



A 'National Service' Revival Will Serve the State, Not The People

By Doug Bandow – July 1st, 2013

American culture and values are deteriorating, it is claimed. Probably true. But then, it likely has been true for many years.

What to do?

The hoary panacea of “national service” has reemerged. Just make selfish young people “serve” as part of a “shared experience” organized by Washington, and America will move upward, ever upward.

Service has a long and venerable history in the U.S. Americans’ generosity and penchant to organize to meet community needs were noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic, *Democracy in America*. And so it continues today. Most Americans give something to charity. Tens of millions of people volunteer time.

Such efforts are ever more important as the “Age of Politics” winds down. Even then-President Bill Clinton admitted: “Much of the work of America cannot be done by government, much other work cannot be done by government alone. The solution must be the American people through voluntary service to others.”

The country’s little platoons have responded, as they always have. Yet some politicians, pundits, and other elites believe such efforts, beyond Washington’s control or oversight, don’t count.

Which explains yet another round of proposals for national service. Observed columnist Michael Gerson, “These are tough times for the nation, by which I mean the idea of the nation, the concept of things national.” The answer? A grand new *national* service initiative.

Gerson explained: “How then does a democracy cultivate civic responsibility and shared identity? Taxation allows us to fund common purposes, but it does not provide common experiences. A rite of passage in which young people — rich and poor, liberal and conservative, of every racial background — work side by side to address public problems would create, at least, a vivid, lifelong memory of shared national purpose.”

He pointed to the proposal by former Gen. Stanley McChrystal to require government service. The Aspen Institute also is pushing to create a new federal program supported by the social expectation of service, military or civilian. The proposal is a complex mix of private as well as public, but the government bias is clear.

For instance, City Year CEO Michael Brown said the idea “is stirring. With its implementation, ‘Where will you do your service year?’ will rapidly become the most commonly asked question of America’s young people. But most importantly, young people will be inspired to answer the question: ‘The Marines!’, ‘Teach for America!’, ‘Air Force!’, ‘Habitat for Humanity!’, ‘The Army!’, ‘City Year!’, ‘The National Guard!’, ‘YouthBuild!’, ‘Navy!’, ‘AmeriCorps!’, ‘Coast Guard!’ and ‘Peace Corps!’.” Of these, only Habitat is private.

The Aspen Institute hosted the National Service Summit last week attended by 275 luminaries to promote the Franklin Project with its proposal for a million government-funded volunteers, intended to roughly match the number serving in the military. The effort, co-chaired by McChrystal, envisions voluntary service. However, at last year’s Aspen Ideas Festival he endorsed a mandatory program. And he was backed by former Adm. Mike Mullen, who argued: “I want a national service that would have the same effect as a draft: where everybody’s in.” Hospital president Elizabeth Nabel urged Congress to mandate a year or two of public service.

The idea of coercive universal “service” is not new. The concept goes back to the 19th century, to *Looking Backward*, a novel by lawyer and journalist Edward Bellamy. Bellamy envisioned compulsory service for all men and women between the ages of 21 and 45, resulting in a peaceful and prosperous utopia. Bellamy’s book was outsold only by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur* in its time and was translated into 20 different languages. Some 165 Bellamy clubs were formed to push his egalitarian social system.

Two decades later William James spoke of the need for a “moral equivalent of war,” in which all young men would be required to work for the community. He argued that “the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods,” and that national service would instill those same values in peacetime. As anachronistic as William James’ sexist and militarist vision may seem today, his rhetoric remains the touchstone for many national service advocates.

In succeeding decades a host of philosophers, policy analysts, politicians, and pundits proffered their own proposals for national service. Although most of these measures fell short of James’ extravagant utopian vision, proponents still wanted to transform society. For instance, declared the Potomac Institute in 1979:

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.

The legislative process always ended up shrinking grandiose proposals into much more limited programs, such as the Peace Corps, VISTA, the Corporation for National and Community Service, AmeriCorps, and various local and state initiatives. But the expansive vision never died.

Thus, the Aspen Institute crowd talked of instilling values of citizenship and service, finding common ground, creating a shared experience, cultivating leadership, and sharing a common

cause. Gerson imagined that national service would demonstrate “gratitude for our patrimony and affection for our traditions and institutions.”

Despite the always benevolent objectives and ennobling rhetoric, the basic question remains: service to and organized by whom? Americans have worked in their communities for others since before the nation’s founding and opportunities for similar kinds of service abound today. Businesses, churches, charities, and schools all participate.

Much more could be done, of course, especially given America’s serious problems. But what makes service in the U.S. so vital is that it is decentralized, privately organized, directed at meeting human, not political, needs, and an outgrowth of people’s sense of compassion and obligation. Public exhortations may encourage some people to act, but “leaders” who spend more time urging others to help than helping—those who had “other priorities,” like Vice President Richard Cheney, when they were young and called upon to serve—aren’t the best salesmen for the obligation to volunteer.

The very fact that community service is so valuable argues against turning it into a federal project. Government funding and control would squeeze voluntarism into a larger social plan implemented and enforced by Washington. The welfare state is the history of public enterprise pushing out private assistance. The impact was largely unintentional, but natural—indeed, inevitable. Increased taxes left individuals with less money to give; government’s assumption of responsibility for providing welfare reduced the perceived duty of individuals to respond to their neighbors’ needs; and the availability of public programs gave recipients an alternative to private assistance, one which made fewer demands for the reform of destructive behaviors and lifestyles. Over time, the welfare state pushed aside charitable enterprises as well as a host of benevolent societies that once served the needs of tradesmen, minorities, and other.

Even some churches abandoned the mission of being salt and light. In response to President Clinton’s call on every church to employ one person then on welfare Rev. Albert Pennybacker of the National Council of Churches responded that “Our job is not to compensate for the failure of government to do its job.” Government’s job? Religious orders once provided a host of social services, including health care, education, and charity. Now even some churches apparently see aid to the needy as the state’s responsibility.

Government promoted/mandated service could further supplant private responsibility. A massive federal “service” program would suggest that giving and organizing giving (deciding who should receive money and volunteers) belong to government rather than society. It would become even easier for the average person to say in effect: “I gave at the office.”

A national program, whether voluntary or mandatory, also would treat “public” service as inherently better than private service. Yet being paid/forced by the government to shelve books in a library is no more laudable than being paid to stock shelves at Barnes & Noble. A host of private sector jobs provide enormous public benefits—consider health care professionals, medical and scientific researchers, business entrepreneurs and inventors, and artists. Many of them earn less than they could in alternative work; they have chosen to “serve” in their own way. Yet government programs that equate public employment or publicly-endorsed employment with service effectively denigrate private service.

More subtle but no less damaging may be the impact on support for volunteer groups. It certainly is simpler if the IRS empties pockets nationwide, hands the money to a government

entity, which, in turn, gives grants to or hires workers for charity. But the right way is for individuals to send their money directly to deserving groups.

Indeed, genuine charity doesn't mean giving away someone else's money. As Marvin Olasky, author of *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, has pointed out, compassion once meant to "suffer with." The giver also learned from the recipient and benefited from the relationship.

Over time compassion came to mean writing a check. It increasingly has become equated with making someone else write a check. Yet turning the job of funding private groups, however worthy, over to the state is likely to encourage people to further abdicate their civic responsibilities. To strengthen civil society and recreate a sense of duty to help the needy requires encouraging people to contribute as well as volunteer.

In fact, thoughtfully choosing which charities to support and monitoring their activities are important forms of volunteerism. Sending money to Washington for distribution to private groups benefits the recipients, no one else. In contrast, people informing themselves about service, supporting worthwhile organizations, giving voluntarily, and getting involved in other ways strengthen the sinews of community. Getting more people to more thoughtfully give more money should be a top social priority. But government-funded service, though implemented in the name of volunteerism, makes it less necessary for people to volunteer time and money.

Moreover, public welfare programs at least are nominally accountable to taxpayers. Not so private entities, some of which may have philosophical or theological viewpoints that conflict with those of many taxpayers. However, excluding such groups would put them at a notable disadvantage—a concern with welfare spending that led to President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative, which delivered federal grants to religious groups. Conflicts are inevitable.

Is it realistic to expect people to volunteer more time and money? They are less likely to do so the less need they see to do so, and they will see less need to do so if the government not only provides public welfare but creates its own "service" programs and funds and mans nominally private charitable groups. If the government essentially supplants the independent sector by providing one million volunteers, let alone four million "service" conscripts as part of a mandatory, universal program, why should anyone give?

National service suffers from two other significant failings. Having the federal government attempt to organize or oversee (with money comes strings) work for a million 18-year-olds—or worse, the roughly four million who turn 18 every year as part of a universal scheme—should horrify anyone with a clear-eyed view of Washington. Never mind the difficulty of impecunious Uncle Sam finding tens of billions of dollars for the program. There's no reason to assume such a shared experience would be particularly positive, let alone uplifting.

National service advocates long have concocted detailed estimates of "unmet social needs" which offered the illusion of precision but were meaningless. The demand for "service" is infinite if there is no consideration of opportunity costs, what could otherwise be achieved with the money and labor involved. The draft military wasted human resources because it paid little for conscript labor. The idea that Uncle Sam would employ millions of 18-year-olds every year doing morally uplifting and socially serious work is a fantasy.

Mandatory programs, which remain the ultimate objective of many national service advocates, have a far more serious moral failing. What conceivable justification is there for jailing people

who do not want to shelve books at the local bookstore? Or clean bedpans at the local hospital? A war of national survival at least offers a plausible argument for conscription. It is quite another thing to draft the young to impose an elite vision of social engineering.

Last year McChrystal expressed doubt that “young people really would fight it if it was fair, if everybody did it.” Surely Vietnam demonstrated that young people will battle for their freedom. No doubt, most would do less to avoid spending a year picking up litter in the local park than fighting guerrillas in Southeast Asia, but it wouldn’t take many recalcitrants to create bureaucratic and legal chaos. If even one percent of young people resisted, there would be more than 40,000 lawbreakers. Even more likely would be passive resistance—failing to show up at work, doing little on the job, disobeying supervisors, and otherwise treating mandated service with the respect that it deserved. What then? Fines? Jail time? Imagine the lessons taught: those well past the age of service using force to make the young “good.”

America would benefit from a renewed commitment to service. People, in community with one another, should help meet America’s many serious social problems. There is a role for government: officials should eliminate public programs that discourage personal independence and self-responsibility, disrupt and destroy communities and families, and hinder the attempts of people and groups to respond to problems around them. Moreover, those demanding that others serve should lead by example.

But private activism needs neither oversight nor subsidy from Uncle Sam. Some of the volunteerism can be part-time and some full-time; some can take place within the family, some within churches, and some within civic and community groups. Some may occur through profit-making ventures. There is no predetermined definition of service, pattern of appropriate involvement, set of “needs” to be met or tasks to be fulfilled. There certainly is no need to create a “national” system to inculcate elite values.

America long has benefited from humanitarian impulses, private association, and social diversity. We need more service, not government service.