

National Service: Select History and Prospects

A paper by Ray Beery for the Blue Ridge Torch Club, April 21, 2009

Introduction

I'm here tonight to talk about citizenship. Specifically, American citizenship. There's a simple proposition that says, you enjoy invaluable benefits as a citizen, but you also need to pay something back. You have obligations, duties that you can fulfill through national service. What is national service, anyway? Let me quote from two presidents and one senator.

Here are John F. Kennedy's stirring words: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country!"

Fast forward to today. Barack Obama says that Americans honor members of the military who are fighting wars "not only because they are the guardians of liberty, but because they embody the spirit of service—work either in the armed forces or in the civil arena." He called for speedy passage of the Hatch – Kennedy Serve America Act.

About Serve America, Senator Orrin Hatch explains, "National service is not a job or a career move for these individuals who volunteer. Indeed, no one is getting rich by participating in these programs. Those who join are motivated to give back to this great country."

I like those quotes, and hope you do, too.

Let's see if there's a common notion of national service. Can we define it? Your definition depends upon what generation you belong to.

If you are generation X (30-40) or a millennial (late teens), national service is what you hear about in high school and college: It is voluntary community service. You measure it by the number of hours you work in a food bank or at the hospital, and the corresponding benefits you get toward graduation or tuition breaks.

If you are a baby boomer, national service means the hated Vietnam draft. My son went to college on a Navy ROTC scholarship, half his University of Virginia expenses paid. That was an alternative to the draft. But wait, national service in the 60s and 70s also means the Peace Corps and some other experiments like the Youth Conservation Corps. My daughter remembers her summer in the Maryland YCC and believes her adult life was shaped in part by that experience.

Finally, if you belong to the WW II greatest generation and its Korean War younger edge, national service surely was the military. You either joined up or got drafted. There was a payoff: through the GI Bill, VA home loans and job training.

My siblings and I, and our friends, were in that latter group. Over five decades now, I've had countless discussions about what military service meant to us. My kind of service was extremely good for me. It made me understand who we are, we Americans from all corners of this continent, and how we've woven and strengthened a national fabric from the threads of diverse backgrounds we were born into. It's the melting pot, up close and personal.

A Personal Story

My grade school years in small-town Kansas were in the midst of the Great Depression. Though I had absolutely no concept of national service, I watched with huge excitement and interest as FDR's WPA (Works Progress Administration) put my uncles and their friends to work building a municipal building, high school and swimming pool. I later knew this was a national service program. At the same time, I saw newsreel clips about the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) for jobless young men, who built enduring improvements across our national parks and forests.

At the end of WW II, my two older brothers returned from the war and had the GI Bill in college and auto mechanics job training, respectively. During this time I was a freshman in high school and participated on the debate team. Our 1946 topic was, "Resolved, that the United States should adopt a program of Universal Military Training." I favored that idea, but Congress turned it down.

Half-way through college, I enlisted in the Army for the Korean War. During training, I was thrown together with Wisconsin dairy farmers, poor near-illiterate Alabama blacks from Alabama, poor and illiterate guys, and some tough characters from the Bronx. That was certainly a different group than my buddies at the KU fraternity house. It is this set of experiences that colors the ideas I present in this paper.

National Service, an Obligation of Citizenship

National service programs have been around for a while. Let me cover four of them, then conclude with a look at prospects today and a personal evaluation.

Part I – History of National Service: CCC, UMT, Peace Corps, AmeriCorps

Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

President Roosevelt launched the CCC with other New Deal program, in 1933. It was a work relief program for unemployed young men. Highly popular, it operated in every State and lasted until it was no longer needed in WW II. The enrollment period was six months, and could be extended for three more six-month periods, to a maximum of two years. If a man wanted to leave early, there was no serious penalty.

Across our national parks, forests, and rivers, you could find rough field camps operated by the Army. Recruits received apprentice training. The work projects were, of course, civilian in nature.

In the CCC, you got paid. Every month, \$30, but you had to send \$25 home! By any measure, the CCC was big. It cost \$3 billion, that's in 1930s dollars. When in full operation, there were 505,000 enrollees in over 4,000 camps. The total number of graduates was over three million.

As a classic case of national service, the CCC stands out. Few of our political leaders today are old enough to remember the program, but many know the story.

Universal Military Training (UMT)

Think George C. Marshall and Harry Truman. In 1946 they worked to get a bit of military service for all young men. The major purpose was to have soldiers ready for a crisis threatening the nation. However, training would not neglect character building, firing up a sense of civic responsibility.

Marshall knew the value of citizenship development. By 1951, with the country immersed in the Korean War, Congress did deliver a Military Training and Service Act. It approved UMT in principle, based on induction of youths for six months' service in a 'National Security Training Corps.' " Unfortunately, separate legislation for UMT failed to pass.

The Army had carried out a demonstration project for UMT in 1947, at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Here are a few colorful snips from a public relations sergeant who wrote it up at the time.

"On a typical Monday, 700 enlisted recruits boarded trains for Ft. Knox. They were between 18 and 19. Some had come from California, some from Maine. Some were obvious college students; a few were as obviously illiterate.

"The UMT plan calls for eight weeks of individual training. Then, eleven weeks of branch training. Finally, three weeks of unit training in the field. The UMT test covers a total of six months.

"Spiritual exposure. There is compulsory chapel for the first four weeks. Physical development. A milk bar is substituted for the traditional beer hall. Mental training. The information and education center offers USAFI and university extension courses, along with skill classes in languages, arts and crafts and radio. A special training unit deals with illiterates and non-English speakers.

"We hope that UMT will become a year of life which each young man will look forward to without dread and look back upon with pride." End of quotes.

Well, UMT came and went in those days. A few old soldiers like me suffer nostalgia remembering it.

Peace Corps

John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps dates from 1961. It got a lot of publicity for several years. It continues, largely out-of mind, today. A volunteer signs up for two years. They serve America in peaceful missions by living and working in developing countries. Though only 195,000 volunteers have served, most Americans can identify one or more alumni in their home communities. Senator Chris Dodd is one example.

The Peace Corps is a federal program, funded in the regular annual appropriations. For 2009, that is a mere \$330 million for 7,800 participants. What do they do? The work areas are education 35%, health and AIDS 21%, business 15%, environment 15%, youth 5%, agriculture 5% and all other 4%. Who are they? Six out of ten are women. Average age is 27. They are predominantly college grads, 94%.

AmeriCorps

The most significant national service program following the Peace Corps is AmeriCorps, created in 1993 by Bill Clinton. Although most people think of it as a voluntary program for college students, in fact it enrolls adults at any age and from a range of backgrounds. Federal funds pay for it. Today, 75,000 participants serve annually, for 12-month terms. It offers a chance to apply skills and ideals toward helping others and meeting critical needs in communities here at home.

The structure of AmeriCorps is a network of partnerships with local and national nonprofits. Five of the service fields are:

1. Tutor and mentor disadvantaged youth
2. Improve health services
3. Build affordable housing
4. Clean parks and streams, and
5. Help communities respond to disasters

What's in it for members? Well, new skills and experiences ... plus, satisfaction that comes from helping others. And a cash grant. Full time members finish up with an education award of \$4,725.

Part II – Prospects for National Service

Kennedy-Hatch Act

On National Service Day in September, 2008, Senators Ted Kennedy and Orrin Hatch introduced the Serve America Bill. Embraced by President Obama, it was re-introduced in January 2009.

In his address to a joint session of Congress on January 24, the President said, "I ask Congress to send me the bipartisan legislation that bears the name of Senator Orrin Hatch, as well as an American who has never stopped asking what he can do for his country, Senator Edward Kennedy."

With a five-year federal fund of \$6 billion, this program will expand AmeriCorps nearly four times, from 75,000 to 250,000 members. It also widens the scope. "Use service to meet specific national challenges. Put service to work to solve our most pressing challenges, such as tackling the dropout crisis and strengthening our schools; improving energy efficiency; safeguarding the environment; improving health care in low-income communities; expanding economic opportunities for low-income individuals; and preparing for and responding to disasters and emergencies."

The Senate and House bills were compromised, approved and sent to the President on March 31.

Here are the key details.

1. Authorize \$6 billion over five years, \$1.1 billion in 2010
2. Increase AmeriCorps from its current 75,000 positions to 250,000
3. Four new service corps: clean energy, education, healthy futures and veterans service
4. For a minimum of 10 months' service, award \$5,350 for college expenses.

AmeriCorps teams will continue their traditional community construction and improvement projects. The Clean Energy Corps will encourage energy efficiency and conservation. The Education Corps will help increase student engagement, achievement and graduation. The Healthy Futures Corps will improve health care access. The Veterans Service Corps will enhance services for veterans. All this work is carried out in government entities and in the many non-profit organizations of our country.

I'll conclude now with my evaluation of national service today.

As for a universal or mandatory program, there is no significant movement in that direction. The all-volunteer military, including voluntary enlistment in the National Guard—these are the shape of national service for defense.

The new stuff is all community service, and it is voluntary, too. If we reflect on the experience of the Peace Corps, I think many would agree with me that the effect in peoples' minds is far greater than the size of the program. So, the Serve America program should well bring the same effect. The truth is, a very small number of American youth will be participating. For the rest of us, let's support and commend them, and give their work full publicity.

We have our national service policy for the next five years. I modestly suggest that there are two big gaps, though. Here's what they are.

First, the linkage is weak between the body of volunteers and the specific work they will do in the 20,000 non-profits. To fix this, perhaps some community boards of advisors will arise; something like the draft boards of old.

Second, and more important, is devising a path toward more participants. Here, something good can happen in high schools and colleges. Let's look to America's teachers ... and to intelligent youth of high spirit. Seems to me they will demonstrate that young citizens DO exercise their civic responsibilities, and they will help more of their classmates to do the same.

Thank you.