

# The Case For National Service

## A Time To Serve

By Richard Stengel

As the Constitutional Convention of 1787 came to a close, after three and a half months of deliberation, a lady asked Dr. Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" "A republic," replied the Doctor, "if you can keep it."

— ANECDOTE FROM THE RECORDS OF THE FEDERAL CONVENTION OF 1787, ED., MAX FARRAND, VOL. 3, APPENDIX A, 1911

A republic, if you can keep it. The founders were not at all optimistic about the future of the Republic. There had been only a handful of other republics in all of human history, and most were small and far away. The founders' pessimism, though, came not from history but from their knowledge of human nature. A republic, to survive, needed not only the consent of the governed but also their active participation. It was not a machine that would go of itself; free societies do not stay free without the involvement of their citizens.

Today the two central acts of democratic citizenship are voting and paying taxes. That's basically it. The last time we demanded anything else from people was when the draft ended in 1973. And yes, there are libertarians who believe that government asks too much of us — and that the principal right in a democracy is the right to be left alone — but most everyone else bemoans the fact that only about half of us vote and don't do much more than send in our returns on April 15. The truth is, even the archetype of the model citizen is mostly a myth. Except for times of war and the colonial days, we haven't been all that energetic about keeping the Republic.

When Americans look around right now, they see a public-school system with 38% of fourth graders unable to read at a basic level; they see the cost of health insurance escalating as 47 million people go uninsured; they see a government that responded ineptly to a hurricane in New Orleans; and they see a war whose ends they do not completely value or understand.

But there is something else we are seeing in the land. Polls show that while confidence in our democracy and our government is near an all-time low, volunteerism and civic participation since the '70s are near all-time highs. Political scientists are perplexed about this. If confidence is so low, why would people bother volunteering? The explanation is pretty simple. People, especially young people, think the government and the public sphere are broken, but they feel they can personally make a difference through community service. After 9/11, Americans were hungry to be asked to do something, to make some kind of sacrifice, and what they mostly remember is being asked to go shopping. The reason private volunteerism is so high is precisely that confidence in our public institutions is so low. People see volunteering not as a form of public service but as an antidote for it.

That is not a recipe for keeping a republic.

Another reality the founders could not have possibly foreseen was that a country that originally enslaved African Americans would be a majority non-white nation by 2050. Robert Putnam, the famed Harvard political scientist who wrote about the decline of civic engagement in *Bowling Alone*, recently released a new study that showed the more diverse a community is, the less people care about and engage with that community. Diversity, in fact, seems to breed distrust and disengagement. The study lands in the midst of a rickety immigration debate, but even if all immigration were to cease tomorrow, we would still be diverse whether we liked it or not. Yet the course of American history, Putnam writes, has always given way to "more encompassing identities" that create a "more capacious sense of 'we.'"

But at this moment in our history, 220 years after the Constitutional Convention, the way to get citizens involved in civic life, the way to create a common culture that will make a virtue of our

diversity, the way to give us that more capacious sense of "we" — finally, the way to keep the Republic — is universal national service. No, not mandatory or compulsory service but service that is in our enlightened self-interest as a nation. We are at a historic junction; with the first open presidential election in more than a half-century, it is time for the next President to mine the desire that is out there for serving and create a program for universal national service that will be his — or her — legacy for decades to come. It is the simple but compelling idea that devoting a year or more to national service, whether military or civilian, should become a countrywide rite of passage, the common expectation and widespread experience of virtually every young American.

In 2006 more than 61 million Americans dedicated 8.1 billion hours to volunteerism. The nation's volunteer rate has increased by more than 6 percentage points since 1989. Overall, 27% of Americans engage in civic life by volunteering. Dr. Franklin would be impressed. The service movement itself began to take off in the 1980s, and today there is a renaissance of dynamic altruistic organizations in the U.S., from Teach for America to City Year to Senior Corps, many of them under the umbrella of AmeriCorps. In a 2002 poll, 70% of Americans thought universal service was a good idea. And while it's easy to sit back and say this to a pollster, the next President can harness the spirit of volunteerism that already exists and make it a permanent part of American culture.

At various times in American history, public service and private effort went arm in arm. After Pearl Harbor, Rosie the Riveter and Uncle Sam exhorted people to help the war effort, and Americans responded. But since F.D.R., and especially since J.F.K.'s launching of the Peace Corps, national service has been seen by some as a Democratic or liberal idea. In the '90s, Newt Gingrich argued that the rise of big government programs robbed people of their initiative to volunteer. After Bill Clinton signed the bill to create AmeriCorps in 1993, then Senator John Ashcroft called it "welfare for the well-to-do."

But these days there is a growing consensus on Capitol Hill that the private and public spheres can be linked. Democrats understand the need to support programs outside of government; Republicans understand that voluntary programs can be helped by government. In his first State of the Union address after 9/11, President George W. Bush called for Americans to give 4,000 hours of service and established the USA Freedom Corps. One of the early critics of AmeriCorps, John McCain, has since become a devout supporter. "National service is an issue that has been largely identified with the Democratic Party and the left of the political spectrum," McCain wrote in a 2001 Washington Monthly essay. "That is unfortunate, because duty, honor and country are values that transcend ideology...National service is a crucial means of making our patriotism real, to the benefit of both ourselves and our country."

It may seem like a strange moment to make the case for national service for young Americans when so many are already doing so much. Young men and women have made their patriotism all too real by volunteering to fight two wars on foreign soil. But we have battlefields in America, too — particularly in education and health care — and the commitment of soldiers abroad has left others yearning to make a parallel commitment here at home.

## **THE PLAN**

So what would a plan for universal national service look like? It would be voluntary, not mandatory. Americans don't like to be told what they have to do; many have argued that requiring service drains the gift of its virtue. It would be based on carrots, not sticks — "doing well by doing good," as Benjamin Franklin, the true father of civic engagement, put it. So here is a 10-point plan for universal national service. The ideas here are a mixture of suggestions already made, revised versions of other proposals and a few new wrinkles.

### **1. Create a National-Service Baby Bond**

Every time an American baby is born, the Federal Government would invest \$5,000 in that child's name in a 529-type fund — the kind many Americans are already using for college savings. At a rate of return of 7% — the historic return for equities — that money would total roughly \$19,000 by the time that baby reaches age 20. That money could be accessed between the ages of 18 and 25 on one condition: that he or she commits to at least one year of national or military service. Like the old GI Bill, the money must be used to fund education, start a

business or make a down payment on a home. The bond would preserve the voluntary nature of the service but offer a strong incentive for young people to sign up for it. Says City Year CEO and co-founder Michael Brown: "It's a new kind of government philosophy about reciprocity. If you invest in your country, your country will invest in you."

## **2. Make National Service a Cabinet-Level Department**

Right now, the Corporation for National and Community Service — created in 1993 to manage AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America — is a small, independent federal agency. Find a catchier name, streamline its responsibilities and bring it up to Cabinet level. This would show that the new President means business when it comes to national service and would recognize that service is integral to how America thinks of itself — and how the President thinks of America. And don't appoint a gray bureaucrat to this job; make it someone like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Mike Bloomberg, who would capture the imagination of the public. In fact, the next President — whatever party — should set a goal to enlist at least 1 million Americans annually in national service by the year 2016.

## **3. Expand Existing National-Service Programs Like AmeriCorps and the National Senior Volunteer Corps**

Since 1994, 500,000 people have gone through AmeriCorps programs tutoring and teaching in urban schools; managing after-school programs; cleaning up playgrounds, schools and parks; and caring for the elderly. After Katrina, AmeriCorps participants descended on the Gulf Coast within 24 hours and have since contributed more than 3 million hours of service. AmeriCorps members earn a small stipend for their volunteering and receive education awards of up to \$4,725 per year. Right now, says David Eisner, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, "AmeriCorps is the best-kept secret in America." But under this national-service proposal, the program would more than triple in size, from 75,000 members each year to approximately 250,000. "We don't need to reinvent this nascent infrastructure," says Brown. "We need to take it to scale."

Presently, AmeriCorps is a catch-all initiative for a variety of different programs. Here are four new branded corps and other programs that could come under the new Department of National Service.

## **4. Create an Education Corps**

The idea here is to create a cadre of tutors, teachers and volunteers who can help the 38% of fourth-graders who can't read at a basic level. The members of the Education Corps would also lead after-school programs for the 14 million students — a quarter of all school-age kids — who do not have a supervised activity between 3 and 6 p.m. on schooldays. Studies show that students who spend no time in after-school programs are almost 50% more likely to have used drugs and 37% more likely to become teen parents than students who spend one to four hours a week in an extracurricular activity. The Corps members would also focus on curbing America's dropout epidemic. Right now, 50% of the dropouts come from 15% of the high schools in the U.S., most of them located in high-poverty city neighborhoods and throughout the South. The Education Corps would focus on those troubled school districts.

## **5. Institute a Summer of Service**

For many teenagers, the summer between middle school and high school is an awkward time. They're too young to get a real job and too old to be babysat. Well-to-do families can afford summer camps and exotic learning opportunities, but they're a minority. Shirley Sagawa, an expert on youth policy and an architect of the AmeriCorps legislation, is proposing a Summer of Service. One hundred thousand students would volunteer for organizations like City Year, a national volunteering program and think tank, or Citizen Schools, which organizes after-school activities for middle schoolers, and run summer programs for younger students in exchange for a \$500 college scholarship. Senators Christopher Dodd (Democrat, Conn.) and Thad Cochran (Republican, Miss.) and Representative Rosa DeLauro (Democrat, Conn.) have sponsored a bill that would support a service "rite of passage" for students before they begin high school.

## **6. Build a Health Corps**

There are nearly 7 million American children who are eligible for but not enrolled in government-sponsored health-insurance programs. Health Corps volunteers would assist the mostly low-income families of these children in accessing available public insurance offerings like the Children's Health Insurance Program. These volunteers could also act as nonmedical support staff such as caseworkers and community education specialists in underserved rural health clinics — which have less than three-quarters of the nonmedical staffing they need, according to Voices for National Service, a coalition of service organizations that advocates expanding federal service programs. The one-year experience in the Health Corps could lead these volunteers toward careers in nursing or medicine, helping to redress gaps that have left the U.S. with a dearth of qualified nurses and medical professionals.

## **7. Launch a Green Corps**

This would be a combination of F.D.R.'s Civilian Conservation Corps — which put 3 million "boys in the woods" to build the foundation of our modern park system — and a group that would improve national infrastructure and combat climate change. When Roosevelt created the CCC, there were 25 million young Americans who were unemployed. Today there are 1.5 million Americans between 18 and 24 who are neither employed nor in school. These young men and women could address America's well-documented infrastructure problems. The Green Corps could reclaim polluted streams and blighted urban lots; repair and rehabilitate railroad lines, ports, schools and hospitals; and build energy-efficient green housing for elderly and low-income people.

## **8. Recruit a Rapid-Response Reserve Corps**

The disarray and lack of a coordinated response to 9/11 and Katrina tell us there is a role volunteers can play in responding quickly to disasters and emergencies. The new Rapid-Response Reserve Corps would consist of retired military and National Guard personnel as well as national- and community-service program alumni to focus on disaster preparedness and immediate response to local and national disasters. The program would initially train 50,000 members, who could be deployed for two-week periods in response to emergencies and serve under the guidance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

## **9. Start a National-Service Academy**

Picture West Point, but instead of learning how to fire an M-4 and reading *The Art of War*, students would be studying the Federalist papers and learning how to transform a failing public school. Conceived by two former Teach for America corps members, Chris Myers Asch and Shawn Raymond, the U.S. Public Service Academy would give undergraduates a four-year education in exchange for a five-year commitment to public service after they graduate. The idea is to provide a focused education for people who will serve in the public sector — either the federal, state or local government — and thereby create a new generation of civic leaders. Asch and Raymond were so dismayed by the government's response to Katrina that they wanted to create a new generation of people who were idealistic about government. "We need an institution that systematically develops leadership," says Asch. "We need to elevate it in the eyes of young people so we can attract the best and the brightest." The idea has been endorsed by Hillary Clinton and Pennsylvania Republican Senator Arlen Specter, who are co-sponsors of legislation that would allocate \$164 million per year for the envisioned 5,000-student academy.

## **10. Create a Baby-Boomer Education Bond**

Over the next 20 years, 78 million baby boomers will be eligible to retire. That is, if they can afford to — and if they want to. According to an AARP survey, 80% of Americans between 50 and 60 said they were planning to work during retirement. "Many seniors are interested in careers that are influenced by a spirit of service. Over half want to work in the education, health-care and nonprofit sector," says Marc Freedman, founder and CEO of Civic Ventures and co-founder of Experience Corps. Experience Corps is the largest AmeriCorps program for people over 55; it consists of teams of 10 to 15 people working to improve reading for students in kindergarten through third grade. Just as AmeriCorps members receive scholarships, baby-

boomer volunteers would be able to designate a scholarship of \$1,000 for every 500 hours of community service they complete. The \$1,000 would be deposited into an education savings account or a 529 fund to be used by the volunteer's children or grandchildren or a student they designate. "There is a whole trend of people starting second careers with a focus on service," says Freedman. "National service is not just for young people. This is the generation that national service was created for in the first place, whom J.F.K. called on to help and for whom we created the Peace Corps. Many missed their chance and are now getting a second opportunity to ask what they can do for their country."

## **THE COST**

So how much would all this cost? There are about 4 million babies born each year, and if each receives a \$5,000 baby bond, that would be about \$20 billion a year; that is, roughly two months of funding for the Iraq war and about half what the government spends per year on the federal prison system. The government would get \$1 billion in dividends from the investment and would be able to cash in the bonds that people don't use. At the same time, corporate America would need to play a critical role in a plan for universal national service. The private sector has contributed more than \$1 billion to AmeriCorps. The private sector must step up to the plate in funding national service — after all, it benefits too.

People are often skeptical of calls for service, especially from politicians, as they see them as crowd-pleasing rhetoric or a way of avoiding asking people to make a true sacrifice. But Americans are ready to be asked to do something. "People understand the idea that this is a great country, and that greatness isn't free," says Zach Maurin, the co-founder of ServeNext.org, which has launched a campaign to get the presidential candidates to endorse national service.

Between 1944 and 1956, 8 million returning veterans received debt-free education, low-interest mortgages or small-business loans. The GI Bill helped assimilate those young men into a new postwar society and helped turn America into a middle-class nation. A new GI Bill for national service involving men and women, young and old, could help secure America for the future and turn every new generation into a Greatest Generation. The courageous souls who signed the Declaration of Independence pledged "our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." The least we can do to keep the Republic is to pledge a little time.

*With reporting by Jeremy Caplan and Kristina Dell/New York*