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Joe Biden Chooses Susan Rice to Socialize the Economy

Doug Bandow

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It looks like Susan Rice will get to the White House, just not as vice president or secretary of state, as she had hoped. Best known for mismanaging international affairs under President Barack Obama, she will take control of the Domestic Policy Council (DPC). It is a badly inspired choice with the U.S. racing toward de facto bankruptcy.

What makes Rice dangerous is not that she is “an intellectual powerhouse,” as claimed by Melody Barnes, who ran the DPC under Obama. Rather, it is that “She has extensive government experience and knows how to manage a process, and work with departments and agencies, which is an essential part of the director’s job.” This makes Rice an effective bureaucratic operator, and thus dangerous. Equally important, as a media favorite, she is bound to win Fourth Estate approbation for whatever she proposes, no matter how harmful.

Rice said, “I wish we could have mandatory national civilian service in this country.” She is not the first person to believe such nonsense.

But she isn’t likely to make her name with expensive new programs. After all, what leading Democrat doesn’t want to spend America into oblivion? All the Democratic presidential candidates proposed new initiatives costing trillions of dollars. As the price of winning support from Sen. Bernie Sanders and his neo-socialist acolytes, Biden agreed to push much of the Left’s domestic agenda. If Republicans lose control of the Senate, the Treasury doors will open wide, with or without Rice.

Rather, if she comes up with a signature initiative, it is more likely to be “national service,” perhaps of the mandatory variety. Which means it wouldn’t be service at all.

This terrible idea is a Democratic staple, despite the lack of evident political appeal. After all, two Democratic presidential hopefuls unsuccessfully tried to energize their campaigns by proposing to force America’s young to do good things for the country. But neither candidate went very far.

South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg was worried about America’s lack of “social cohesion” and suggested “national service” as a response: “One thing we could do that would change that would be to make it, if not legally obligatory, but certainly a social norm that anybody, after they’re 18, spends a year in national service.” Of course, he would quickly find that most young people, while giving lip service to his sanctimonious blather, would continue to choose to spend their lives doing things other than building “social cohesion” under Uncle Sam’s beneficent gaze.

For this reason John Delaney — although barely remembered today, the onetime Maryland congressman was the first Democrat to announce a 2020 presidential run — was refreshingly honest in advocating use of conscription rather than hortatory appeals to acquire program participants. He explained, “It’s time to bring the country together, to restore our sense of shared purpose and rebuild a common and inclusive national destiny. That’s why we need mandatory national service.” In short, Uncle Sam would make every 18-year-old a slave of sorts, with “no exceptions,” insisted Delaney, who was as little noticed when he exited the campaign as when he entered it.

Alas, it is not just losing Democratic candidates who believe in forcing others to clean bed pans, pick up trash, plant trees, and much more. So does the designated head of the DPC.

In her weaker moments, Rice appeared ready to rely on volunteerism, advocating initiatives such as Sen. Chris Coons’ proposal for a tenfold increase in AmeriCorps to 750,000. That would essentially mean hiring a lot more federal employees, though with the added encouragement and prestige of having their tasks labeled “service” rather than “work.”

But Rice is not one to allow personal liberty to get in the way of a really, really bad idea. She said, “I wish we could have mandatory national civilian service in this country, so that every kid between the age of 18 and 21 spent six or 12 months in national service, whether it’s laying broadband or building infrastructure, or rehabilitating inner-city schools and libraries.” Obviously, her idea is not focused on the form of “service.” None of the tasks she mentions are special. Most are already widely performed in society, usually by private firms or local governments.

What apparently excites Rice is the idea of making everything mandatory. A task, any task, somehow becomes special if government forces people to perform it against their will:

The reason I think service is so important is, not only is it creating economic opportunity in training and skills for those who may not otherwise have them, but most importantly, it’s teaching us to understand and to know each other as Americans across different geographic, racial, socioeconomic lines, as part of one nation and one community.

She is not the first person to believe such nonsense. Mandatory national service long has been a favorite of social engineers everywhere. Sanctimonious and self-satisfied adults look around and suddenly experience an epiphany: *Today’s young people are to blame for our most grievous problems.* Something must be done for and to them! If only we, the good, the just, the aged, the enlightened, make them do what we chose not to do, Americans will soon join the wise, the cultivated, the sophisticated, and the virtuous, and together embark upon a new journey, holding hands and singing “Kumbaya” every night. America’s problems will melt away.

It is a profoundly stupid, even maleficent idea.

Americans believed in service before there was an America, in the form of the United States of America. Community and service are part of Americans’ DNA. The widespread, personal, and voluntary commitment to others has enriched virtually every social institution. Throughout U.S. history such participation energized communities, generated organizations, transformed individuals, and revitalized society.

Two centuries ago Alexis de Tocqueville famously turned an official trip to study the new republic's prisons into an unofficial exploration of society, culture, and people. He considered civic involvement to be one of America's unique and defining characteristics, which set it apart from Europe's sclerotic monarchies and enervating aristocracies. He wrote in his seminal book *Democracy in America*: "I have seen Americans making great and sincere sacrifices for the key common good, and a hundred times I have noticed that, when needs be, they almost always gave each other faithful support."

As the nation lost its original revolutionary spirit, however, more Americans became enamored with the idea of using the state to forcibly transform the less virtuous around them. One of the earliest presentations of a form of national service was *Looking Backward*, the truly bizarre 1888 novel by journalist and attorney Edward Bellamy, who envisioned a utopia maintained by coerced employment for everyone between 21 and 45. At least 165 Nationalist Clubs were created by Bellamyites hoping to force this totalitarian vision on their countrymen.

Even more famous was the 1906 speech and essay written by philosopher William James on "The Moral Equivalent of War." It was truly awful, the product of an enthusiastic social engineer who believed himself to be immune from the flaws he discerned in others. He contended that "the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods," and that forced service to the state should be used to spread these vital values in peacetime. "Our gilded youths would be drafted off," he declared, "to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas."

He, or at least the title of his essay, is widely cited today. But he had a very different vision from today's advocates of national service. No shelving books in libraries or redecorating school buildings. Rather, he said,

The military ideals of hardihood and discipline would be wrought into the growing fiber of the people; no one would remain blind, as the luxurious classes now are blind, to man's relations to the globe he lives on and to the permanently sour and hard foundations of his higher life. To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers would our gilded youths be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas.

Today's national service enthusiasts remain all about social engineering, even if their version is slightly less extreme. They are the farseeing, the moral exemplars, the visionaries, those chosen to rule the rest of us. Whatever their exact rhetoric about doing good, they always intend to remake both individuals and communities for ideological, almost always left-wing, ends. Sometimes advocates are blunt about seeking to replace the influence of more traditional institutions. For example, sociologist Margaret Mead concocted a national service proposal, which she believed "would replace for girls, even more than for boys, marriage as the route away from the parental home." Why shouldn't the far-seeing, always benevolent, and ever-competent state set the route for independence and adulthood?

For such ideas coercion is essential. Service, however defined, is only secondary. The state's intent is to remake the human person. In 1979, the Committee for the Study of National Service,

co-chaired by Harris Wofford, who later served in the U.S. Senate, offered the astonishingly honest and blunt vision:

International comparisons also fire some American imaginations. Millions of young people serve social needs in China as a routine part of growing up, many [are] commanded to leave the crowded cities and to assist in the countryside. Castro fought illiteracy and mosquitoes in Cuba with units of youth. Interesting combinations of education, work, and service to society are a part of the experience of youth in Israel, Jamaica, Nigeria, Tanzania, and other nations. The civic spirit being imbued in youth elsewhere in the world leaves some Americans wondering and worrying about Saturday-night-fever, unemployment, the new narcissism, and other afflictions of American youth.

Perhaps Mao Zedong's Red Guards seemed a better model only three years after his death. The image is rather more dated today, after China turned to capitalism to develop and invited businessmen and women into the “communist” party. Similarly, Cuba's youth now are more likely to flee their island in search of work and freedom than stick around as civic foot soldiers for Castro (today Raoul instead of Fidel).

Nevertheless, modern advocates of national service also want to reorder and remake society — individuals, families, institutions, and more. The ends sound beyond reproach: promote patriotism, ensure diversity, offer job training, create work, encourage tolerance, increase college access, spread civic-mindedness, and, always, fill the ever-expanding number of “unmet social needs.”

Yet the idea is dangerous, seeking to use the state to transform human beings, turning them into the new man and woman so often advanced by ivory tower philosophers and practical political despots at every turn. And to do so by turning over the power of the state to the sinful human beings most determined to accumulate, wield, and abuse power. To even associate the concept with the likes of Mao and Castro should be to discredit it forever.

In practice the idea is no better. There is a constitutional problem, admittedly something that does not bother Rice and other progressives for whom constitutional law is simply the process of torturing legal texts until they yield a vaguely conceivable interpretation justifying the desired result. Nevertheless, the 13th Amendment's language seems clear, prohibiting “involuntary servitude.” What is mandatory service but that? If the law requires that you serve, especially if there is sizable penalty attached, then the Constitution bars the practice. Yet neither Rice nor most other mandatory national service advocates — former Gen. Stanley McChrystal is another one — even bother to mention the issue.

It also seems, well, a stretch to assume that today's young people would react positively to being blamed by their elders for society's problems in a system constructed, managed, and defended by those same elders, who seem to view themselves as immune from selfishness, greed, envy, frivolousness, ambition, callousness, and the manifold other social deficiencies to be cured by conscripting the young now that their elders have providentially reached a sufficient level of understanding. Especially when these elders are ambitious Washington insiders seeking to enhance their own ambitions for high office. Indeed, cynicism seems the most likely response. Advocates of such schemes often point to the military draft, but for every person who has endearing memories of being ordered about by the ultimate arbitrary federal bureaucracy, there are many others who report less enchanting experiences.

National service is a moronic way to provide jobs or job training. Dragooning the roughly four million people turning 18 every year and doing something with them isn't likely to be cost-effective, efficient, or inexpensive, and isn't likely to yield useful training or jobs. If treated like low-cost military conscripts, the federal government, or the organizations to which it sends the essentially free labor it has called up, will use them accordingly. The more the forced laborers are paid, the more their "service" will look and feel like normal jobs.

Short-term service, the norm with conscription, is a particular waste. People get trained only to be given a task when they have begun counting down their days till they can escape back to civilian life. Moreover, as the military also discovered, those who resent being forced into uniform resist in myriad ways — being late, making little effort, ignoring instructions, exhibiting indiscipline, ignoring training, resisting authority, and otherwise undermining the system. You can't even fire someone who wants out rather than in, since doing so would be a reward. But are you really willing to imprison the perennial laggard who always shows up late and does a shoddy job?

Moreover, the only real "national service" is representing the nation, most obviously being in the armed forces. Most of what is called national service is more accurately individual or community service. That is, it has nothing to do with the nation and everything to do with what traditionally has been done by the voluntary and independent sectors. Many of such tasks are simply an employment substitute for services that tend to be underfunded — there is no special virtue in shelving library books, picking up trash, cleaning bedpans, or whatever other tasks might win endorsement by the interest groups and legislators who would pass on any national service program.

However valuable such jobs might seem, they would be moral and virtuous only if voluntary. To imagine coercion instilling virtue and morality requires having a totalitarian soul. Compulsory compassion is an oxymoron, created to benefit the one doing the imposing, not the one being imposed upon. Indeed, arresting someone for refusing to live up to someone else's vision of service would be a moral crime.

The worst practical argument for national service is the usual kitchen sink contention about addressing "unmet social needs." Asked about the jobs that need doing, advocates come up with manifold lists of hundreds of thousands or millions of supposedly vital tasks currently not performed by hospitals, libraries, parks, schools, community centers, gardens, government bureaucracies, and more. But such numbers mean nothing when no costs are attached to the request. If labor is free, the demand is infinite. Heck, the unmet needs in properly caring for my house and yard are many — just not worth me doing or paying someone else to do.

At issue is opportunity costs. That is, the real price of conscripting people is not the pittance paid them, but their forgone activities — finishing medical school, caring for an ill family member, engaging in scientific research, creating a useful new app, working for an NGO, doing volunteer service, increasing economic opportunities for others, meeting people's basic needs, producing useful goods and services, or simply enjoying their own lives, as they should be free to do. The theory of national service objectively and humanely discovering and solving manifold social problems sounds great when expressed in an op-ed piece. But it bears no relationship to reality. Turning such an endeavor over to politicians, bureaucrats, lawyers, judges, interest groups, lobbyists, and an independent sector dependent on government for money and labor is likely to have unexpected consequences, to put it mildly.

The more grandiose the proposals, the greater the disconnect with reality. Consider the slightly mad idea of Charli Carpenter of the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), who would round up millions of 18- to 20-year-olds to do good. She imagines,

Some draftees could be trained as nursing assistants and emergency medical technicians, like those grossly overworked first responders driving ambulances or providing support work where patients are treated. Some could be put to work by the Army Corps of Engineers and help build new hospitals. Some could staff food banks and other civil society organizations to support vulnerable families hit by the downturn so that older, more at-risk volunteers could stay safely at home. Some could fill in on converted or makeshift factory assembly lines to rapidly build masks and ventilators — just like young people were mobilized to build munitions in the past. Some could help on farms, where a lack of labor risks shortages of certain foods. Many would receive special training to be safely put to work sanitizing, cleaning, and clearing.

It sounds so glorious. No problem. Someone somewhere would decide that someone somewhere would train someone somewhere to work with someone somewhere doing something somewhere, and this process would be repeated millions of times, all over America. As a result all sorts of wonderful things would happen. Millions of young people would glory serving at the direction of their idealistic betters exempt from such service. Millions of the chosen would show up, on time, perform their assigned tasks, and cheerfully participate, like Mao's Red Guards, singing while marching across America. And they would amaze their fellow citizens with the civic-mindedness acquired. The country would never be the same.

But why limit such a grand experience to 18- to 20-year-olds? Why not conscript everyone for life and send them out on a life of virtuous labor on behalf of the people, as defined by the worthy elite tasked with making the system work? Why not allow the enlightened few to remake society into some of the utopian fantasies that fill the heads of Washington policymakers? Why not resurrect Edward Bellamy's vision of mandatory lifetime, or almost, service to others? Why be faint-hearted when proposing a panacea for fixing society's ills? If you're going to engage in social engineering, why not *go large*?

Service is good. Americans know that. They've known that since people were called Americans. But that does not justify "national service," especially when mandated by government. Service should remain private and voluntary. This ensures that it will be both moral and effective. And that it will really be service.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. He is a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan and the author of several books, including The Politics of Plunder: Misgovernment in Washington.