

Rio Grande

G U A R D I A N

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Mounce: Public Service: Outmoded?

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The “Public”? Who are they? “Service?” What is that? Both outmoded? Or worse, both forgotten?

Perhaps not, if you are one of the few (only eight percent of Americans, now) who have served in the military, or the less than one percent who have had experience with some other service (Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps).

This disparity has created a “gap between those who have served and those who have not” (Stan McChrystal, *Washington Post*, 14 November 14).

Retired General McChrystal maintains: “trust in government is near an all-time low and social trust—trust in others—is lower among millennials than previous generations.” McChrystal is Chair of the Franklin Project Committee on Public Service, with the Aspen Institute. He was previously Commander of US/International forces in Afghanistan. He knows something about service, and the rewards it brings to the individual and to society. On a different scale, I can relate, remembering and appreciating my own military service (Officer, U.S. Army—Infantry/Intelligence).

McChrystal and Aspen Institute urge a surge in financing, planning, training in public service. The call is made more urgent by the current political/divisive climate: “leaders are less likely to cross the aisle to get things done.” Citizens are less likely to have a sense of common identity. Many, in the media, in homes and churches, as well as government, are talking about that split, hoping it’s not permanent.

There is a need for more service and there is also a provable demand. AmeriCorps, for example, has five times the applications than it has positions. Their personnel (and others we could/should envision) work in diverse but important areas such as schools, national parks, in diplomacy (with the State Department); with fire fighters; in hospices. Of course, this resurgence in the goal of more public service will still include the military as well as, say, Peace Corp and VISTA. Choices should be, could be expanded. Options must be discussed and are thorny, often

controversial issues (e.g., one or two years? 18 through 28? voluntary or mandatory?)
Remuneration could/should be increased.

As you might assume, there is opposition. Right wing “think tanks” (Heritage, CATO Institute) have long cranked out their antagonistic line: it would delay earlier marriage, already on the decline; private groups (churches) should/could do it; the US could just expand the Peace Corps and/or AmeriCorps. Unfortunately, that idea is out. George W. already started the cuts. Ironic, because both father, George H. W. and Mother, Barbara, supported voluntarism: “A Thousand Points of Light”. But those days are gone and President Trump has cut even more deeply into finances for AmeriCorps (C. Friedersdorf, *Atlantic*, 26 June 13).

Earlier, in the last decade, some progress began. Proposals were made in Congress (proponents, in many cases, now retired) for a “Universal Service Act” (*Pendulum*, 17 March 05). Different ideas were proposed (and could still be resurrected), such as appropriate compensation, e.g., four years tuition of college in return for two years of volunteering. “Interest is now, once again, at an all time high” (Alia E. Dastigir, *USA Today*, 10 Nov 17.) Benefits to the individual could be measured in dollars as well as personal growth and maturity (much as during the New Deal). To the nation, benefits would include diverse ethnic groups working together, literally re-building infrastructure. National unity would expand, certainly a good thing.

One does not have to search far for major supporters. Senator John McCain, who had both military and public service, voiced this conviction upon receiving the Liberty Medal in 2017:

“What a privilege it is to serve in this big, boisterous brawling, intemperate, strong, daring, beautiful, bountiful, brave magnificent country. With all our flaws, all our mistakes, with all the frailties of human nature as much on display as our virtues, with all the rancor and anger of our politics, we are blessed” (Dastigir). Opponents disparage wisdom, such as Senator McCain’s advice, to enhance public service. Haters gotta hate. Which side are you on? Is more and better public service outmoded? Or is it, instead, “an idea whose time has come?”