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Serve America lets Congress take another bow

By [Gene Healy](#)

Examiner Columnist | 4/7/09 4:36 AM

Last week, the House passed the Serve America Act (SAA), which will triple the number of federally funded "volunteer" positions, create a "Clean Energy Corps" to weatherize homes, and make September 11th a "National Day of Service."

Like many federal assaults on the taxpayer, the SAA is a bipartisan offense: It passed by huge margins in both houses. Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-MA, the primary sponsor, got a standing ovation after the vote was in, and co-sponsor Orrin Hatch, the Utah Republican, gushed that "the whole Kennedy family has been a service family."

Hatch's statement neatly captures the fallacy behind the act - the notion that service to America is principally service to the American state.

The SAA is more carrot than stick, subsidizing volunteerism rather than mandating it. But the Obama administration prefers a more coercive approach if and when they can get away with it. Obama's campaign-trail plan would have forced schools to require 50 hours of community service a year, making charity as popular among teens as study hall and mandatory pep rallies.

In 2006, then-Rep. Rahm Emanuel, now Obama's chief of staff, coauthored *The Plan: Big Ideas for America* with New Democrat guru Bruce Reed. Among their big ideas was "universal civilian service for every young American."

"It's time for a real Patriot Act that brings out the patriot in all of us. This is not a draft," Rahm and Reed insisted. Instead, "young people will know that between the ages of 18 and 25, the nation will enlist them for three months of civilian service." See the difference?

Political elites have long believed that Americans should be forced to perform good works. We need "the moral equivalent of war," progressive philosopher William James said in 1906, a community service program that would conscript young Americans to "get the childishness knocked out of them."

Some on the Right share James's vision. Shortly after 9/11, Sen. John McCain, R-AZ, lamented that a draft would be a hard-sell politically, but subsidized national service could help address "a spiritual crisis in our national culture."

Americorps programs that had kids "living together in barracks" and performing daily calisthenics in

front of city halls, should be the model for "a service program consciously structured along military lines," McCain said.

Obama's vision is less paramilitary than McCain's. But like McCain, Obama believes that politicized public service is the best way to serve one's fellow man. Obama's website brags that he "passed up lucrative law firm jobs" to work as a community organizer. (As a recovering lawyer still traumatized by the billable-hour drudgery of my past, I can assure him he didn't miss much.)

Of course, people *should* help their neighbors out. But why does that effort require federal subsidies?

When the government gets into the business of funding community service, the results are, unsurprisingly, politicized and wasteful. Americorps, the pride of the Clinton legacy, has, among other things, sponsored a toy-gun "buyback" program that gave kids \$5 for each plastic pistol they turned in.

The price-tag for SAA - about \$6 billion over five years - is hardly staggering in an era of trillion-dollar deficits. But if we're going to add to that crushing pile of debt, we ought to have a good reason. Do we?

In 1831, Alexis De Tocqueville marveled at the number of charitable associations he saw while touring America. "Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France… in the United States you will be sure to find an association." Yet today, the American intelligentsia seems to believe that unless a barn-raising gets a federal subsidy, it hasn't really happened at all.

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country," JFK declared in his inaugural address. Milton Friedman, who helped end the draft and did more for his country than most of our "public servants," pointed out how wrongheaded that perspective was: "The free man will ask neither what his country can do for him nor what he can do for his country."

Americans have always been a charitable people. But when they help their neighbors voluntarily, without federal oversight or funding, it's hard for politicians to take credit for their service. Perhaps that's the real point of the Serve America Act.

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