

# Compulsory National Service Would Undermine the American Character

Government-directed “volunteerism” belittles authentic volunteerism.

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Americans have always exhibited a strong sense of compassion toward their neighbors and those less fortunate. Volunteerism, what Alexis de Tocqueville called our "spirit of association," is in the national DNA. Policymakers have long recognized the importance of citizen engagement and philanthropic volunteerism to a thriving civil society.

But government should not attempt to compel its citizens to engage in these worthwhile endeavors. Its proper role is merely to energize a culture of personal commitment to those in need as a way of strengthening the natural grounds of citizenship and community.

The goal of citizen service should be to protect and strengthen civil society. Tocqueville observed that one of American society's great virtues is its tendency to create local voluntary associations to meet the most important needs of the people. Other nations handled these needs through and by government; but in the United States, private individuals of all ages, conditions, and dispositions formed associations.

"I have often admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeed in proposing a common object to the exertions of a great many men, and in getting them voluntarily to pursue it," Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*. "What political power could ever carry on the vast multitude of lesser undertakings which American citizens perform every day, with the assistance of the principle of association?" He added, "The more [government] stands in the place of associations, the more will individuals, losing the notion of combining together, require its assistance."

The traditional associations of civil society—families, schools, churches, and voluntary organizations—sustain social order and public morality, moderate individualism and materialism, and cultivate personal character.

The concept of national service is altogether different.

Government programs, like AmeriCorps, do not encourage sacrificial giving of time and resources, which has the character-forming effect of teaching compassionate responsibility. Instead, they suggest that "volunteerism" could just as well mean a paid job with benefits—or worse, a mandatory obligation. Such government-directed "volunteerism," by encouraging

individuals and associations to look to the state as the provider of assistance, belittles authentic volunteerism, the process by which individuals choose without economic benefit to help their neighbor. It also threatens the independence of the private associations that have always been the engine of moral and social reform in America.

**The American way.** The call to service is best answered not by government, but by the citizens in voluntary associations, local communities, and private organizations that are at the heart of American charity. Last year alone, 63.4 million Americans volunteered, well exceeding the 500,000 involved in national service. Total private giving is estimated to exceed \$300 billion a year, with individuals accounting for 75 percent of that, overwhelming the Corporation for National and Community Service's budget of just under \$1 billion. One organization, the Knights of Columbus, made charitable contributions of over \$150 million and generated some 70 million volunteer service hours. The depth of private American charity and the vast potential to expand these great activities ought to be highlighted and strongly encouraged.

These private voluntary organizations thrive today precisely because their work is privately organized, highly decentralized, and directly focused on community needs and local conditions.

At a time when Americans are volunteering in unprecedented numbers (and ways), policymakers should reject the model of government-centered national service, which undermines the American character and threatens to weaken private associations.

The better course is to bolster the call to service by encouraging a true and voluntary citizen service that is consistent with principles of self-government, is harmonious with a vibrant civil society, and promotes a service agenda based on personal responsibility, independent citizenship, and civic volunteerism.