The Promise of National Service:
A (Very) Brief History of an Idea

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Americans are always in favor of national service—except when we are not. Public rhetoric in the United States has always laid heavy stress on the obligations of citizenship. "With rights come responsibilities." It's a statement that rolls off the tongues of politicians. "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, politicians regularly 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.

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Yet how firm is our belief in service? There is no prospect anytime soon that we will return to a military draft. The number of politicians who support compulsory national service is small. Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY), in his now-famous December 2002 *New York Times* article, succeeded in creating the most serious debate on renewing the draft since its expiration after the Vietnam years.[1] Most of the American military remains skeptical of a renewal of the draft, a view reflected by former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's response to Rangel in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.[2] While only a few lawmakers signed on to Rangel's proposal, many joined the debate he sparked. A headline from a *Buffalo News* editorial summed up the mood: "Even if Conscription Stands No Chance, the Idea Poses Food for Thought."

It is true that the service idea took an important new institutional form when President Clinton succeeded in pushing his AmeriCorps program through Congress. Clinton talks of it to this day as one of his proudest achievements. It's worth remembering, however, that at the time and for many years afterward there were many Republicans, such as former Representative Dick Armey, who denounced the idea as "a welfare program for aspiring yuppies" and "government-managed, well-paid social activism."

Many Americans also doubt the basic premise 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 the right of 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 about military service. Most Americans honor both forms of devotion to country. But in public arguments, the skeptical voices are often the loudest.

The Service Idea and the American Experiment

Divisions over the meaning of service are rooted deeply in our history. When the United States was founded, liberal and civic republican ideas jostled for dominance. The liberals—they might now be called libertarians—viewed personal freedom as the heart of the American experiment. The civic republicans valued freedom too, but they 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 philosopher Michael Sandel has put it in his book, *Democracy's Discontents*, "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. On national service, libertarians lean toward skepticism, communitarians toward a warm embrace.

America has 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 still bears repeating: our view of heroes underwent a remarkable and sudden change. The new heroes are public servants—police, firefighters, rescue workers, and postal workers whose lives were threatened; men and women in uniform—not the CEOs, high-tech wizards, rock stars, or sports figures who dominated the 1990s. When citizens focus on urgent national needs, those who serve their country naturally rise in public esteem. Robert Putnam, a pioneer in research on civic engagement, captures the post–September 11 moment powerfully. He argues that because of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—and the courage shown by those on the plane that went down in Pennsylvania—"we have a more capacious sense of 'we' than we have had in the adult experience of most Americans now alive."

September 11 and the Transformation of the Service Ideal

After September 11, the politics of national service were also transformed. Even before the attacks, President Bush had signaled a warmer view of service than many in his party endorsed. In choosing two Republican supporters of the idea—former Indianapolis Mayor Steve Goldsmith and Leslie Lenkowsky, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service—to head his administration's service effort, Bush made clear that he intended to take it seriously.

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After September 11, service became a stronger theme in the president's rhetoric. In his 2001 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 F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Bush's father, the first President Bush, who offered the nation a thousand points of light.

There is also a new acknowledgment across the political divide 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 the talk real. Paradoxically, as journalist Steven Waldman points out, AmeriCorps, a Democratic initiative, fit neatly into the Republicans' emphasis on faith-based programs. Democrats accepted the need to strengthen programs outside of government; Republicans accepted that voluntary programs could use government's help. This interplay between government and independent communal action may be especially important in the United States, where powerful and intricate links have always existed—long before the phrase "faith-based organizations" was invented—between the religious and civic spheres.

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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 (R-Ariz.) and Evan Bayh (D-Ind.). Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) has made an ambitious service proposal a centerpiece of his presidential campaign. These legislative ideas mirror the spirit of the moment. As Marc Magee and Steven Nider of the Progressive Policy Institute reported a year ago, in the first nine months after September 11, applications for AmeriCorps jumped 50 percent, those for the Peace Corps doubled, and those for Teach for America tripled.[3] Yes, a difficult private economy certainly pushed more young Americans toward such public endeavors. Nonetheless, their choices point to the continued power of the service idea.

Citizenship and Service

Citizenship cannot be reduced to service. The good works of faith communities and of the private sector—or "communities of character," as President Bush has called them—cannot replace the responsibilities of government. Service can become a form of cheap grace, a generalized call to 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.

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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.[4] No one can dispute visionaries such as former Senator Harris Wofford, chairman of America's Promise, and Alan Khazei, cofounder and CEO of City Year, who have shown how AmeriCorps, VISTA, the Senior Corps, and the Peace Corps have transformed communities. But Paul Light of the Brookings Institution's Center for Public Service questions whether this transformation is sustainable. Can episodic voluntarism build the capacity and effectiveness of public and nonprofit organizations? 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 of national service—such as Bruce Chapman, who in 1966 wrote *The Wrong Man in Uniform,* one of the earliest calls for a volunteer military—express such strong reservations about government-led service programs. But service has the potential to be far more than something nice.

Will Marshall and Marc Magee of the Progressive Policy Institute argue that the service idea could be a departure comparable to breakthroughs in earlier eras toward a stronger sense of citizenship. "Like settlement houses and night school, which helped America absorb waves of immigration," they write, "national service opens new paths of upward mobility for young Americans and the people they serve. And, like the G.I. Bill, national service should be seen as a long-term investment in the education, skills and ingenuity of our people."[5]

Service, then, is not simply a good in itself but a means to many ends. It creates bridges between groups that have little to do with each other on any given day, and as the New Left's Port Huron Statement put it forty years ago, it draws citizens "out of isolation and into community." Michael Brown, cofounder of City Year, says that service can activate "people's justice nerve," creating a thirst for social improvement. It could foster civic and political participation in a society that seems not to hold public service in the highest esteem.

But this very plurality of ends creates a certain skepticism about service. If it offers something for everyone, how serious can the idea really be? Michael Lind, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, is right when he says that "within the small but vocal community of national service enthusiasts, there is far more agreement on the policy of national service than on its purpose." In the post–September 11 environment, he argues, the one compelling case for citizen service rests on the need to expand the nation's capacity to prepare for and respond to domestic emergencies, notably those caused by terrorism.

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Answering the Call to Service

In whatever way one conceives of service, surely one of its ends—or at least one of the ends that wins the broadest assent—is the urgency of finding new ways to engage young Americans in public life after a long period of estrangement. Many surveys suggest that young Americans are deeply engaged in civic activity. For example, a survey by Harvard's Kennedy Institute of Politics in October 2002 found that 61 percent of its national sample of undergraduates reported performing some form of community service in the past year. In his 2000 campaign, Senator McCain—initially a skeptic about 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 American history. Service could become a pathway to a stronger sense of citizenship. As columnist Jane Eisner argues, service "must produce more than individual fulfillment for those involved and temporary assistance for communities 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 and others have suggested 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 to make the connection "between service to the community and participation in the very process that governs community life."[6]

Focusing on the links that service forges between the rights and responsibilities of citizenship could offer new ways out of old political impasses. For example, Andrew Stern, 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. Stern also suggests that former felons now denied voting rights might "earn credits toward restoration of full citizenship" through service. At its best, service is not make-work but what Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, in their book *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."[7] Service as public work is the essence of the democratic project. It solves common problems and creates common things. Public work entails not only altruism but also enlightened self-interest—a desire to build a society in which the serving citizen wants to live.

Skepticism, Realism, and Hope

Service alone cannot build a stronger sense of citizenship. Citizenship is meaningless unless citizens have the power to achieve their goals and to change their communities and the nation. It is thus possible to be skeptical about the new call to service, and it is absolutely necessary to be realistic. Speeches about service can be a convenient way for politicians to call 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 behind the decent drapery of community feeling.

William Galston, a scholar who has devoted years of energy to promoting research and action to excite young Americans to public engagement, worries that the failure to link post–September 11 rhetoric about service to actual calls for civic action could lead to the very sort of cynicism service advocates decry. "Would Pearl Harbor have been a defining event if it had not been followed by a national mobilization and four years of war that altered the lives of soldiers and civilians alike?" Galston asks. "In the immediate wake of September 11, the administration's failure to call for any real sacrifice from citizens fortified my belief that the terrorist attack would be the functional equivalent of Pearl Harbor without World War II, intensifying insecurity without altering civic behavior."

Theda Skocpol, another wise student of the last century and a half of American civic life, sounds an equally useful warning in *Diminished Democracy.* "Absent organizational innovations and new public policies," she writes in an essay drawing on themes from the book, "the reinvigorated sense of the American 'we' that was born of the travails of 9/11 may well gradually dissipate, leaving only ripples on the managerial routines of contemporary U.S. civic life."[8] In fact, as Skocpol and Galston suggest, mere exhortation to serve will do little to foster public—and especially political—participation if too many citizens see the public realm as broken.

The issue of whether Americans have been called to any real sort of sacrifice is of course the point of Representative Rangel calling for a renewal of the draft. It is neither race baiting nor class warfare—Rangel was accused of both—to suggest that a democratic society has a problem when members of its most privileged classes are not among the first to rally to the colors at a time of trouble.

This problem also worries Charles Moskos, the nation's premier student of service and the military experience. Moskos has explored ways of expanding the circle of commitment and promoting the idea of the "citizen soldier." This idea has caught on in a wide range of political circles. As Stanley Kurtz wrote in the *National Review* in April 2003, "In a world of looming military challenges, the citizen-soldier program may be our last chance to expand the armed forces without a draft."[9] John Lehman, Navy Secretary under Ronald Reagan, has also offered helpful remedies short of a draft to overcome what he agrees is a fundamental problem: that "the burdens of defense and the perils of combat do not fall even close to fairly across all of our society."

From Service to Citizenship

If the problems of inequality are vexing where military service is concerned, they can also be troubling for service at home. Badly conceived, service can distance citizens from public problems by seeing the server more as a missionary uplifting the needy than as a fellow citizen. Michael Schudson, a professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, sees 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." Schudson's point is not to knock Rotarians. It is 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 citizenship 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." The point is brought home powerfully by Charles Cobb, who sees the civil rights movement as best understood "as a movement of community organizing rather than one of protest." The civil rights movement performed a huge national service—and inspired many specific forms of service, including the registration of thousands of voters. This quintessentially civic, "good government" act, the registration of new voters, was also a powerful form of rebellion in places that denied African Americans the right to vote.

These are essential points. Yet it is also true that Rotarians are good citizens. Neighborliness, charity, and social responsibility are genuine virtues. And it is 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 is a debate over how we will solve public problems and what we owe to our country and to one another. If our nation is to continue to prosper, it is a debate we will have in every generation. For if we decide that there is nothing public to which we should be willing to pledge some of our time and some of our effort—not to mention "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor"—we will be breaking faith with our nation's experiment in liberty rooted in mutual assistance and democratic aspiration.

NOTES

1. Rangel, C. B. "Bring Back the Draft." *New York Times,* Dec. 31, 2002, A-19.

2. Weinberger, C. W. *Wall Street Journal,* Jan. 10, 2003.

3. Magee, M., and Nider, S. J. "Expand National Service, Not Bureaucracy: Why the Bayh-McCain Bill Gets Us There Faster." *Blueprint: Ideas for a New Century,* July/Aug. 2002 [http://www.ndol.org/blueprint/2002_jul_aug/24_national service.html].

4. Lenkowsky, L., speech at the National Conference on Community Volunteering and National Service, Salt Lake City, June 9, 2002 [www.nationalservice.org/news/lenkowsky/ll060902.html [accessed on Dec. 10, 2003].

5. Marshall, W., and Magee, M. *"Breaking the Silence on AmeriCorps Funding."* *Christian Science Monitor*, Aug. 11, 2003.

6. http://www.cityyear.org/pressroom/clipp.cfm?Clipp=JaneEisner&CatID=2 [accessed Dec. 10, 2003].

7. Boyte, H. C., and Kari, N. N. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

8. Skocpol, T. *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

9. Kurtz, S. *National Review,* Apr. 21, 2003.

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