hardly augur well for yet another, even larger, federal effort at social engineering.

In fact, CETA, with its system of federal funding for local jobs, is an important model. Before its termination by Congress, CETA, reports policy analyst James Bovard, spent $30,000 to build an artificial rock for rock climbers to practice on, gave $500 a month to a communist agitator in Atlanta to, in his words, "organize for demonstration and confrontation," and paid for a nude sculpture class in Miami in which aspiring artists practiced Braille reading on each other. The usual racketeering abounded.

In Philadelphia, 33 Democratic party committeemen or their relatives were put on the CETA payroll. In Chicago, the Daley political machine required CETA job applicants to have referral letters from their ward committeemen and left applications without such referrals piled under tables in unopened mail sacks. In Washington, D.C., almost half the City Council staff was on the CETA rolls.[28]

Finally, money has to be an issue in a year when the federal deficit is expected to be some $350 billion. National service will not come cheap--there will be more loans and thus more defaults, as well as the salaries and benefits paid to those who take government service jobs. During the campaign, the president acknowledged that his program could more than double the cost of the student loan program, which is currently between $4 billion and $5 billion, to some $12 billion.[29] Alas, the long-term cost would probably be far higher. "It would be a lot more expensive," warns David Merkowitz, spokesman for the American Council on Education.[30] For that reason the White House is proposing a more modest program that it says will cost $9.5 billion over five years. However, a full complement of 150,000 participants would cost that much in just two years. Moreover, the political dynamic of concentrated beneficiary groups versus the larger taxpaying public tends to promote the constant expansion of benefits once they are established. Even if the costs remain only an extra few billion dollars, one has to wonder at the justification for spending that much money in that way, especially when the president is calling for big tax increases. Hiking expenditures so that private individuals can go to school for private gain is a dubious enough use of public money. Using national service to effectively hire 150,000 or more young people to do jobs of questionable worth is an even bigger waste.

Conclusion

As did the mythical Sirens, national service retains its allure. Argues Roger Landrum of Youth Service America,
"Clinton has a shot at mobilizing the idealism and energy of a very significant number of young people, as Roosevelt did with the Civilian Conservation Corps and John F. Kennedy did with the Peace Corps."[31] Alas, President Clinton's scheme would be no bargain. It would create a nightmarish bureaucracy and increase an already out-of-control deficit. National service would also reinforce today's misbegotten entitlement mentality while siphoning tens of thousands of young people out of productive private labor into make-work projects. Finally, if the program inflated tuition levels as has student aid in the past, it probably would not even benefit many participants, since it would provide more funding for college administrators than for students.

What we need instead is a renewed commitment to individual service. People, in community with one another, need to help meet the many serious social problems that beset us. There is a role for government: officials should commit themselves to a strategy of "first, do no harm." We need to eliminate public programs that discourage personal independence and self-responsibility, disrupt and destroy communities and families, and hinder the attempts of individuals and groups to respond to problems around them. The private activism that would follow would need neither oversight nor subsidy from Big Brother. Some voluntarism could be part-time and some full-time; some could take place within the family, some within churches, and some within civic and community groups. Some might occur through government and some through profit-making ventures. The point is, there would be no predetermined definition of service, pattern of appropriate involvement, set of "needs" to be met, or tasks to be accomplished. America's strength is its combination of humanitarian impulses, private association, and diversity. We need service, not "national" service. National service is an idea whose time will never come.

Notes


[7] Quoted in Jacob Lamar, "Enlisting with Uncle Sam," Time, February 23, 1987, p. 30. Many other supporters of voluntary initiatives today, such as Sens. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Charles Robb (D-Va.), have long backed mandatory service.

[8] In Maryland, for instance, the state Board of Education voted last July to require that, starting with this fall's class of ninth-graders, students will have to complete a set number of hours of "community service" to graduate. Local school systems will have the duty of defining what constitutes "service." Two state senators have proposed legislation to repeal the regulation. Lisa Leff, "Service Requirement for Students Attacked," Washington Post, January 28, 1993, p. B3.


[10] Bill Clinton, Putting People First: A National Economic Strategy for America (Little Rock: Clinton Presidential Campaign, 1992), p. 12. President Clinton has also proposed a national police corps, through which the federal
government would hire some 100,000 policemen to serve for two years; the government would provide them with educational benefits as well as salary. Jerry Seper, "Clinton's Police Corps Idea Called 'Goofy,'" Washington Times, October 30, 1992, p. A5. That proposal is obviously closely related to national service.


[17] Democratic Leadership Council, p. 11. Much of the growing gap reflects the declining quality of a high-school education, so we would do the most good by enabling more students to get a decent high-school education.


[22] National service advocates have often argued that their proposals would enhance military recruiting. There is good reason to doubt their claims, however. See, for example, the debate between Doug Bandow and Charles Moskos, "National Service," Orbis 34, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 371-97. However, President Clinton has made no such claim for his scheme, which makes no special provision for military service, as did the DLC plan.


[27] Moskos, p. 79.


[31] Quoted in Seib and Trost.
American culture and values are deteriorating, it is claimed. Probably true. But then, it likely has been true for many years.

What to do?

The hoary panacea of “national service” has reemerged. Just make selfish young people “serve” as part of a “shared experience” organized by Washington, and America will move upward, ever upward.

Service has a long and venerable history in the U.S. Americans’ generosity and penchant to organize to meet community needs were noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic, *Democracy in America*. And so it continues today. Most Americans give something to charity. Tens of millions of people volunteer time.

Such efforts are ever more important as the “Age of Politics” winds down. Even then-President Bill Clinton admitted: “Much of the work of America cannot be done by government, much other work cannot be done by government alone. The solution must be the American people through voluntary service to others.”

The country’s little platoons have responded, as they always have. Yet some politicians, pundits, and other elites believe such efforts, beyond Washington’s control or oversight, don’t count.
Which explains yet another round of proposals for national service. Observed columnist Michael Gerson, “These are tough times for the nation, by which I mean the idea of the nation, the concept of things national.” The answer? A grand new national service initiative.

Gerson explained: “How then does a democracy cultivate civic responsibility and shared identity? Taxation allows us to fund common purposes, but it does not provide common experiences. A rite of passage in which young people — rich and poor, liberal and conservative, of every racial background — work side by side to address public problems would create, at least, a vivid, lifelong memory of shared national purpose.”

He pointed to the proposal by former Gen. Stanley McChrystal to require government service. The Aspen Institute also is pushing to create a new federal program supported by the social expectation of service, military or civilian. The proposal is a complex mix of private as well as public, but the government bias is clear.

For instance, City Year CEO Michael Brown said the idea “is stirring. With its implementation, ‘Where will you do your service year?’ will rapidly become the most commonly asked question of America’s young people. But most importantly, young people will be inspired to answer the question: ‘The Marines!’, ‘Teach for America!’, ‘Air Force!’, ‘Habitat for Humanity!’, ‘The Army!’, ‘City Year!’, ‘The National Guard!’, ‘YouthBuild!’, ‘Navy!’, ‘AmeriCorps!’, ‘Coast Guard!’ and ‘Peace Corps!’.” Of these, only Habitat is private.

The Aspen Institute hosted the National Service Summit last week attended by 275 luminaries to promote the Franklin Project with its proposal for a million government-funded volunteers, intended to roughly match the number serving in the military. The effort, co-chaired by McChrystal, envisions voluntary service. However, at last year’s Aspen Ideas Festival he endorsed a mandatory program. And he was backed by former Adm. Mike Mullen, who argued: “I want a national service that would have the same effect as a draft: where everybody's in.” Hospital president Elizabeth Nabel urged Congress to mandate a year or two of public service.
The idea of coercive universal “service” is not new. The concept goes back to the 19th century, to *Looking Backward*, a novel by lawyer and journalist Edward Bellamy. Bellamy envisioned compulsory service for all men and women between the ages of 21 and 45, resulting in a peaceful and prosperous utopia. Bellamy’s book was outsold only by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur* in its time and was translated into 20 different languages. Some 165 Bellamy clubs were formed to push his egalitarian social system.

Two decades later William James spoke of the need for a “moral equivalent of war,” in which all young men would be required to work for the community. He argued that “the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods,” and that national service would instill those same values in peacetime. As anachronistic as William James’ sexist and militarist vision may seem today, his rhetoric remains the touchstone for many national service advocates.

In succeeding decades a host of philosophers, policy analysts, politicians, and pundits proffered their own proposals for national service. Although most of these measures fell short of James’ extravagant utopian vision, proponents still wanted to transform society. For instance, declared the Potomac Institute in 1979:

> *International comparisons also fire some American imaginings. Millions of young people serve social needs in China as a routine part of growing up, many [are] commanded to leave the crowded cities and to assist in the countryside. Castro fought illiteracy and mosquitoes in Cuba with units of youth. Interesting combinations of education, work, and service to society are a part of the experience of youth in Israel, Jamaica, Nigeria, Tanzania, and other nations. The civic spirit being imbued in youth elsewhere in the world leaves some Americans wondering and worrying about Saturday-night-fever, unemployment, the new narcissism, and other afflictions of American youth.*
The legislative process always ended up shrinking grandiose proposals into much more limited programs, such as the Peace Corps, VISTA, the Corporation for National and Community Service, AmeriCorps, and various local and state initiatives. But the expansive vision never died.

Thus, the Aspen Institute crowd talked of instilling values of citizenship and service, finding common ground, creating a shared experience, cultivating leadership, and sharing a common cause. Gerson imagined that national service would demonstrate “gratitude for our patrimony and affection for our traditions and institutions.”

Despite the always benevolent objectives and ennobling rhetoric, the basic question remains: service to and organized by whom? Americans have worked in their communities for others since before the nation’s founding and opportunities for similar kinds of service abound today. Businesses, churches, charities, and schools all participate.

Much more could be done, of course, especially given America’s serious problems. But what makes service in the U.S. so vital is that it is decentralized, privately organized, directed at meeting human, not political, needs, and an outgrowth of people’s sense of compassion and obligation. Public exhortations may encourage some people to act, but “leaders” who spend more time urging others to help than helping—those who had “other priorities,” like Vice President Richard Cheney, when they were young and called upon to serve—aren’t the best salesmen for the obligation to volunteer.

The very fact that community service is so valuable argues against turning it into a federal project. Government funding and control would squeeze voluntarism into a larger social plan implemented and enforced by Washington. The welfare state is the history of public enterprise pushing out private assistance. The impact was largely unintentional, but natural—indeed, inevitable. Increased taxes left individuals with less money to give; government’s assumption of responsibility for providing welfare reduced the perceived duty of individuals to respond to their neighbors’ needs; and the availability of public programs gave recipients an alternative to private assistance, one which made fewer de-
mands for the reform of destructive behaviors and lifestyles. Over time, the welfare state pushed aside charitable enterprises as well as a host of benevolent societies that once served the needs of tradesmen, minorities, and other.

Even some churches abandoned the mission of being salt and light. In response to President Clinton’s call on every church to employ one person then on welfare Rev. Albert Pennybacker of the National Council of Churches responded that “Our job is not to compensate for the failure of government to do its job.” Government’s job? Religious orders once provided a host of social services, including health care, education, and charity. Now even some churches apparently see aid to the needy as the state’s responsibility.

Government promoted/mandated service could further supplant private responsibility. A massive federal “service” program would suggest that giving and organizing giving (deciding who should receive money and volunteers) belong to government rather than society. It would become even easier for the average person to say in effect: “I gave at the office.”

A national program, whether voluntary or mandatory, also would treat “public” service as inherently better than private service. Yet being paid/forced by the government to shelve books in a library is no more laudable than being paid to stock shelves at Barnes & Noble. A host of private sector jobs provide enormous public benefits—consider health care professionals, medical and scientific researchers, business entrepreneurs and inventors, and artists. Many of them earn less than they could in alternative work; they have chosen to “serve” in their own way. Yet government programs that equate public employment or publicly-endorsed employment with service effectively denigrate private service.

More subtle but no less damaging may be the impact on support for volunteer groups. It certainly is simpler if the IRS empties pockets nationwide, hands the money to a government entity, which, in turn, gives grants to or hires workers for charity. But the right way is for individuals to send their money directly to deserving groups.
Indeed, genuine charity doesn’t mean giving away someone else’s money. As Marvin Olasky, author of The Tragedy of American Compassion, has pointed out, compassion once meant to “suffer with.” The giver also learned from the recipient and benefited from the relationship.

Over time compassion came to mean writing a check. It increasingly has become equated with making someone else write a check. Yet turning the job of funding private groups, however worthy, over to the state is likely to encourage people to further abdicate their civic responsibilities. To strengthen civil society and recreate a sense of duty to help the needy requires encouraging people to contribute as well as volunteer.

In fact, thoughtfully choosing which charities to support and monitoring their activities are important forms of volunteerism. Sending money to Washington for distribution to private groups benefits the recipients, no one else. In contrast, people informing themselves about service, supporting worthwhile organizations, giving voluntarily, and getting involved in other ways strengthen the sinews of community. Getting more people to more thoughtfully give more money should be a top social priority. But government-funded service, though implemented in the name of volunteerism, makes it less necessary for people to volunteer time and money.

Moreover, public welfare programs at least are nominally accountable to taxpayers. Not so private entities, some of which may have philosophical or theological viewpoints that conflict with those of many taxpayers. However, excluding such groups would put them at a notable disadvantage—a concern with welfare spending that led to President George W. Bush’s faith-based initiative, which delivered federal grants to religious groups. Conflicts are inevitable.

Is it realistic to expect people to volunteer more time and money? They are less likely to do so the less need they see to do so, and they will see less need to do so if the government not only provides public welfare but creates its own “service” programs and funds and mans nominally private charitable groups. If the gov-
ernment essentially supplants the independent sector by providing one million volunteers, let alone four million “service” conscripts as part of a mandatory, universal program, why should anyone give?

National service suffers from two other significant failings. Having the federal government attempt to organize or oversee (with money comes strings) work for a million 18-year-olds—or worse, the roughly four million who turn 18 every year as part of a universal scheme—should horrify anyone with a clear-eyed view of Washington. Never mind the difficulty of impecunious Uncle Sam finding tens of billions of dollars for the program. There’s no reason to assume such a shared experience would be particularly positive, let alone uplifting.

National service advocates long have concocted detailed estimates of “unmet social needs” which offered the illusion of precision but were meaningless. The demand for “service” is infinite if there is no consideration of opportunity costs, what could otherwise be achieved with the money and labor involved. The draft military wasted human resources because it paid little for conscript labor. The idea that Uncle Sam would employ millions of 18-year-olds every year doing morally uplifting and socially serious work is a fantasy.

Mandatory programs, which remain the ultimate objective of many national service advocates, have a far more serious moral failing. What conceivable justification is there for jailing people who do not want to shelve books at the local bookstore? Or clean bedpans at the local hospital? A war of national survival at least offers a plausible argument for conscription. It is quite another thing to draft the young to impose an elite vision of social engineering.

Last year McChrystal expressed doubt that “young people really would fight it if it was fair, if everybody did it.” Surely Vietnam demonstrated that young people will battle for their freedom. No doubt, most would do less to avoid spending a year picking up litter in the local park than fighting guerrillas in Southeast Asia, but it wouldn’t take many recalcitrants to create bureaucratic and legal chaos. If even one percent of young people resisted, there would be more than 40,000 lawbreakers. Even more likely would be passive resistance—failing to show up at work, doing little on the job, disobeying supervisors, and otherwise treating
mandated service with the respect that it deserved. What then? Fines? Jail time? Imagine the lessons taught: those well past the age of service using force to make the young “good.”

America would benefit from a renewed commitment to service. People, in community with one another, should help meet America’s many serious social problems. There is a role for government: officials should eliminate public programs that discourage personal independence and self-responsibility, disrupt and destroy communities and families, and hinder the attempts of people and groups to respond to problems around them. Moreover, those demanding that others serve should lead by example.

But private activism needs neither oversight nor subsidy from Uncle Sam. Some of the volunteerism can be part-time and some full-time; some can take place within the family, some within churches, and some within civic and community groups. Some may occur through profit-making ventures. There is no predetermined definition of service, pattern of appropriate involvement, set of “needs” to be met or tasks to be fulfilled. There certainly is no need to create a “national” system to inculcate elite values.

America long has benefited from humanitarian impulses, private association, and social diversity. We need more service, not government service.

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TESTIMONY

On the Corporation for National Service and Community Service

By Doug Bandow

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Committee on Labor and Human Resources
United States Senate

Service has a long and venerable history. It has perhaps become a cliche, but Americans’ generosity and penchant to organize to meet community needs were noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic, Democracy in America. And so it continues today. Three-quarters of American households give to charity. Some 90 million adults volunteer; the value of their time has been estimated by the Independent Sector to approach $200 billion.

However, there has long been a strong desire by some to directly involve government. Eight decades ago William James wrote of the need for a “moral equivalent of war,” in which all young men would be required to work for the community. He argued that “the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods,” and that national service provided a method for instilling those same values in peacetime. Anachronistic though his vision may seem today, his rhetoric has become the touchstone for national service advocates: In succeeding decades a host of philosophers, policy analysts, and politicians proffered their own proposals for either
voluntary or mandatory national service. And some of these initiatives have been turned into law, most recently the National and Community Service Trust Act, which established the Corporation for National and Community Service.

**Service Philosophy**

There are a number of important practical issues surrounding the operation of the Corporation, but I will leave them to others. I want to focus more on the philosophical and theoretical issues surrounding government-funded “service,” and some of the problems that may result.

Service is obviously a good thing, which is why so many people give time and money, and why voters tend to respond so positively when politicians talk about “national service.” The issue, however, is service to whom and organized by whom?

Americans have worked in their communities since the nation’s founding and opportunities for similar kinds of service today abound. Businesses, churches, and schools all actively help organize their members’ efforts. In a cover story *Newsweek* reported that “many of the old stereotypes are gone. Forget the garden club: today working women are more likely than housewives to give time to good works, and many organizations are creating night and weekend programs for the busy schedules of dual-paycheck couples. Men, too, are volunteering almost as often as women.”

Much more could be done, of course. But what makes service in America so vital is that it is decentralized, privately organized, centered around perceived needs, and an outgrowth of people’s sense of duty and compassion. A federal “service” program, especially if it expands over time, risks teaching that the duty of giving, and the job of organizing giving (deciding who is worthy to receive government grants and, indirectly, private groups’ services) belongs to government rather than average people throughout society. This is, in fact, the explicit goal of advocates of mandatory service programs, who would create a duty to the state rather than the supposed beneficiaries of service. But even a program such as the present one, given the government’s dominant role in society and
ability to shape private behavior to conform with its wishes (in order to receive public funds, in this case), risks perverting America’s traditional volunteer ethic. At some point service to society could become widely equated with work for government.

Shared Fears

Some participants in voluntary organizations share this fear. David King of the Ohio-West Virginia YMCA has warned: “The national service movement and the National Corporation are not about encouraging volunteering or community service. The national service movement is about institutionalizing federal funding for national and community service. It is about changing the language and understanding of service to eliminate the words ‘volunteer’ and ‘community service’ and in their place implant the idea that service is something paid for by the government.” This distinction is important for the server, the person being served, and society. In particular, projects that involve the greatest interpersonal contact, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and other work with “at risk” youth, are better implemented by volunteers who give sacrificially than by workers who are paid for their efforts. The latter may be dedicated, but their commitment is likely to be more limited. Indeed, a different kind of relationship is likely to develop if the supposed beneficiary realizes that the helper is motivated by a desire to give and not to earn a paycheck or educational voucher.

A second problem is that government service programs treat “public” service as inherently better than private service. Service comes in many forms, however. Being paid by the government to shelve books in a library, whether as a formal employee or as an AmeriCorps member, is no more laudable or valuable than being paid by Crown Books to stock shelves in a book store. A host of private sector jobs provide enormous public benefits - consider health care professionals, medical and scientific researchers, business entrepreneurs and inventors, and artists. Many of these people earn less than they could in alternative work; they have chosen to serve in their own way. Yet government programs that equate public employment with service effectively denigrate service through private employment.
This public sector bias is reflected in the fact that 2,800 of the first 20,000 AmeriCorps participants were assigned to federal agencies. For instance, the Department of the Interior used AmeriCorps workers to “update geological and hydrological information for the U.S. Geological Survey” and restore wetlands and wildlife habitat. Jobs like these are respectable, to be sure, but resemble traditional government employment rather than “service.” While AmeriCorps participants may do some good work as government employees, such activities are not likely to promote volunteerism around the country.

**Entitlement Mentality**

Some national service proponents have rightly pointed to the problem of an entitlement mentality, the idea that, for instance, students have a right to a taxpayer-paid education. Why should middle-class young people be able to force poor taxpayers to help put them through school? This is a good question. But public “service” jobs rewarded with a salary and an educational grant are no solution: they merely transform the kind of employment that a young person seeks to help cover his educational expenses. There is no real sacrifice involved in, say, informing people about the availability of FEMA Service Centers, maintaining vehicles, surveying residents about recreational interests, cutting vegetation, and changing light bulbs in dilapidated schools (all activities of members of the AmeriCorps*National Civilian Community Corps). In contrast, consider the sort of tasks envisioned by William James: young laborers would be sent off “to coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December,” and much more.

The solution to the entitlement mentality, then, is not to say that students are entitled to taxpayer aid as long as they essentially work for the government for a year or two, but to rethink who deserves the subsidy. We also need to explore how federal educational assistance may have actually made it harder for students to afford college by fueling tuition hikes (the schools, of course, are the ultimate beneficiaries of most student aid).

Equally important has to be the concern over whether taxpayers are likely to get their money’s worth from the service provided. There’s no doubt that some good work has and will be done by AmeriCorps volunteers; it is hard for even
the government to spend hundreds of millions of dollars without doing some good. But there is no guarantee that taxpayer-funded “service” will be worth its cost. One problem is the concern over potential job displacement. To avoid putting AmeriCorps personnel in positions that might compete with existing jobs ensures that they won’t be performing tasks that is obviously of value to the community. While the alternative work might not be bad, it will be second best.

And even attractive-sounding jobs won’t necessarily produce significant social benefits. The Corporation and its supporters speak grandly of meeting current “unmet social needs.” Past proponents of national service have tossed around figures ranging up to 5.3 million on the number of jobs that need to be done. According to one study, for instance, libraries require 200,000 people; education needs six times as many. But as long as human wants are unlimited, the real number of unfilled social “needs,” as well as unmet business “needs,” is infinite. Labor, however, is not a free resource. Thus, it simply isn’t worthwhile to satisfy most of these “unmet” needs. Trade-offs must be made, yet national service treats some jobs as sacrosanct while ignoring other, disfavored tasks.

Opportunity Costs

Indeed, this may be the crux of the national service debate: the role of opportunity costs. Paying young people what amounts to good compensation for those just out of school - tuition relief plus salary, health insurance, and other benefits - to paint “darkened buildings,” as suggested by the President, or perform the many other tasks engaged in by AmeriCorps participants, entails forgoing whatever else could be done with that money. Moreover, it involves forgoing whatever else those young people could do. “Public service” has a nice ring to it, but there is no reason to believe, a priori, that a dollar going to national service will yield more benefits than an additional dollar spent on medical research, technological innovation, business investment, or any number of other private and public purposes. Nor is having, say, a potential doctor spend a year doing such jobs as surveying residents, handling paperwork, and replacing light bulbs necessarily a good deal - in terms of economics or service.
Another potentially important opportunity cost is the diversion of bright men and women from the military. The end of the Cold War has sharply cut recruiting needs, but it has also reduced the perceived national need. As a result, the services have had greater difficulty in attracting quality recruits. Yet various programs of educational benefits have always been an important vehicle for attracting college-capable youth into the military. Providing similar benefits for civilian service is likely to hinder recruiting for what remains the most fundamental form of national service - defending the nation. Surveys have found that a majority of potential recruits would consider joining AmeriCorps rather than the armed forces because they see it as a better way to gain educational assistance.

Of course, many worthwhile service work remains to be done across the country. But government often stands in the way of private individuals and groups who want to help. Such barriers should be stripped away, yet the Corporation and its activities may divert attention from the ways the government hinders private provision of important social services. Minimum wage laws effectively forbid the hiring of dedicated but unskilled people; any increase will make this problem worse. Restrictions on paratransit operations limit private transportation for the disabled. Regulations also harm other forms of volunteerism. Health regulations prevent restaurants in Los Angeles and elsewhere from donating food to the hungry, for instance. In short, in many cases important needs are unmet precisely because of perverse government policy.

**Targeting Needs**

To the extent that serious social problems remain, narrowly targeted responses are most likely to be effective. That is, it would be better to find a way to attract several thousand people to help care for the terminally ill than to lump that task in with teaching, painting buildings, changing light bulbs, administrative work, and scores of other jobs to be solved by a force of tens or hundreds of thousands. So far the program has had decidedly mixed results. Among the dubious successes and apparent flops: in California English classes were cancelled for lack of interest and a health care fair was badly bungled; volunteers in one Flor-
ida program complained that they were used for publicity purposes; Ameri-
Corps members involved with the Georgia Peach Corps spent much of their time
training, traveling, and playing computer games; participants in one Baltimore
program provided condom education; Northeastern University won money for
an initiative to promote athletics; the Green Corps devoted 55 participants to
“training the next generation of environmental leaders”; and more.

Further, what purpose, one wonders, does a “RapidResponse Corps” fulfill
when a major federal agency, FEMA, and large private organizations, like the
Red Cross and Salvation Army, already exist to meet the same needs? Talk of re-
spending to “unmet human needs,” as does the Corporation, is a good sound
bite but is meaningless in practice.

Even the best of purposes may not be well-served by AmeriCorps volunteers.
The willingness to support everything makes it less likely that participants will
be well-trained for specific tasks. AmeriCorps personnel aren’t necessarily the
best people to be handling disaster relief. Even what might appear to be simple
tasks often aren’t. One participant in Orange County, California, worried that
she wasn’t really prepared to act as a Big Sister to a 19-year-old with a neurolog-
ical condition. The volunteer said that she could only hope that she did some
good.

In any case, local organizations are not likely to use essentially “free” labor
from the federal government as efficiently as if they had to cover the costs
themselves: staff members will have an almost irresistible temptation to assign
work they prefer not to do to outsiders subsidized by the federal government.
For example, in Orange County, California, the Civic Center Barrio Housing
Corp. used AmeriCorps personnel to solicit donations and handle paperwork.

**Jobs That Shouldn’t Be Filled**

In fact, there are good reasons why many tasks that are not performed today
are not performed, a fact ignored by national service advocates. But the availa-
bility of federal money will usually create a pressing “need.” A similar problem
of perverse incentives has been evident in federal grant programs which allow
states to use national money for projects without much local contribution. Observes David Luberoff, of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, “One of the lessons of the interstate project is that in general ... if you don’t require that states put up a reasonable amount of the cost, you run the risk of building stuff that is probably not that cost-effective.”

Real volunteerism, in contrast, works because the recipient organization needs to offer valuable enough work to attract well-motivated volunteers. But Corporation personnel may be more interested in working off a school debt than “serving,” and especially than serving in their particular position. In fact, the government risks subverting the volunteer spirit by paying participants too much. AmeriCorps members receive benefits of roughly $13,000 - actually a bit higher in effect, since the educational voucher and other fringe benefits are not taxed. And some AmeriCorps personnel have ended up with more: those at the Department of Agriculture earned more than $17,000 in annual benefits. As a result, “service” is a better financial deal than many entry-level jobs. (Unit Leaders and Assistant Unit Leaders may even receive overtime pay, which seems rather incongruous for a “volunteer” program.) Thus, as discussions with participants indicate, some students see national service as a financially remunerative job option, not a unique opportunity to help the community. Indeed, much of the President’s pitch during the campaign was framed in terms of naked self-interest: earning credit towards college tuition.

The role of politics is also a concern. Despite the promise of the Corporation to be a lean machine, its staff exceeds 500. The initial cost per participant was about $27,000, which seems high for what is supposed to be a program of “volunteers.” Of course, only about 80 percent of that was federal money, but it is still no bargain to spend $27,000 of society’s money per “volunteer.”

Even worse, over the long-term federal involvement is likely to politicize much of what is now private humanitarian activity. A report issued last year by Public/Private Ventures noted that the Corporation has taken a very aggressive role
in shaping service programs. So far, in contrast, state commissions, which are supposed to help ensure that the overall effort meets local needs, appear to have little influence.

**Institutional Aggrandizement**

And the Corporation itself has its own agenda which it is willing to promote - it has produced a media guide, for instance, which emphasizes marketing. Moreover, one has to wonder if the desire for favorable publicity was a factor in the decision to support the “AmeriCorps Team for the Games” during the Olympics in Atlanta. The group is going to perform tasks typically associated with uncompensated volunteerism, like driving those with disabilities; board members were particularly sensitive about use of the word “games” in the project’s name.

A program offering the free (or heavily-subsidized) assistance of young people is also likely to provide a political honey pot for local and state officials and groups alike. And government will be forced to judge the relative worth of different service activities. Politicizing the volunteer process in this way poses a number of problems. For instance, the most effective social programs have a religious content, yet enterprises that desire to emphasize spiritual concerns - the Salvation Army, to name an obvious one - are disfavored by government. Equally problematic is the role of controversial political, sexual, and social lobbies.

The Corporation rightly came under severe criticism for funding the ACORN housing program which, though it purports to be independent of ACORN, is inextricably linked with what is a partisan, left-wing organization. In Denver the Cole Coalition forced AmeriCorps members to draft and distribute political fliers. Federally-funded “volunteers” were bused to an Earth Day rally in Havre de Grace, Maryland, last year. The Arizona Border Volunteer Corps used an AmeriCorps-funded newsletter to encourage its members to lobby for the program.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that government grants have been misused for political purposes. CETA, with its system of federal funding for local jobs, turned into a veritable patronage machine in some cities. According to investigative reporter James Bovard, at one point “in Washington, D.C., almost half the City Council staff was on the CETA rolls.” Similar problems are likely to
continue to bedevil the Corporation as it funds activist groups across the nation. Indeed, the problem is inevitable so long as government answers the question, what is service?

Finally, money has to be an issue. The federal government continues to face the prospect of continuing huge deficits. The only way to achieve fiscal responsibility is to eliminate lower-priority programs. Although Congress has so far limited the Corporation to less than a half billion dollars annually, the political dynamic of concentrated beneficiary groups versus the larger taxpaying public has generally led to expanded benefits over time. But even if the program stays relatively small, it will still be difficult to justify spending for a program that, despite its laudable purpose, is generating such questionable benefits.

What we need instead is a renewed commitment to individual service. People, in community with one another, need to help meet the many serious social problems that beset us. There is a role for government: officials should commit themselves to a strategy of “first, do no harm.” We need to eliminate public programs that discourage personal independence and self-responsibility, disrupt and destroy communities and families, and hinder the attempts of people and groups to respond to problems around them. But the private activism that follows needs neither oversight nor subsidy from Uncle Sam. Some of the volunteerism can be part-time and some full-time; some can take place within the family, some within churches, and some within civic and community groups. Some may occur through profit-making ventures. The point is, there is no pre-determined definition of service, pattern of appropriate involvement, set of “needs” to be met or tasks to be fulfilled. America’s strength is its combination of humanitarian impulses, private association, and diversity. We need service, not “national” service.
Doug Bandow on the draft

By Doug Bandow

In the early days of the Reagan administration, military manpower was a critical issue because the all-volunteer force was having problems with quality and discipline. So it was a major concern of the Reagan administration to get the force right and to get it working. And that has happened. We've got ourselves a very high-quality force. The volunteer military is working very well.

Nevertheless, we are hearing some low but unmistakable calls for a return to conscription. We have a number of representatives and senators—Rep. Steve Buyer, chairman of the National Security Committee's Subcommittee on Personnel; John Murtha, ranking minority member on the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Defense; Norm Sisisky, senior member of the House National Security Committee; and Sen. John McCain, potential presidential candidate—who are talking about the potential need for conscription. This seems an odd time to be talking about conscription. The United States is at peace. America's enemies are pitiful. Our allies dominate the globe. The normal reasons for conscription just aren't there.

Nevertheless, a potpourri of reasons for conscription has been cited:

- High payroll and recruiting expenses.

- Poor recruiting results: Both the quality and the number of recruits are problems. The Navy, in particular, fell 7,000 recruits short last year.
• Poor retention—for example, of pilots and certain other skill grades.

• The lack of connection between political leaders and the military.

• The notion that young people today lack discipline. We no longer have some of the virtues that were inculcated by the military in the past.

None of those arguments is new. They’ve all been around for a long time, and they’re not any better today than they were 10 or 20 years ago.

Conscription is not cheaper than a volunteer force. I remember debating Gen. William Westmoreland, who said that, with a draft, you just pay soldiers cigarette money. This was a constant mantra in the early Reagan years: conscription is a great way to save money. But it doesn’t reduce costs; it shifts costs. What you’re saying is that a cost that the entire society cannot bear should be shifted to 18-year-olds. That’s a curious tactic for a free society. Moreover, there are new costs—the costs of the conscription apparatus, of avoidance activities, of economic dislocations. Look at the Vietnam War, when we saw the creation of an entire industry for avoiding conscription.

Then there’s the issue of quality. If you look at any measure of quality today, our volunteer force is far superior to a conscript force, and there’s a very real reason for that. The question is, who wants to be in the military? In a conscript military you have people who don’t want to be there. Today you can discharge somebody who abuses drugs. You can refuse to bring in lower quality recruits. It’s much harder if you have a conscript force to make those decisions because restrictions on drugs and so on just give unhappy conscripts a way out. That’s a completely different dynamic in terms of discipline and all the measures that are important to an effective force.

Conscription has nothing to do with careerism. Conscription brings you first-termers, not long-term soldiers. Indeed, conscripts are far less likely to reenlist than are volunteers. The extra difficulty of maintaining a high-tempo military with all the new commitments that we’ve been making is reflected, for example,
by the reenlistment rate of people who have been in Bosnia. If you factor out higher bonuses, you find lower retention rates. A draft would exacerbate the problem.

Some people are concerned that a volunteer military can become a Praetorian Guard that is more dangerous than an army drawn from the whole people. It can be used for undemocratic purposes. But our history disproves this argument. The Vietnam War showed how a conscription apparatus run by the government can be maintained even in the face of an increasingly unpopular war. It took years of protests to stop the draft because the costs were immediately felt by 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds as opposed to the entire society.

A somewhat opposite claim for conscription today is that it's harder to get soldiers to enlist and reenlist to fulfill our commitments around the world. People aren't thrilled about patrolling Kosovo or Bosnia or Somalia. So the only way we can maintain those commitments is to have conscription. One of the virtues of a volunteer force is that it shuts off unpopular foreign commitments. If people don't want to serve in such deployments, they don't show up in the military. That puts a real check on government policy.

It has been alleged that we have a military that is not representative of society, so we need conscription to bring in college-educated people and others who are escaping their duty today. There's a whole tangle of issues here. Many people who talk about the number of college grads in the military ignore the officers and look just at the enlisted force, which gives a strange view of the armed forces. Today our military is very much middle class and weighted toward the middle. It has a slightly higher percentage of minorities than the general population. It has a much higher percentage of high school graduates. It has a somewhat lower percentage of college graduates. What we have is, not a force that is dramatically out of keeping with America, but one that is representative of middle America.

Ironically, conscription would force people who don't want to be in the military to serve and supplant people who do want to be there. That's a stupid policy if you want a force that's effective, a force that can fight wars, a force that will do
the job that it’s supposed to do. And to go out and take 5 or 10 percent of 18-year-old men—because realistically we’re talking about conscription of men only—would be grossly unfair. I find the argument for conscription unconvincing, but it might be at least plausible if conscription were universal—everyone served—and we were, in fact, fighting a serious threat to our national survival. But it’s very hard to see that today. There is no such threat. And the notion of drafting 5 or 10 percent of 18-year-olds and calling that a fair process betrays a gross misunderstanding of what fairness is all about.

There are only two conceivable arguments, then, for conscription today. One is that it’s the only way to fulfill all the grand new commitments that we have. The problem is that most of those commitments are frivolous at best. What happens in the Kosovo civil war is not a matter of great security concern to the United States. It’s a tragic situation—I visited there back in June. But it is not an issue that requires drafting young Americans and sending them off to settle a quarrel that goes back centuries. The only acceptable reason for foreign interventions is that they defend vital American interests. The interventions in Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti do not. That somehow we might feel good about ourselves because we are wandering around the globe doing costly and dangerous things that have very little to do with American national security is not sufficient.

The other argument that has to be taken seriously is based on the notion of moral duty, the sense that we owe something, and that young people today are not paying their debt. We have important duties to one another, but those duties are owed to our overall society, not to the government. And they are owed by everyone, not just 18-year-olds. To my mind, a voluntary military is the right way to share the defense burden. We issue a call for patriotic young people to come forward, and everyone helps pay for that military. Everyone supports that military, and we withhold from the government the extraordinary power to order somebody to go fight and die. And that’s the proper way for a free society to defend itself.
Still, some military manpower problems exist. What should we do? First and foremost we should drop commitments that aren't important for American security. We also need to look at benefits—in a booming economy we may well have to pay soldiers more. We may need enhanced benefits for pilots and particular skill grades. We need to recognize that military life is very tough. I spent two weeks in Britain with my sister and her family. My brother-in-law, who is in the Air Force, is stationed near London. It's a hard life, especially when you're overseas. We need to take that into account. We also need to view a military career as worthwhile and to speak well of our armed services.

But we must recognize that the military is the means to an end. It's not an end in itself. Defending a free society, built on respect for individual liberty, is the reason that we have a military. That, ultimately, is the most important reason to reject conscription. It is simply incompatible with the government's duty to protect our liberty. A draft would destroy the very values that government is supposed to be defending.


*Full Issue in PDF (16 pp., 317 Kb)*

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Citizenship and Civic Attachment: The Case for a Universal Service Lottery
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Perspective

Citizenship and Civic Attachment: The Case for a Universal Service Lottery

The concept of the “civic” encompasses both the ensemble of voluntary associations and informal social attachments known as “civil society” and the official institutions and processes of political life. Citizenship is the name that we give to formal membership in a particular civic community. It is a legal status that carries with it a bundle of legal rights and duties. While informal membership in civil society does not have a generally accepted name, and its defining characteristics are fuzzy, it involves a special sense of identification with other members and the belief that, in some important respects, their fate is intertwined with one’s own.

During the past decade, many scholars have argued that civic membership, both formal and informal, is weaker than it once was and should be. As our society becomes more divided along lines of income and social status, as well as partisanship and ideology, Americans increasingly are inclined to associate with the people they resemble most closely. At the same time, citizenship increasingly is understood as individual liberty without reciprocal responsibility. I believe that some form of mandatory service to the civic community could ameliorate both of these problems.

The Most Familiar Kind of Mandatory Service: The Military Draft

The Vietnam-era military draft was widely regarded as arbitrary and unfair, and it was held responsible for disension within the military as well as in the wider society. In the immediate wake of its disaster in Vietnam, the United States made a historic decision to end the draft and institute an all-volunteer force (AVF). On one level, it is hard to argue with success. The formula of high-quality volunteers plus intensive training plus investment in state-of-the-art equipment has produced by far the most formidable military in history. Evidence suggests that the military’s performance in recent decades has bolstered public trust and confidence.

The organization of the military is embedded in larger issues of citizenship and civic life, however, and it is along these dimensions that our current arrangements fall short. First, the AVF reflects, and has contributed to the development of, what I call optional citizenship—the belief that being a citizen involves rights without responsibilities and that we need do for our country only what we choose to do.

Second, the AVF contributes to what I call spectatorial citizenship—the premise that good citizens need not be active but can watch others doing the public’s work on their behalf. This spectatorial outlook makes it possible to decouple the question of whether we as a nation should do X from the question of whether I would do or participate in X.

Finally, the AVF has contributed to a widening gap between the orientation and experience of military personnel and that of the citizenry as a whole. Since the inauguration of the AVF, the officer corps has become far more conservative politically than the electorate. More troubling still, the share of elected officials with military experience has declined sharply. Lack of such experience does not necessarily imply hostility to the military. Rather, it means ignorance of the nature of military service, as well as diminished capacity and confidence to assess critically the claims that military leaders make.

I do not favor reinstituting anything like the Vietnam-era draft. It is hard to see how a reasonable person could prefer that fatally flawed system to today’s arrangements. The question, rather, is whether a feasible system of universal service could preserve the gains of the past four decades while more effectively promoting active, responsible citizenship across our social, economic, and political differences.

Does Mandatory Service Invade the Sphere of Individual Liberty?

Some opponents of mandatory service stumble at the threshold: it constitutes, they argue, an impermissible invasion of individual liberty. In On Liberty, John...
Stuart Mill delivered what I regard as a persuasive response to this objection:

[E]veryone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct toward the rest. This conduct consists, first, in not injuring the interests of one another, or rather certain interests which, either by express legal provision or by tacit understanding, ought to be considered as rights; and secondly, in each person's bearing his share (to be fixed on some equitable principle) of the labors and sacrifices incurred for defending the society or its members from injury and molestation. These conditions society is justified in enforcing at all costs to those who endeavor to withhold fulfillment.

There are many examples of such linkage in the contemporary United States. To sustain the burdens of society and receive its benefits, those of us who can must pay taxes. The right to receive GI Bill benefits is contingent on the fulfillment of military duties. Even the right to vote (and what could be more central to citizenship than that?) rests on law-abidingness; most states disenfranchise convicted felons, at least while they are incarcerated. It takes real work, moreover, to sustain political institutions that we often take for granted. If citizens did not perform jury duty when summoned, trial by a jury of one's peers would become an empty promise.

Civic Duty and Social Solidarity

During World War II and the Korean War—indeed, through the early 1960s—roughly equal percentages of high school and college graduates performed military service, and about one-third of college graduates were in the enlisted (i.e., nonofficer) ranks. Today, enlisted men and women are rarely college graduates, and elite colleges other than the service academies are far less likely to produce military personnel of any rank, officer or enlisted.

Many have argued that this skew is a virtue, not a vice, because the military extends good career opportunities to young men and women whose prospects are otherwise limited. There is something to this argument, of course. But the current system purchases social mobility at the expense of social integration. Today's privileged young people tend to grow up hermetically sealed from the rest of society, and episodic volunteering in soup kitchens does not really break the seal.

The separation is more than economic. The sons and daughters of the upper middle classes grow up in a cultural milieu in which certain assumptions tend to be taken for granted. Often, college experiences reinforce these assumptions rather than challenging them. As a Vietnam-era draftee, I can attest to the role that military service plays in expanding mutual awareness across cultural lines. This process is not always pleasant or pretty, but it does pull against the smug incomprehension of the privileged.

American democracy today combines a high level of legal equality with high and rising levels of economic inequality and social stratification. It is unlikely that democratic leaders drawn disproportionately from the upper ranks of our society will adequately understand the experiences or respect the contributions of those from the lower. Integrative experiences are needed to bring this about. In a society in which economic class largely determines residence and education and in which the fortunate will not willingly associate with the rest, only institutions that cut across class lines can hope to provide such experiences. If some kind of sustained mandatory service does not fill this bill, it is hard to see what will.

Mandatory Service: A Concrete Proposal

The concept of universal service with civilian as well as military components is hardly revolutionary. It played a central role in postwar Germany and Israel, among others. In other cases, such as Mexico, university students are required to perform a significant period of service as a condition of graduation. The question is not whether it would be morally legitimate for the United States to move in this direction, but whether it would be feasible and effective.

To explore this question, let me put a concrete proposal on the table. To the extent that practical circumstances permit, we should move toward a system of universal 18-month service for all high school graduates (and, in the case of dropouts, all 18-year-olds) who are capable of performing it. Those subject to this system would choose either military or full-time civilian service, receiving in return a modest stipend. Fiscal realities, military quotas, and the limited capacity of civic institutions to make good use of young volunteers would certainly slow the implementation of this program and might well impose a permanent ceiling on its scope. The best response to these constraints would be a lottery to which all are exposed and from which none except those who are unfit to serve can escape. Some would end up serving, while others would not, but at least everyone would be treated equally.

To extend service opportunities to more young adults, Congress could expand AmeriCorps (the Clinton-era national and community service program). The public strongly supports the basic tenet of this program that young people should have the opportunity to serve full time for a year or two and earn significant postservice benefits that can be used for higher education and advanced technical training.

I do not want to oversell the civic benefits that might accrue from a universal service lottery. Still, enhanced contact between the sons and daughters of the privileged upper middle class and the rest of society would represent real progress. Moreover, some of our nation's best social scientists see a link between World War II-era military service and that generation's productive dedication to our postwar civic life. If implementing my proposal could yield even a fraction of these civic dividends, it would be worth the price.
There's more to citizenship than simply asserting your rights.

By William A. Galston, Contributor   Oct. 19, 2010

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There are different kinds of rights. Some we enjoy simply because we are human beings—the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, for example. Others are linked to a particular status: American citizens possess some rights that noncitizens do not. We do not have to earn human rights, and no one can take them away from us. By contrast, we may have to perform specified acts to obtain citizenship rights (that's what naturalization laws are about), and we may act in ways that lead to forfeiture of some of those rights, at least temporarily, as in the case of convicted criminals not being allowed to vote.

Citizenship, then, is a package of rights and responsibilities. But there is no theory that tells us exactly what is or should be in that package. It's up to us to decide.

In recent decades, we've expanded old rights and created new ones. While often controversial, that process has in many respects made us a fairer and more inclusive society. We've spent less time on the other half of the equation—the responsibilities that citizens share for the well-being of others and for the country as a whole. It's time to redress the balance.

Citizens' due. Some responsibilities are not controversial, such as obeying duly enacted laws. Another example: Most people recognize that the right to trial by a jury of our peers exists only on paper unless we appear for jury duty when summoned. No doubt the summons can arrive at an inconvenient moment, but we can't take the position that mandatory jury duty is an illegitimate limitation on individual liberty without threatening the basis of our justice system.
In the past, we have regarded military service as a responsibility of citizenship. After Vietnam, in which the fairness of the draft emerged as a major issue, we turned toward all-volunteer armed forces. In many respects the shift has been a success. The military has attracted a steady stream of highly qualified recruits, and the skills and discipline of our armed forces have never been higher.

But we have paid a price: A small percentage of Americans do the fighting for the rest of us, creating a wedge between military professionals and average citizens. Many elected officials lack military experience, and few have children in uniform. For most of us, defending our country is something we watch on television. Little in the lives of young Americans helps them understand that citizenship is more than a list of rights to which they are entitled.

There’s something we can do about this. Suppose that upon high school graduation or reaching the age of 18, every American were given a randomly selected lottery number based on their birthday and that a certain portion were selected for civic service. They would be offered a choice—two years of either military or civilian service. Those doing civilian service would receive stipends large enough to pay living expenses, as members of AmeriCorps do today.

This system would produce a number of desirable results for the country, as it would benefit from such service, but also for those who perform it. By the time they entered high school, young people would know that they might be asked to serve, and they would begin to talk to their older siblings or relatives about their options. They would begin to understand that there’s more to citizenship than simply asserting their rights.
Those called to serve would spend time helping their country in their communities, in hard-hit areas far from home, or overseas. They would meet people unlike themselves, members of other classes and ethnic groups, with different aspirations. Some would begin to reshape their conceptions of how to spend their lives, opting for military, nonprofit, or public service careers. Most would form enduring friendships; all would have formative experiences they would never forget.

Some will object to this proposal as an unwarranted limitation on liberty, and surveys probably would show a majority of high school students opposed. But we have to ask ourselves whether we're satisfied with the condition of American citizenship today and, if not, how we're prepared to strengthen it. This is a national debate we should all welcome.

*Read why compulsory national service is a bad idea, by Matthew Spalding, director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at the Heritage Foundation.*

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Step Forward America!
A Case for a National Service Program - Second edition
by Ted Hollander

Published Jun 26, 2017
269 Pages
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Ted Hollander

Mr. Hollander graduated from Harvard University in 1957, and after a tour of duty in the Marine Corps, joined the Presray Corporation, which currently manufactures watertight and airtight doors and barriers for flood protection and hazard containment. He currently serves as Presray’s board chairman, and he is past chairman of the New Milford Hospital in Connecticut. You may contact Mr. Hollander by E-mail at tedhol@charter.net.
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It Doesn’t Matter Who Controls the Military
Lucy Steigerwald
There are more than 8,000 troops still fighting in America’s longest war. According to Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, we need about 3,000 more. The idea that 3,000 troops will change a decade and a half long stalemate seems dubious, but that’s the number Mattis suggests. Others in the administration are reportedly arguing that that number is too small.

The war in Afghanistan seems to be never-ending, but now something is a little different. The military is making the calls more directly. That’s not how it generally works. The Constitution specifies that civilians will control the armed forces. This has been laid out more overtly in subsequent legislation.

Congress is supposed to vote on war, though that only happens sometimes, and executives feel free to use drones, missiles, and Special Forces in countless countries on which the US has never declared war.

There are a lot of "supposed tos" that aren’t happening in US foreign policy. The president decides to go to war, and congress is too timid to enforce their ability to vote on it. The post-Richard Nixon War Powers Resolution has never once been actually used against a commander in chief who engaged troops or bombs or drones, or some combination, without approval from the legislative branch.

Few expected Donald Trump to be a micromanager of the armed forces. During his campaign, the future president talked the occasional good game about the benefits of the military being less of a presence in the world. When real world politics caught up with him, that supposed skepticism towards America’s past military adventures started to look a lot more like trusting the military to handle their own affairs – and that’s the most generous way of putting it.

To some, that’s a positive step. Trump sure thinks so. In April he said that the armed forces were making their own decisions on the ground and "frankly, that’s why they’ve been so successful lately."

Who knows the military better than the military? They’re the ones in combat, and on the ground. They are not some suited, distant figure who doesn’t know about what they speak. But they are also now the ones
choosing to do things like use the most powerful bomb in the US arsenal, as Gen. John Nicholson did in Afghanistan in April. Meanwhile, Mattis was so recently in the military that he needed special permission to take the job as defense secretary. He is very experienced in this area then, but he also is particularly far from being a civilian. A Marine Corp general, Mattis got special permission to take the job after only being out of the military for three years, instead of the usually required seven.

Some conservatives seem relatively happy that the military is being given organic control of the situation, whatever that may be. The right mostly assumes that the armed forces know best – unless, they're the types who have seen wars, and have some uncomfortable feedback about how maybe we should stop having them. On the other hand, liberals can get uncomfortable with what appears to be a lack of balance of powers. Nobody wants a military junta. Civilian control of the military feels safer, tethered. Perhaps it is better than the alternative, but it hasn’t stopped any of the myriad wars the US had enthusiastically fought over the past 110 years.

Maybe the military making its own choices will be an improvement over the status quo. There could be fewer opportunities for executive cowboying across the globe. The US armed forces have plenty to occupy their time with on the ground in Afghanistan, and dabbling in Iraq, Syria, and a half dozen other countries with a drone presence – not to mention, the more than 100 nations that host military bases or troops.

Sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that because our volunteer army makes wars easier to ignore, bringing back conscription would somehow stop this. The most common example to turn to is Vietnam. Though the draft provoked mass outrage, it also didn’t magically end the conflict – not before some 60,000 Americans and 2 million Vietnamese were killed.

Similarly, here is the fundamental distraction that lies at the heart of this conversation about who should decide which wars to fight, and how. At the end of the day, new wars will be fought if someone wants them – or they will simply be continued ad nauseum as in Afghanistan. There are arguments to advocate for Congressional votes on war, but democracy exercised by 100 or 435 people does not prove that it is a just, judicious,
or moral endeavor, any more than when it’s a whim by a bully pulpit president. A bad war is a bad war, and just about every war imaginable leads to dire consequences, and civilian casualties.

There are arguments to make in favor of harm reduction in war-making policy. Congress, again, is divided and mostly unable to come to a consensus. That sounds like a decent, practical stopping method for wars. But again, it’s not a moral or even a practical one. Bad wars have been voted upon. Wars justified on paper turn to dead innocent people. No matter who is the mastermind, war is a bad idea justified by ignorance of its terrible cost.

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APRIL 21, 2017

Stop Suggesting Mandatory National Service as a Fix for America’s Problems

by LUCY STEIGERWALD

There’s a season for it—the thinkpieces, the brave suggestions, the crawling out to the edge of the limb and saying, yes, I have the answer, we should force America’s youth to come together and serve in some collective cause.

In spite of the right’s fondness for military service and such pageantry, it’s usually the left or the more accurately, the muddy, authoritarian center that suggest this kind of thing. Progressives worry over wars, but they don’t worry enough over the civilian casualties in other countries, or the blowback in America. Sometimes they become overly concerned, instead about how poor people join the military, and rich, privileged people don’t. Sometimes they even pull up an extra deep argument, dust the dirt off of it, and say, gee, maybe the draft can stop wars! Charlie Rangel spent decades in congress trying to bring back conscription for that very reason.

And then the thought leaders—the columnists who have to waste space in the New York Times or various blogs each week—they need to get in on this brainstorming. America is broken. America is fractured and overly politicised, and we could be on the brink of a God damned civil war. This is dangerous. Also dangerous is the fact that young people aged,
say, 18-25, just keep on choosing their own paths in life. Sometimes they get married or do important things that contribute to society's togetherness. But sometimes they just eat exotic food and become polyamorists or or Instagrammers. We have to do something.

Why not bring back the draft? What was once the weight on the back of every young man—the fear that he would have to kill or be killed for a broadly-defined goal of patriotism, nationalism, service, whether he wanted to or not—is now gone. Youths are not grinding themselves down under nationalist knapsacks nearly as much as they did before, in the days that were good.

Sometimes a writer, politician, thinker, considers bringing back a draft without any kind of spit shine on it. Just, make those damn kids join the military the ways their pappies did, so they stop playing video games! Plus, after 58,000 of those kids died in Vietnam—along with about two million Vietnamese—we stopped the war! The draft works!

Most advocates for this tepidly-argued collectivism, however, take a different tact. They want it to be “national service” instead of mean old conscription. They are happy to offer options and choices, provided that engaging in this service is a necessary part of graduation from highschool or college. At best they are the movie theaters who said you were free to defy the Hays Code if you had your own theater, and weren’t run out of town by moralists, and didn’t want to hire any known American actors, etc. At worse, they are mini dictators who, even if they don’t realize it, are simply deeply offended by the fact that American young people are making their own choices and living their own lives. They are central planners not of cities, but of human action and motivation.

Bloomberg View’s Noah Smith is one person who has no self-awareness about how many stock writers from Thomas Friedman to David Brooks, to this guy who wrote a letter, and who used to be a columnist, have already suggested national
service as a cure for the nation’s ills, both real and imagined. Yes, as Smith notes, people in South Korea and Israel and other places are made to join the army. There is also what amounts to mandatory reserves training in places like Switzerland. Though all of those coercive policies are bad, certainly it’s a little more of a moral quandary to serve in Israel and be a real, fighting soldier, than it is to be made to do basic training in Switzerland, then come home and go back to your normal life (unless and until Germany invades).

In America, the draft was put to rest in 1973. Men are still made to register with the Selective Service, however. Though the changes of the US bringing back a military draft are not high, thanks to the potential outcry, as well as the technical skills needed for most army recruits in 2017, that registration still hangs over the heads of every young male citizen. Your choices are on loan from the military, it says. You can have your life for now, but if we need it, you will know.

Smith and his ilk are terrified of a polarized nation. At its worst point, yes, screaming cable news divides could transform into real wars. But as scared as we all are of fighting with relatives on Facebook, or being trolled by Twitter Nazis, that kind of unpleasantness is far from a real conflict as you can get, until it actually isn't (and it currently is).

Furthermore, Smith happily suggests that his plan would lead to “national unity.” He gives a startlingly shallow nod to the libertarian argument against coercive national service by saying, uh, people could get out of it if they wanted to become high school drop-outs. He doesn't actually counter the Milton Friedman quote he mentions, which dubs drafted soldiers “slaves.” Smith simply says, well, libertarians might object to this grand scheme, but they are wrong. Best of all, he pays not even a whisper of lip service to the fact that all of human history teaches us that “national unity” can have some deadly side effects.
More paragraphs could be devoted to flipping Smith's logic over, and then prodding its insides. Unfortunately, he doesn't have enough to bother with. He has the fact that the country is, it seems, at odds. Occasionally, being at odds leads to violence and even wars. And also young people don't work that much, and Smith has a chart to prove that. Ergo, national service it is.

This is a bad piece. It's a weak, lazy spasm towards collectivism to solve the nation's problems (real, imagined, and exaggerated). The draft and national service are blessedly unpopular. Rangel retired from congress without his pet project of bringing it back ever coming close to fruition.

And yet, Smith's piece deserves a response if only because it encapsulates a dangerous, monstrously huge idea—that the individual belongs to the state. More particularly, the young individual of a certain age belongs to the state. With all of our concern over being bogged down in wars, or filling our prisons coming into the public sphere, this notion that we have to suffer or struggle in order to grow up remains.

Millennials are the worst, right? They're lazy, and they're entitled. And yet, they're rarely the ones demanding that the younger generation be pressed into servitude.

This attitude has killed. It has killed thousands and thousands of people. It is Teddy Roosevelt worrying about a soft nation that had tamed the West. It is the fear that American manhood would atrophy without natives to shoot, so let's go to the Philippines, to Cuba, anywhere where our young men can grow strong on righteous suffering and contrived acts of bravery. We mustn't let them turn feminine and soft.

Political polarization is a concern. At its peak, it can destroy a country. But forcible national unity destroys individuals, and has hacked its way across the world in conquest and conflicts for centuries. Placing youth into the mouth of the nation for sacrifice is swapping the potential problem of polarization...
for the definite one of unification—and that’s a problem much more likely to lead to tyranny and war.

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