

UNITED WE SERVE

# The Debate Over National Service

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AMERICANS ARE ALWAYS FOR NATIONAL SERVICE—except when we're not. Our public rhetoric has always laid heavy stress on the obligations of citizenship. "With rights come responsibilities" The statement rolls off the tongues of politicians without their giving it a moment's thought. "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." John F. Kennedy's words are so embedded in our civic catechism that the mere mention of the word "service" automatically calls them forth. On Veterans Day and Memorial Day, we rightly extol the valor of those "without whose sacrifices we would not enjoy our freedom." Bill Clinton praised the idea of service. George W. Bush now does the same. It is one of the few issues on which our last two presidents agree.

Yet how firm is our belief in service? There is no prospect anytime soon that we will return to a military draft—and our own military is skeptical that a draft would work. The number of politicians who support compulsory national service—the case for it is made powerfully in this issue by Robert Litan—is small. President Clinton succeeded in pushing his AmeriCorps program through Congress, building on the ideas of Will Marshall and others at the Democratic Leadership Council who sought to reward young people with stipends and scholarships for giving time to their country. But many Republicans denounced the idea as "paid volunteerism. Representative Dick Armey, the

Texas Republican, described it as "a welfare program for aspiring yuppies" that would displace "private charity with government-managed, well-paid social activism, based on the elitist assumption that community service is not now taking place."

And in truth, many Americans doubt that they or their fellow citizens actually "owe" anything to a country whose main business they see as preserving individual liberty, personal as well as economic. In a free society, liberty is a right owed to all, worthy and unworthy alike.

Finally, Americans differ widely over which kinds of national service are genuinely valuable. Many who honor military service are skeptical of voluntarism that might look like, in Armey's terms, "social activism." Supporters of work among the poor are often dubious of military service. Most Americans honor both forms of

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devotion to country, and we have included here powerful testimonials to the varieties of civic dedication. But in our public arguments, the skeptical voices are often the loudest.

Our divisions about the meaning of service are rooted deeply in history. At the founding of our nation, liberal and civic republican ideas jostled for dominance. The liberals viewed personal freedom as the heart of the American experiment. The civic republicans valued freedom, too, but stressed that self-rule demanded a great deal from citizens. The liberals stressed rights. The civic republicans stressed obligations to a common good and, as the philosopher Michael Sandel has put it, "a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake." In our time, the clash between these older traditions lives on in the intellectual wars between libertarians and communitarians. When it comes to national service, the libertarians lean toward skepticism, the communitarians toward a warm embrace.

Yes, we have changed since September 11, 2001. Respect for service soared as the nation forged a new and stronger sense of solidarity in the face of deadly enemies. What has been said so often in the past year still bears repeating: our view of heroes underwent a remarkable, and sudden, change. The new heroes are public servants—police, firefighters, rescue workers, postal

workers whose lives were threatened, our men and women in uniform—not CEOs, high-tech wizards, rock stars, or sports figures. At a time when citizens focus on urgent national needs, those who serve their country naturally rise in public esteem. In the face of an attack that imperiled rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike, it was natural that, in Sandel's words, "a concern for the whole" and "a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake" became more than abstract concepts.

Accordingly, the politics of national service also has been transformed. Even before the attacks of September 11, President Bush had signaled a warmer view of service than most in his party. In choosing two Republican supporters of the idea—former Mayor Steve Goldsmith of Indianapolis and Leslie Lenkowsky—to head his administration's service effort, Bush made clear he intended to take it seriously. But after September 11, he made service a central theme of his administration. In his State of the Union message, he called on Americans to give two years of service to the nation over their lifetimes and announced the creation of the USA Freedom Corps. It was a patriotic, post-September 11 gloss on the old Clinton ideas—and the ideas of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and his father, the first President Bush, who offered the nation a thousand points of light.

There is a new acknowledgment across the political divides that government support for volunteers

can provide essential help for valuable institutions that we too often take for granted. It is easy for politicians to talk about the urgency of strengthening "civil society." But through AmeriCorps and other programs, the government has found a practical (and not particularly costly) way to make good on the rhetoric. Paradoxically, as Steven Waldman points out here, AmeriCorps, a Democratic initiative, fitted in neatly with the Republicans' emphasis on faith-based programs. Democrats were acknowledging the need to strengthen programs outside of government; Republicans, that voluntary programs could use government's help.

That national service has become a bipartisan goal is an important achievement. It is reflected in the White House's Citizen Service Act and in bills cosponsored by, among others, Senators John McCain and Evan Bayh. In this case, the world of legislation mirrors the spirit of the moment. As Marc Magee and Steven Nider of the Progressive Policy Institute reported this summer, applications for AmeriCorps have jumped 50 percent since September 11, those for the Peace Corps have doubled, and those for Teach for America have tripled. Yes, a difficult economy may have pushed more young Americans toward such endeavors. Nonetheless, their choices point to the power of the service idea.

But what is the connection between the ideas of service and citizenship?

### Citizenship and Service

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private sector, or "communities of character"—cannot replace the responsibilities of government. Service can become a form of cheap grace, a generalized call on citizens to do kind things as an alternative to a genuine summons for national sacrifice or a fair apportionment of burdens among the more and less powerful, the more and less wealthy. But when service is seen as a bridge to genuine political and civic responsibility, it can strengthen democratic government and foster the republican virtues.

Lenkowsky made this connection when he urged attendees at a Corporation for National and Community Service conference to turn "civic outrage into civic engagement" by increasing the reach and effectiveness of volunteer programs. No one can dispute visionaries like Harris Wofford and Alan Khazei, who have shown how AmeriCorps, VISTA, the Senior Corps, and the Peace Corps have transformed communities. But Paul Light questions whether this transformation is sustainable. Can episodic volunteerism build the capacity and effectiveness of public and nonprofit organizations? And to what extent can we separate respect for service through volunteerism from a genuine respect for those who make public service a way of life—in the military, the local uniformed services, the schools and the hospitals, and (dare one even use the word) the bureaucracies? As Alice Rivlin notes, "recreational government bashing" saves us from facing up to how hard it is to make public policy in a free market economy. Will the new respect for service make government bashing less satisfying as a hobby? It's possible, but we are not holding our breath.

Underlying the debate over national service is an argument over whether service is necessary or merely "nice." If service is just a nice thing to do, it's easy to understand why critics, well represented in these pages by Bruce Chapman and Tod Lindberg, express such strong reservations about government-led service programs. But is it possible that service is something more than nice? What if it is—as Bob Litan, Harris Wofford, Carmen Sirianni, and Charlie Cobb suggest in different ways—a means to strengthen

the ties that bind us as a nation? What if it creates bridges across groups in our society that have little to do with each other on any given day? What if service, as the New Left's Port Huron Statement put it 40 years ago, can mean "bringing people out of isolation and into community"? What if it fosters civic and political participation in a society that seems not to hold the arts of public life in the highest esteem? In sum, what if service is not simply a good in itself, but a means to many ends?

### Service and a New Generation

Surely one of these ends is the engagement of young Americans in public life. As Peter Hart and Mario Brossard argue here, the evidence of many surveys suggests that young Americans are deeply engaged in civic activity. In his 2000 campaign, Senator John McCain—initially a skeptic of national service, now a strong supporter—won a wide following among the young by urging them to aspire to things "beyond your own self-interest." Service learning, increasingly popular in our public schools, has been linked with a heightened sense of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness. If the new generation connected its impulses to service with a workable politics, it could become one of the great reforming generations in our nation's history.

And service could become a pathway to a stronger sense of citizenship. As Jane Eisner argues, service "must produce more than individual fulfillment for those involved and temporary assistance for those in need." It should, she says, "lead to an appetite for substantive change, a commitment to address the social problems that have created the need for service in the first place." Eisner suggests that as a nation, we should celebrate the First Vote cast by young people with the same fanfare that greets other moments of passage to adult responsibility. The goal would be to encourage a new generation that is gravitating toward national service to make the connection "between service to the community and the very process that governs community life."

A focus on service and the links it forges between rights and responsibilities of citizen-

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ship could also offer new ways out of old political impasses. For example, Andrew Stern, the president of the Service Employees International Union, suggests that a two-year commitment to national service could become a pathway for undocumented workers to legalize their status and for legal immigrants to speed their passage to citizenship. And former felons now denied voting rights might "earn credits toward restoration of full citizenship" through service.

Jeff Swartz, the CEO of Timberland, offers practical proposals for business at a moment when the public demand for responsible corporate behavior is rising. He suggests that obligations to shareholders, to employees, and to the community are linked. One reason his company is on Fortune magazine's list of the 100 "Best Companies to Work For" is its program of service sabbaticals through which employees can spend up to six months working at existing or start-up nonprofits. Their purpose is not simply to do "good works," but also to build the capacity of the organizations that promote social change.

At its best, service is not make-work but what Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, in *Building America*, have called "public work." It is work that "is visible, open to inspection, whose significance is

widely recognized" and can be carried out by "a mix of people whose interests, backgrounds, and resources may be quite different." Service as public work is the essence of the democratic project. It solves common problems and creates common things. Public work entails not altruism, or not only altruism, but enlightened self-interest—a desire to build a society in which the serving citizen wants to live.

It is possible to be cynical about the new call to service. It can be a terribly convenient way for politicians to seem to be calling for sacrifice without demanding much of citizens. At little cost to themselves, advocates of both conservative and liberal individualism can use service to shroud their real intentions in the decent drapery of community feeling. Service, badly conceived, can distance citizens from public problems. Those who serve can help people "out there," as if the problems "they" have are disconnected from the society in which the server lives. The sociologist Michael Schudson has argued that President Bush's ideal citizen is a "Rotarian, moved by a sense of neighborliness, Christian charity, and social responsibility, but untouched by having a personal stake in public justice." His point is not to knock Rotarians. It's to argue that self-interest in pursuit of justice is a virtue. As Schudson notes in describing the civil rights movement, the most dramatic expansion of democracy and citi-

zenship in our lifetime was brought about by citizens "driven not by a desire to serve but by an effort to overcome indignities they themselves have suffered."

It's an important point. But it's also true that Rotarians are good citizens. Neighborliness, charity, and social responsibility are genuine virtues. It is both good and useful to assert, as Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin did, that "my neighbor's material needs are my spiritual needs." It's just possible that a nation responding to the call to service would, over time, become a nation deeply engaged in questions of public justice.

The debate over national service is a debate over how we Americans think of ourselves. It's a debate over how we will solve public problems and what we owe our country and each other. If our nation is to continue to prosper, it's a debate we will have in every generation. For if we decide there are no public things to which we are willing to pledge some of our time and some of our effort—not to mention "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor"—then we will have quietly abandoned our nation's experiment in liberty rooted in mutual assistance and democratic aspiration. ▲

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