



**NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND  
PUBLIC SERVICE  
MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

**Subject: Academic Thought Leaders Discussion  
May 11, 2018**

The following is a record of a meeting with Commission staff and various academic thought leaders, which took place on May 11, 2018 at the Center for Politics at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. At the meeting, participants discussed various topics relevant to service, including recommendations for its definition and barriers to engagement. The conversation was facilitated by Dr. David Gergen and Chair Joseph Heck and included all Commissioners other than Dr. Janine Davidson. This memorandum is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

**Attendees:**

- Commissioners: All except Dr. Janine Davidson
- Commission Staff: Kent Abernathy, Keri Lowry, Paul Lekas, Annie Rorem, John Lira, Jud Crane, Cristina Flores, Sandy Scott
- Academic Thought leaders:
  - Dr. Andrew Bacevich
  - Ms. Shiela Thimba
  - Mr. Gene Corbin
  - Mr. Paul Erickson
  - Ms. Ashley Spillane
  - Dr. Alan Solomont
  - Dr. Peter Levine
  - Dr. Rosabeth Kanter
  - Dr. John Della Volpe
  - Mr. David Gergen

**Key Takeaways:**

- Thought leaders discussed potential definitions for service, with some agreement that “service” is a spectrum of activities. Additional elements of the definition include collaboration, “public work,” formal organization, and discernable impact.
- Several thought leaders discussed the eroding sense of trust young people have in government, as well as their declining interest in becoming civil servants.
- Many participants discussed the value of service-learning and civics education to promote a sense of responsibility and citizenship among young people.
- Incentives for service participation were widely discussed, with several thought leaders agreeing that properly-structured incentives will increase participation more effectively than a mandatory service program.

- Some discussion revolved around the value of modifying the Selective Service System to include options other than military service.

### Meeting Discussion

**Mr. Gergen** began the meeting by welcoming attendees and stating that he could not think of a time when the conversation of service to inspire civic engagement was more urgent. He identified that a culture of national service has significant appeal, but that developing that culture will take considerable effort. Before turning over the **Chairman Heck**, he identified that the purpose of the day's gathering was to brainstorm how to develop the necessary leverage and momentum to get to a cultural expectation and ethos of service.

Participants around the table introduced themselves and their affiliations, **Chairman Heck** thanked everyone for their attendance. He commenced the meeting by stating the vision of the Commission—"Every American, inspired and eager to serve"—before offering definitions of service from the statue. He opened up the conversation by asking participants for their thoughts on the inherent value of service.

### **Value of Service**

**Dr. Solomont** referenced the robust discussion about mandatory national service that he had participated in with the Commission earlier in the week, and identified the value of civics education as a key takeaway from that conversation. He particularly referenced a civics education bill currently in front of the Massachusetts legislature, and cited the presumed value of the Florida civics education requirement (formalized by the Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education law, co-drafted by his colleague and meeting participant **Dr. Peter Levine**) in informing Parkland students about the value of civic engagement.

**Dr. Levine** concurred with **Dr. Solomont's** statements, offering his opinion that service is educative and should be a complement to academics for three key reasons: (1) It opens up opportunities for employment, particularly for individuals not pursuing a college education; (2) It can integrate diverse populations by bringing people together, an acute need "in a time of political polarization and social stratification;" and (3) It is purposive—directed at the public good—and collaborative—teaches the skills of collaboration, therefore complementing the country's individualized and competitive education system.

**Dr. Kanter** later suggested that service inspires social bonding and empathy by raising awareness of other peoples' situations. Further, she indicated service can inspire a sense of purpose and meaning, thereby promoting health and overcoming anomie.

**Ms. Thimba** noted the size of Harvard's incoming class for ROTC students, identifying it as the largest in the school's history (19). She then noted that approximately 50% of Harvard's undergraduates participate in formal service programs through the Philips Brooks House. Were the school to include all forms of civic engagement within the scope of "service," the percentage would be much higher. Her sense from the student body with which she works is that service is undermarketed, undervalued, and considered the opposite of innovation. Reflecting on the value of social entrepreneurship to her home country, she suggested the value of marketing the connection between social entrepreneurship and service.

## Definition of Service

In response to an anecdote shared by **Dr. Della Volpe**, suggesting a student who donates his hair to Locks for Love is participating in service, as well as a statistic he shared that around 2011, 64 percent of college students engaged in some kind of community service, **Chairman Heck** raised the question: “How do we define service? What are we going to ‘count’ as service?”

**Dr. Kanter** responded by suggesting that service lies on a continuum, ranging from volunteerism to full-time professional service, such as that performed by AmeriCorps volunteers. She referenced De Tocqueville’s treatise on democracy, noting it didn’t make mention of formal government so much as it referenced the value of volunteerism and civic associations as a display of American propensity to take care of one another, the work of which have since professionalized and changed into full-time jobs.

In returning to **Dr. Della Volpe**’s comment on Locks for Love, **Mr. Erickson** asked: “What’s the difference between ‘giving’ and ‘serving?’” and “Should charity be considered a form of service?” **Chairman Heck** differentiated between types of service, using his own career as an example, stating that his employment as an Emergency Room physician is not service, but a trip to foreign country to provide medical aid is.

**Dr. Levine** suggests that service may be thought of as collaborative work, with or without a paycheck. He mentioned being specifically disinclined to define it as the absence of a paycheck, indicating that this might reinforce a class divide. He further suggests that service could be defined using the phrase “public work,” a phrase used by Ghandi. Work, Dr. Levine explained, is taken seriously, while “service” may appear optional.

**Dr. Kanter** continues further on the theme of work and, specifically, skilled work. She indicated that there are very clear vocational opportunities for individuals coming out of the military, but that such opportunities are not as apparent for those coming out of AmeriCorps. She continued by suggesting that, just as the federal government has invested in the military, it should also invest in other types of service. She further added that service without a skill will always be devalued as “nice” but not “essential,” and said that for an act to be truly defined as service, it must have some discernable impact.

**Mr. Corbin** added that service requires an organized element, indicating that organized efforts engender an increased concern for others. Benefits of service, he explained, include bringing people together from all walks of life with a common goal.

**Dr. Della Volpe** stated that today’s youth are ready to serve and looking for opportunities. However, he stated, with 69 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds agreeing that public service is “honorable,” and only 29 percent agreeing that it is “appealing,” it is clear that there is a net decline in the attractiveness of public service, which correlates with a decrease in trust of the federal government. He said the shift witnessed in the latest Institute of Politics’ survey coincides with the biggest since 9/11. He further indicated that young people tend to like volunteerism because it is tangible and immediate, which they do not tend to see politics as being. The results of the survey suggest that young people are already serving but that there is a disconnect between service and political engagement. **Mr. Gergen** pointed out that, just as trust in the government is declining, interest in technology is rising. Dr. Della Volpe continues on this theme, saying that the Institute of

Politics' survey suggests that young people (ages 18 to 29) trust college administrations, Google, and Amazon more than the Supreme Court or the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Interestingly, young people do report high trust in the military and do report liking the idea of opportunities to serve their country without danger to themselves.

### **Military service**

**Dr. Bacevich** stated that a study of service requires a critical look at the military system, the foundation of which is the all-volunteer force (AVF), which he describes as a “sacred cow,” indicating that it receives reverence without criticism. Specifically, he believes that while members of the AVF serve with distinction, today's force is not effective because it is not democratic and does not conclusively achieve the country's political goals. He urged the Commission to address Americans' indifference to these realities.

In response to **Ms. Skelly's** question of whether military service is correctly, but disproportionately valued, **Dr. Bacevich** stated that while he believes military service to be the most important type of service, the country has engaged in fraudulent and ritualistic veneration of troops. If the country truly supported the troops, the public would be engaged in where troops are deployed, what they do there, and at what cost.

Later in the meeting, **Mr. Allard** asked **Dr. Bacevich** to comment further on the efficacy of the AVF, asking about its value as an operational versus strategic reserve. **Dr. Bacevich** indicated that the primary purpose of the AVF in its current form was to deter Soviet invasion of Western Europe during the Cold War. He stated that the AVF is no longer operating to defend the country or prevent war but, instead, serving as “a global police force.” He raises the question: Has our understanding of the role of the United States military changed so dramatically?

**Chairman Heck** followed up with a question: If the fulltime AVF reverts to its original concept as a “holding” force, not a global police force, is there still need for a selective service system? **Dr. Bacevich** suggested that his answer might not adequately address the full range of complexities and posed three questions in response, indicating that the answers to each significantly inform the question of selective service:

- What is the purpose of the American national security establishment?
- What is the nature of modern war?
- How do we organize the force?

With respect to the nature of modern war, **Dr. Bacevich** stated that the United States is no longer in the age of industrial warfare, as the instruments of coercion are more precise and more expensive. He also stated that warfare is increasingly asymmetric, with countries contending against militants. Finally, he stated the U.S. military has demonstrated capacity to overthrow regimes, but not to pacify countries.

**Mr. Gergen** praises **Dr. Bacevich's** reflections on the nature of warfare, but cautions against going “too far” down this path, suggesting that that the Commission is unlikely to have the resources to make that kind of inquiry.

**Dr. Solomont** suggested that the Commission can and should make a statement about the paradox of service in this country, which sees citizens thanking soldiers for serving without requiring much

contribution from civilians. He further indicates that public institutions should do more to capture the enthusiasm and interest of young people, stating that the government is currently not effectively capitalizing on this opportunity, as indicated by the stagnation or demise of national service programs.

### **Civics education**

**Mr. Gergen** asked **Dr. Solomont** to share some information about the Tufts University experiment in civic education. Dr. Solomont reported that Tufts is making an effort to prepare students to meaningfully engage in democracy, a function—he claimed—that used to be at the heart of higher education. He indicated that Tufts is working to embed in every student at Tufts a commitment to civic life, whether through national service, religious organizations, or other opportunities, and further stated that he wants all professionals to consider how best to serve their communities, nation, or the world. Since they began collecting data, he reported, Tufts has seen a 10 percent rise in seniors reporting that they have civic engagement experiences. He stated that he hopes to have an influence on all of higher education.

**Mr. Khazei** asked about how best to restore civics education, to which **Dr. Levine** indicated that state policy is critical. Dr. Levine further mentioned that students use to take courses requiring them to read their local newspapers, a course requirement that has not persisted. He suggested the need for research and development in this field, suggesting that several states had made progress in the last five years. He cited a paper he had prepared on this topic, “A Call to Action for Civilian Education.”

### **Mandatory national service**

In response to **Chairman Heck**’s question, “Should some form of service be mandatory?” a brief discussion ensued over what is truly mandatory in civic life, with agreement that taxes are compulsory for all, school is compulsory only for children to the age of 16, jury duty can be excused, and selective service registration applies only to men. **Mr. Gergen** responded that the goal of creating a culture of service is not equivalent to making everybody serve, suggesting that a “nudge” may be more effective than a mandate. He further indicated concerns with military eligibility and called the notion of creating an “ethos of service” a political mountain to climb. **Dr. Holzer** suggested there is a window for public service at the high school level, recommending the design of high school curricula that would engage volunteerism and encourage careers in government. He noted that there are many government jobs that people undertake willingly in spite of great sacrifices to income and, in some cases, life and health. He encouraged the need to open a dialogue with the media on these topics.

**Ms. Spillane** expressed skepticism over the idea of mandated service, referencing the previous conversation about youth’s distrust of government. She suggested the value of slowing increasing pressure and incentives to serve, referencing the corporate approach of building a “ladder” that eases people into action, from tweeting occasionally, to volunteering time, to organizing events. She further suggested the value of building a community for service in person, as many are motivated to do “cool stuff” offline in order to feed their online profiles.

**Mr. Corbin** noted something gets lost in the transfer in making service mandatory, and suggested the Commission focus on words like “kindness” and “community building,” saying that youth are

coming around to the idea that “kindness is cool.” He suggested broadening the current selective service system that would require individuals to register at the age of 18; this approach, which he recommended include an opt-out provision, would encourage individuals to reflect on what they will do for their country and also connect them with military and non-military service opportunities.

**Mr. Barney** asked **Mr. Gergen** whether the nudge he previously mentioned might be reregistration in a modified selective service system, which could offer more varied opportunities than military service.

**Dr. Kanter** stated that any version of the Selective Service System must include women, period. In response to the idea of mandatory service, she suggested the following reforms, short of a compulsory system: a clear opportunity structure for individuals upon leaving service; appropriately loaded incentives equivalent to the GI Bill; and better marketing of benefits and future opportunities from engaging in service. She stated that compulsion is the policy option that arises when there is not an adequate incentive structure and referenced the success of the IBM corporate service corps as well as the allure of social entrepreneurship.

**Mr. Gergen** raised the idea of connecting college or vocational training to service, suggesting an exchange of tuition reimbursement for a time spent serving, thus tying tuition to responsibility and giving back.

Concurring with **Mr. Gergen’s** idea of connecting college to service, **Mr. Erickson** suggested that service could be used as an eligibility requirement for federally-subsidized student loans. He also asked if national service could provide a path to citizenship for non-citizens, noting that the selective service system currently requires non-citizen males to register.

**Ms. Spillane** returned to the question of (mandatory) national service, suggesting that the distinction between national service and community service, or volunteerism, is not particularly clear. She also raised the question of how to encourage service across the full diversity of socioeconomic brackets. **Chairman Heck** responded by mentioning the Conservation Corps members Commissioners met on their recent trip to Denver were diverse along a number of dimensions and agreeing that this is important.

### Selective Service Modifications

**Mr. Gergen** suggested that the Selection Service System could be more effectively leveraged as a portal to adulthood or mechanism for underscoring what it means to be a citizen. **He** recommended women be required to register, too. **Chairman Heck** raised the possibility of a version of Selective Service that offers an individual a choice in how they may wish to serve their country.

**Dr. Bacevich** advocated for “something substantive” to follow an individual’s Selective Service registration, encouraging him or her to reflect on the responsibilities of being a citizen. He suggested the value of Universal Military Training (UMT), an unsuccessful late 1940s effort spearheaded by President Harry Truman to require universal training among citizens so as to

provide for the long term security of the country.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Bacevich suggested the value of a variation of this program, putting forth an idea that 18-year-olds register with the (modified) Selective Service System and participate in a locally-based, civilian version of UMT, which he suggested be called “Universal Citizenship Training”. A brief program (6 or 8 weeks) would engage youth in a conversation about the rights and obligations of citizenship, encourage participation in service, and serve as a comprehensive presentation of the rationale and opportunities for service.

### **Additional topics and final thoughts**

**Vice Chair Wada** asked for suggestion on engaging higher education in promoting the value of service, particularly public service, which seems to be increasingly discouraged by influencers at colleges and universities. **Mr. Bacevich** suggests elite institutions of higher education need to demonstrate that they value service by admitting more veterans into their undergraduate student bodies.

**Mr. Kilgannon** asked whether there is language or rhetoric the group would recommend public leaders use to make service a national theme. There was no specific response to this question.

**Dr. Della Volpe** reflected on the importance of top-down efforts to instill trust in government, cautioning against only “marshalling opportunities” for service from the bottom up.

**Dr. Holzer** urged the Commission to look at financial incentives for service, such as tax credits for volunteers, financial incentives for people in government (such as credits to send their children to college), or a universal pension system beyond social security for people in the public sector.

**Ms. Spillane** reminded the Commission to consider all the challenges with voter registration when looking at the feasibility of a mandatory service system.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v01p2/d7>.