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National Service on a Community Scale

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In August 2000, George W. Bush began his first presidential campaign in my hometown, Indianapolis. I watched as the then-governor of Texas visited church-based volunteers who work with urban children and listened as he rallied citizens to become soldiers in an army of compassion. As president, he celebrated service again in his first inaugural address, telling his fellow Americans:

“What you do is as important as anything government does. I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort ... to serve your nation, beginning with your neighbor. I ask you to be citizens: citizens, not spectators; citizens, not subjects; responsible citizens, building communities of service and a nation of character.”¹

In his State of the Union Message a year later, the president challenged every American to perform 4,000 hours of service in his or her lifetime. His themes reflect how strongly conservative Republicans value service, even if we sometimes differ with liberals and centrists about Washington’s role in its advancement. When the

president asked me to chair the board of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), he made it clear he wanted the program enhanced, not diminished. Yet, despite strong support from Democrats and from every governor for the expansion agenda pushed by former President Clinton, broad-based bipartisan support for enlarging the federal role in service has failed to materialize.

Why have things been so difficult for the national service movement? Why do so many conservatives still oppose the expansion, if not the existence itself, of CNCS? And how can we resolve those problems in a way that expands service? As mayor of Indianapolis, I was deeply involved in building leadership in urban neighborhoods. I worried that a federal program that injected its paid employees into grassroots programs and then tangled the programs in red tape might retard, rather than advance, our drive to enhance civil society in the Tocquevillean sense. Even now, as chairman of the CNCS board and as an advocate of expansion, I retain some of my original anxiety.

So, how do we start building a solid base of support for the growth of service? Clarifying its purpose is the first step. We need to begin by acknowledging and resolving major policy differences that have been papered over for too long.

The first big philosophical difference is between those who emphasize the “community” in service and those who emphasize the “national.” On the one hand, the service ethic that the president extols manifests itself in every city every day. Neighbors help neighbors, motivated by caring and often by faith. On the other hand, the Progressive Policy Institute and others tend to see service through a national lens. As explained elsewhere in this book, they propose making national civil or military service a civic rite of passage for America’s youth. Indeed, many liberals and conservatives share the view that all young Americans should serve their country in some way. Just this year in *National Review Online*, William F. Buckley Jr. wrote: “My own proposal was that Americans endorse the idea of universal service without conscription. If the ethos were vital, we could look on universal service as the Swiss have for gen-

erations looked upon military service: It is something everybody simply—does.”²

Despite Buckley’s intellectual leadership, most of his fellow conservatives remain skeptics. They worry that universal service could slip too easily into conscription, and from there to the horrible outcome of the government deciding how and where each young American who does not choose to enter the military should perform civilian service for a year. Making service a civic rite of passage is a big, important idea. But without bipartisan support (or anything remotely close to it), it will not be the engine that drives a substantial expansion of service, at least in the near term.

Leslie Lenkowsky, the former chief executive of what was then called the Corporation for National Service, was responding to this tension between community and national perspectives when he restored the word “community” to the corporation’s name, just as Congress originally intended. The change was comforting for those of us who believe that service starts in small neighborhood platoons and adds up; it gave us a place at the corporation to hang our hats. Ironically, although the name change created more room for consensus, it makes day-to-day management of the corporation a constant compromise. The very different views of Washington’s role in service reflected in the corporation’s name make it hard to generate the intensity needed to sustain expansion.

A second, related tension focuses on the competition for grants among national and community organizations. Many of the very best service programs that CNCS funds have a leg firmly grounded on each level. Highly effective, professionally managed national organizations like City Year, Teach for America, Jumpstart, and the American Red Cross are strong competitors for grants and accomplish much at the local level with those funds. They submit better applications, know CNCS and state commission staff members better, and have larger infrastructures. The danger is that national groups with such advantages might win ever larger percentages of grants at the expense of grassroots groups, which may be deserving of support but less savvy about what it takes to submit a winning pro-

posal. So the corporation is left applying arbitrary limits on grant awards to ease the tension. Again, the compromises leave everyone a little dissatisfied and dampen enthusiasm for expansion.

The third big issue that needs to be resolved is whether government should pay individuals for service; in other words, is it really service if it is, in fact, work paid for by the government? Full-time members of AmeriCorps' 2004-05 class can receive annual stipends ranging from \$10,197 to \$20,934. The federal share of these stipends cannot exceed 85 percent of the \$10,197 minimum allowance (which works out to about \$8,700 per member), with the members' programs picking up the balance.³ In addition to the living allowance, members can receive a \$4,725 federally funded education award upon successful completion of their term of service. Washington's exact share varies dramatically from program to program. Teach for America participants, for example, receive very modest support from the corporation, in addition to the education awards, but they receive salaries paid entirely by their schools. The National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), a modern version of the New Deal-era Civilian Conservation Corps, is the corporation's most expensive program per member, costing \$21,000 per year, including living expenses.

CNCS has made great financial strides by increasing local matching and reducing costs per member. But defending service by proving that it pays so poorly as to constitute volunteerism seems both uninspiring and arbitrary and is not a very satisfactory way to make a normative distinction about volunteerism. To create bipartisan enthusiasm for expansion, conservative advocates of service need to rethink and better articulate why government is involved and then why that involvement should be enhanced.

The last major problem area arises from the need to measure outcomes and guard against wrongdoing. AmeriCorps differs from other government programs, in that it was created to help both the young people who serve their country and the needy people whom they serve. Take a tutoring program, for example. To judge its effectiveness, should we evaluate students' test scores and/or the experiences of the service workers who did the tutoring? It is easy to say both, but

in practice almost impossible to produce both results well, at least in an empirically tested manner. Even worse, many times delivery problems by local organizations become surrogate measures of success (or failure). Records not kept to government standards can lead to CNCS Inspector General audits of local programs, which, in turn, fuel conservatives' anxieties about excessive federal interference in local affairs. In addition, inevitably a small number of the tens of thousands of local people in thousands of organizations will behave irresponsibly, or even criminally. These mistakes can be reduced with very tight rules from the top and accompanying audits. But the more rules we hand down and the more audits we conduct, the more we validate conservatives' worst fear that the federal government is using its subsidies to impose its will on grassroots organizations.

If we want to expand service in a major way, we need to articulate an invigorating and inclusive message about service that clarifies policies and reduces tensions. That message should reflect the following principles:

1. We should clearly emphasize community over national service.

As CNCS board member William Schambra has observed:

“Too many of service’s friends assume it should be aimed at strengthening national purpose and oneness, which is fine sometimes, i.e., in war and national crisis, but not sustainable at such a high pitch over time. Conservatism’s idea of service has to do with linking folks with local community, quietly and over the long haul, and for that purpose, using paid staff to strengthen local nonprofits and neighborhoods is crucial. The promotion of national community and civic engagement in national causes tends to erode local community attachments over time, whereas building up local community provides the permanent understructure for larger, national purposes when occasions present themselves.”⁴

Anchoring expansion on community service—enabling more small platoons—would bring the service movement squarely within the

president's compassion agenda. He believes that government can best help the needy through a network of local associations, faith-based organizations, and nonprofit groups closest to the people, rather than through cumbersome bureaucracies. Governments should stop trying to monopolize the doing of good deeds; instead, they should contract for some services while stimulating more local volunteerism. Conservatives and liberals should both be able to rally around a model where once government accepts an obligation to help people in a certain way it then looks to the best network of providers to produce these results—both paid and volunteer. More Americans engaged in service both helps those in need and strengthens the patterns of local community service that are the foundation of our democracy.

2. Expansion's explicit goal should be more people doing more service. We should resolve the dispute between defining success on the basis of service or on the basis of its results in favor of the former. Of course, watching and measuring, to the extent possible, the results for those who are helped is worthwhile, but holding volunteerism hostage to a government definition of success seems inherently worrisome. We also must develop a culture that reiterates the duty, obligation, and privilege of service. A longitudinal study of service for CNCS revealed that participation in AmeriCorps State and National programs consistently enhanced participants' civic engagement, employment, and life-skill outcomes.⁵ Service helps communities in numerous ways. In Indianapolis, I noticed how middle-class citizens who worked with urban youth came to understand them and their problems more deeply.

Service connects people to neighborhood groups, building them up and extending their reach. When a shelter in a church basement gets stronger through more volunteers, it builds up its influence and produces badly needed social capital. Positive outcomes for those assisted through service, of course, are important, but sufficiently difficult to measure and so broad as to be distracting. CNCS should concentrate on its core service mission.

3. The federal government should accept a role of enhancing a culture of service and helping to finance the infrastructure that supports this effort, but it should not consider itself a primary source of volunteers. Government agencies can help by better utilizing citizen volunteers to advance their missions. Government programs, and grants where applicable, should more explicitly consider volunteer utilization as a criterion for selection. Even in the day-to-day work of an agency, citizens can play a much larger part.

The Department of Interior, for example, created a user-friendly Internet tool to match volunteers with service opportunities and offered it to other federal agencies. These tools have linked thousands of motivated volunteers with thousands of important tasks. In this same spirit, CNCS should concentrate on the huge opportunity of enhancing volunteerism among retired baby boomers, whose contributions can benefit civic life, and their lives, enormously. Such an approach would produce a more vibrant civil society and build more durable support for future government investments.

The president's service initiatives in the wake of 9/11 clearly demonstrate the advantages of advocacy. By executive order, he created USA Freedom Corps, led by his close adviser and assistant John Bridgeland. Instead of spending tens of millions of dollars and countless years building and managing a website to encourage volunteerism, Freedom Corps decided to provide the "front door" through which Americans could find information about volunteering in their own communities. It built an infrastructure for service that featured 900 local "Citizen Corps Councils" in every state, hundreds of volunteers in police and medical service, and 700 business chief executives who have pledged to find volunteer opportunities for their 5 million employees.⁶

Conservatives need to accept that active and expanded volunteerism requires a robust infrastructure. Both as mayor and prosecutor, I tried to launch a number of volunteer programs. The ones that worked best typically had talented full-time staff directors, careful application requirements, training, and constant evaluation. Weak, ad hoc support made volunteers' work less effective and less satisfy-

ing. It is naïve to hope for a major renaissance of volunteerism without the money to leverage it.

Effective solutions require a new form of governance, where public officials produce successful solutions by envisioning a network of providers from different sectors, conceptualizing how the many parts fit together and then investing government dollars to leverage results. In this model, CNCS should look at how it can invest its resources in a way that facilitates the greatest number of Americans possible volunteering in their communities.

4. The federal government’s involvement should be broader, and different. First, we need to rethink how CNCS itself stimulates service. Devolving control to states, and even individuals, would strengthen community efforts. Today, CNCS administers its programs through a bewildering mix of federal and state agencies. These need to be dramatically simplified. More authority should be turned over to those states able to accept it. Governors have state service commissions and staffs that could generally accept more authority.

As it rationalizes its management structure, CNCS should re-evaluate its relationships with its top national organizations. Rather than force groups like Teach for America and City Year to continue straddling the national/local divide and arbitrarily limit their growth, the corporation should treat them as part of its support structure. Many of these strong national players provide better infrastructure for service than CNCS itself. The corporation should outsource recruitment, training, and technical assistance to these national organizations and others of a more conservative stripe and encourage them to “franchise” their back-office support services. By doing so, CNCS can broaden and diversify service opportunities for grassroots groups.

We also should give AmeriCorps workers more control over their service benefits. Awarding benefits to members directly, rather than to the programs they work for, is one way to do this. We should adopt the GI Bill or Pell Grant model. Let’s let service-minded citizens decide whether to use these educational vouchers themselves or pass them along to their children or grandchildren. This would help diver-

sify programs, cause them to compete more for members, and allow smaller faith-based and community service providers to participate without having to apply for and obtain a government grant that has little more than reporting requirements.

Since community participation supports democracy itself, a much broader array of government agencies should be involved. Agencies can take simple steps like the Department of Interior volunteer site mentioned. Or officials in many departments when evaluating grants could add a criterion for volunteer leveraging. Or perhaps there are instances where agencies could provide monetary incentives, such as the Department of Education granting discounts on student loan paybacks to those young adults accomplishing certain levels of service.

We conservatives think of ourselves as Tocquevillean in approach. Let’s use those important lessons to sharpen the true message of service, but then support and enlarge it in order to truly maintain and celebrate the great advantages of the American experiment.

ENDNOTES

¹ “President George W. Bush’s Inaugural Address” January 20, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>.

² Buckley, William F. Jr., *Saving the Democrats: Where Might the Party Go in the Immediate Years Ahead?*, Jan. 7, 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com/buckley/wfb200501071114.asp>.

³ *Corporation for National and Community Service*, March 2004, http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/circulars/a133_compliance/04/cncs.doc.

⁴ William Schambra, conversation with the author, December 2004.

⁵ Abt Associates Inc., 2004, *Serving Country and Community: A Longitudinal Study of Service in AmeriCorps, Early Findings*, Washington: Corporation for National and Community Service.

⁶ Goldsmith, Stephen and William Eggers, *Governing by Network: The New Shape of the Public Sector*, Washington: Brookings Institution, 2004.