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United We Serve? The Promise of National Service

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Americans are always for national service—except when we are not. Our public rhetoric has always laid heavy stress on the obligations of citizenship. "With rights come responsibilities." It is 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, 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. The number of politicians who support compulsory national service—the case for it is made powerfully here by Robert Litan—is small. Representative Charles Rangel, in his important and now famous op-ed article reprinted in these pages, succeeded in creating the most serious debate on renewing the draft since its repeal in 1973. But most of the American military remains skeptical of a

renewal of the draft, a view reflected here by former defense secretary Caspar Weinberger.

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 (and in these pages) as one of his proudest achievements. But it is worth remembering that at the time and for years afterward, there were many who denounced the idea as "paid volunteerism."[1] Former representative Dick Armey, the outspoken Texas Republican who became one of AmeriCorps' leading critics, 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."[2]

And many Americans 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 of military service. Most Americans honor both forms of devotion to country, and we have included here moving 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 our history. At the founding of our nation, 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 the philosopher Michael Sandel has put it, "a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake."[3] 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 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 the CEOs, high-tech wizards, rock stars, or sports figures who dominated the culture of the 1990s. 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. Robert Putnam, a true pioneer in research on civic engagement, captures the post–September 11 moment in his essay here. He writes 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 over Pennsylvania—"we have a more capacious sense of 'we' than we have had in the adult experience of most Americans now alive."

"The images of shared suffering that followed the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington," Putnam argues, "suggested a powerful idea of cross-class, cross-ethnic solidarity. Americans also confronted a clear foreign enemy, an experience that both drew us closer to one another and provided an obvious rationale for public action."

Accordingly, the politics of national service were also transformed. Even before the attacks of September 11, President Bush had signaled a warmer view of service than many 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. After September 11, service became a stronger theme in the president's rhetoric. In his 2002 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 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 Steven Waldman points out here, AmeriCorps, a Democratic initiative, fit neatly with 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 intricate links have always existed—long before the term *faith-based organizations* was invented—between the religious and civic spheres. By way of underscoring this vital American difference—and bowing to Tocqueville, as all books of this sort must—we have included a separate section on religion and service, with essays by Waldman, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Robert Wuthnow, who rank among America's most important explorers of the terrain where religion and public life meet.

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, described well in these pages by McCain himself, and also by Will Marshall and Marc Magee. These legislative ideas mirrored the spirit of the moment. As Magee and Steven Nider of the Progressive Policy Institute have reported, 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.[4] 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.

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

Citizenship and Service

Citizenship cannot be reduced to service. And the good works of faith communities, the private sector, or "communities of character," as the

president has called them, 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.[5] 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, in the local uniformed services, in the schools and the hospitals, and (dare one even use the word) in 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 is 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 is 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 service has the potential to be far more than something nice. As Marshall and Magee argue, 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."

And what if service is—as Bob Litan, Harris Wofford, Carmen Sirianni, and Charles 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—a point implicit in Charles Rangel's argument for the draft and explicit in Steve Hess's realistic yet poignant open letter to his sons on the value of military service? What if service, as the New Left's Port Huron Statement put it forty 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?

Still, it must be admitted that this plurality of ends can be a problem as well as an advantage. Michael Lind, in his icon-smashing essay, 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." Lind, along with several authors, suggests that the post–September 11 environment may have created a genuinely compelling argument for citizen service: the need to expand the nation's capacity to prepare for and respond to domestic emergencies, notably those caused by terrorism.

Service and a New Generation

However 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 in the wake of a significant period of estrangement. 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 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 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 to make the connection "between service to the community and participation in the very process that governs community life."

A focus on service and the links it forges between rights and responsibilities of citizenship 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 has been 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 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."[6] 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. And as Boyte tells us in his essay here, service alone cannot build a stronger sense of citizenship. Citizenship, he reminds us, is meaningless unless citizens have power—real power, not illusory power—to achieve their goals and change their communities and their nation. Boyte writes from the organizing tradition that also inspired Charles Cobb, who notes that "community organizers do not lead. Instead, they cultivate leadership."

Skepticism, Realism, and Hope

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 terribly convenient way for politicians to seem 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 well lead to the very sort of cynicism service advocates decry. He is not alone in these pages. "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, a wise student of the last century and a half of American civic life, sounds an equally useful warning. "Absent organizational innovations and new public policies," she writes here, "the reinvigorated sense of the American 'we' that was born of the travails of September 11 may well gradually dissipate, leaving only ripples on the managerial routines

of contemporary U.S. civic life." In fact, as Galston suggests, mere exhortation to serve will do little to foster public—and especially political—participation if too many citizens see the public realm as broken. As Galston puts it, "If we clean up our politics, rebuild the institutions that ask citizens to participate, multiply opportunities for national and community service, and restore the civic mission of our educational institutions, we have a chance to reverse the cynicism evoked by the politics of the past three decades." A tall order indeed! But the alternative is not pretty: "If we squander this opportunity, the civic impact of the terrorist attacks will continue to fade, leaving young Americans with only a dim memory of what might have been."

The issue of whether Americans have been called to any real sort of sacrifice is, of course, the point of Charles Rangel's essay calling for a renewal of the draft. Rangel, drawing on the finding of columnist Mark Shields, was bothered that of 535 members of the House and Senate voting on the Iraq war, only one had a child—a son, as it happens—in the enlisted ranks of the armed forces. Rangel sees this as a problem for democracy, and he is not alone. Rangel struck a nerve because virtually all Americans know there is a hole in our post–September 11 expressions of patriotism. 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. The sacrifices made in Iraq by the men and women of our nation's military remind us that the subject of this book is not abstract. Service is a serious matter, especially for those of our fellow citizens who render it under fire. Charles Moskos, the nation's premier student of service and the military experience, explores ways of expanding the circle of commitment and promoting the idea of the "citizen-soldier." John Lehman, the navy secretary under Ronald Reagan, offers 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."

If the problems of inequality are vexing where military service is concerned, they can also be troubling for service at home. 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. In a separate essay in these pages, Drogosz extends this argument by insisting that service without politics and democratic engagement will never live up to its promise.

Michael Schudson sees President Bush's ideal citizen as a "Rotarian, moved by a sense of neighborliness, Christian charity, and social responsibility, but untouched by having any sense of 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 being best understood "as a movement of community organizing rather than one of protest." The civil rights movement performed a huge national service—and many specific forms of service, including the registration of thousands of voters. It is worth recalling that this quintessentially civic, "good government" act, the registration of new voters, was also a telling 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. 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 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 each other. If our nation is to continue to prosper, it is a debate we will have in every generation. For if we decide that there are no public things 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.