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The Case for Universal Service

| BY WILLIAM A. GALSTON

America should move toward a system of compulsory, full-time, 18-month service for all able-bodied high school graduates (and in the case of dropouts, all 18-year-olds). They should be allowed to choose between military or civilian service, but if all slots in the military were filled, they would have to perform civilian service. It would cost at least \$60 billion per year to fully implement this system, which would certainly slow its development and could well impose a ceiling on participation. A lottery, to which all are exposed and from which none but the unfit can escape, would be the best response to these constraints.

I come to this position via three routes. The first is public service. From 1993 to 1995 I served as deputy assistant to President Clinton for domestic policy, in which capacity I represented the Domestic Policy Council on the task force that was working (against considerable odds) to turn the president's campaign pledge on national service into legislative reality. I believed then, as I do today, that national service can play a key role in revitalizing citizenship. I was dismayed to discover that budgetary pressures, lack of support

from some highly placed congressional Democrats, and ideological hostility on the part of right-wing Republicans combined to constrict national service to a fraction of Clinton's original vision. While support for the program has expanded and outright opposition has diminished in the decade since its inception, opportunities to serve are still much less plentiful than they ought to be.

Scholarly research is my second path to universal service. I am a university professor who studies patterns of citizenship and civic engagement, especially among young Americans. Even a casual glance at trends over the past three decades reveals that something has gone awry. While young people are more highly educated than ever and have access to far more information, they tend to know less about their country, pay less attention to news about public affairs, and participate less energetically in political and civic life than did earlier generations of American youth. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that lowered expectations of citizens have contributed to this decline and that higher expectations are part of the solution. Universal service would express, in a particularly vivid and effective way, our collective decision to reinvigorate citizenship.

My third route to universal service is military service. I came of age as the Vietnam War was at its peak, was drafted out of graduate school in late 1968, and spent two years as an enlisted man in the U.S. Marine Corps. The Vietnam-era military draft was widely regarded as arbitrary and unfair, and it was held responsible for dissension within the military as well as the wider society. In the immediate wake of its disaster in Vietnam, the United States made a historic decision to end the draft and institute an All-Volunteer Force (AVF).

On one level, it's hard to argue with success. The formula of high-quality volunteers, plus intensive training, plus investment in state-of-the-art equipment, has produced the most formidable military in history by far. Evidence suggests that the military's performance, especially since 1990, has bolstered public trust and confidence. For example, a recent Gallup survey of public opinion trends since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 indicates that while the share of Americans expressing confidence in religious leaders fell from 68 per-

cent to 45 percent, and for Congress from 40 percent to 29 percent, the percentage expressing confidence in the military rose from under 30 percent to 78 percent. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, the confidence in the military rose from 20 percent to 64 percent. (Remarkably, these figures reflect sentiment in late 2002, *before* our impressive victory in Iraq.)

While these gains in institutional performance and public confidence are impressive, they hardly end the discussion. As every reader of Machiavelli (or the Second Amendment) knows, the organization of the military is embedded in larger issues of citizenship and civic life. It is along these dimensions that the decision to create the AVF has entailed significant costs. First, the AVF reflects and has contributed to the development of what I call *optional citizenship*, the belief that being a citizen involves rights without responsibilities and that we need do for our country only that which we choose. Numerous studies have documented the rise of individual choice as the dominant norm of contemporary American culture, and many young people today believe being a good person—decent, kind, caring, and tolerant—is all it takes to be a good citizen. This duty-free understanding of citizenship is comfortable and undemanding; it is also profoundly mistaken.

Second, the AVF contributes to what I call *spectator citizenship*—the premise that good citizens can simply watch others doing the public's work on their behalf. This outlook makes it possible to decouple the question of whether *we* as a nation should do X from the question of whether *I* would do or participate in X. In a discussion with his students during the Gulf War, Cheyney Ryan, professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon, was struck by “how many of them saw no connection between whether the country should go to war and whether they would ... be willing to fight in it.” A similar disconnection exists today. Far higher percentages of young adults support the war against Iraq than would be willing to serve in it themselves.

Finally, the AVF has widened the gap between the orientation and experience of military personnel and the citizenry as a whole. This is

an empirically contested area, but some facts are indisputable. First, since the inauguration of the AVF, the share of officers identifying themselves as Republicans has nearly doubled, from 33 percent to 64 percent. (To be sure, officers were always technically volunteers, but the threat of the draft significantly affected young men's willingness to volunteer for officer candidacy.) Second, and more significantly, the share of elected officials with military experience has declined sharply. From 1900 through 1975, the percentage of members of Congress who were veterans was always higher than in the comparable age cohort of the general population. Since the mid-1990s the congressional percentage has been lower, and it continues to fall.

Lack of military experience does not necessarily imply hostility to the military. Rather, it means ignorance of the nature of military service, as well as diminished capacity and confidence to assess claims that military leaders make. (It is no accident that of all the postwar presidents, Dwight Eisenhower was clearly the most capable of saying no to the military's strategic assessments and requests for additional resources.)

For all these reasons, I believe we should dramatically expand AmeriCorps, the flagship program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. At the same time, we should reconsider the decision we made 30 years ago to institute an all-volunteer military. I hasten to add that I do not favor reinstating anything like the Vietnam-era draft. It is hard to see how a reasonable person could prefer that fatally flawed system to today's arrangement. The question, rather, is whether feasible reforms could preserve the gains of the past 30 years while more effectively promoting active, responsible citizenship across the full range of our social, economic, and cultural differences.

Classical liberals will object, of course, on the grounds that it would be an abuse of state power to move toward mandatory universal service. It is worth noting, however, that one of the high priests of classical liberalism disagrees. Consider the opening sentences of Chapter 4 of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, titled "Of the Limits to the Authority of Society Over the Individual":

"[E]veryone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct toward the rest. This conduct consists, first, in not injuring the interests of one another, or rather certain interests which, either by express legal provision or by tacit understanding, ought to be considered as rights; and secondly, in each person's bearing his share (to be fixed on some equitable principle) of the labors and sacrifices incurred for defending the society or its members from injury and molestation. These conditions society is justified in enforcing at all costs to those who endeavor to withhold fulfillment."

It is not difficult to recast Mill's position in the vocabulary of contemporary liberal political thought. Begin with a conception of society as a system of cooperation for mutual advantage. Society is legitimate when the criterion of mutual advantage is broadly satisfied (versus, say, a situation in which the government or some group systematically coerces some for the sake of others). When society meets the standard of broad legitimacy, each citizen has a duty to do his or her fair share to sustain the social arrangements from which all benefit, and society is justified in using its coercive power when necessary to ensure that this duty is performed. That legitimate societal coercion may include mandatory military service in the nation's defense, as well as other required activities that promote broad civic goals.

Brookings scholar Robert Litan has recently suggested that citizens should be "required to give something to their country in exchange for the full range of rights to which citizenship entitles them." Responding in a quasi-libertarian vein, Bruce Chapman, founder and president of the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, charges that this proposal has "no moral justification." Linking rights to concrete responsibilities, he says, is "contrary to the purposes for which [the United States] was founded and has endured." This simply isn't true. For example, the right to receive GI Bill benefits is linked to the fulfillment of military duties. Even the right to vote (and what could be

more central to citizenship than that?) rests on being law-abiding; many states disenfranchise convicted felons during their period of incarceration and probation. As Litan points out, this linkage is hardly tyrannical moralism. Rather, it reflects the bedrock reality that “the rights we enjoy are not free” and that it takes real work—contributions from citizens—to sustain constitutional institutions.

If each individual’s ownership of his or her own labor is seen as absolute, then society as such becomes impossible, because no political community can operate without resources, which ultimately must come from *someone*. Public choice theory predicts, and all of human history proves, that no polity of any size can subsist through voluntary contributions alone; the inevitable free riders must be compelled by law, backed by force, to do their part.

Still, the proponents of a free market/individual choice model might reasonably argue that if a noncoercive approach to military and civilian service can get the job done, there are no valid grounds for legal compulsion. To understand this argument’s shortcomings, consider the analogy (or disanalogy) between national service and domestic law enforcement. The latter is divided into two subcategories: voluntary activities (there’s no draft for police officers) and mandatory responsibilities (e.g., jury duty). Our current system of national service is all “police” and no “jury.” If we conducted domestic law enforcement on that model of service, we’d have what might be called the “All-Volunteer Jury,” in which we’d pay enough to ensure that the law enforcement system had a steady flow of jurors.

There are two compelling reasons not to move in this direction. First, citizens who self-select for jury duty would be likely to be unrepresentative of the population as a whole. Those who incur high opportunity costs (the gainfully employed, for example) would tend not to show up. The same considerations that militate against forced exclusion of racial and ethnic groups from jury pools should weigh equally against voluntary self-exclusion based on income or employment status. (We should ask ourselves why these considerations do not apply to the composition of the military.)

Second, all citizens should understand that citizenship is an *office*, not just a *status*. As an office, citizenship confers both rights and duties—indeed, sometimes both simultaneously. Service on juries is simultaneously a right, in the sense that there is a strong presumption against exclusion, and a duty, in the sense that there is a strong presumption against evasion. To move jury duty into the category of voluntary, compensated acts would be to remove one of the last reminders that citizenship is more than a legal status.

I would also offer an argument based on civic self-respect. From the standpoint of military competence, we might do just as well to engage foreigners (the All-Mercenary Armed Forces), as kings and princes did regularly during the 18th century. The cost might well be lower and the military performance just as high. Besides, if we hire foreigners to pick our crops, why shouldn’t we hire them to do our fighting?

There is also a moral argument to consider: Even if a mercenary army were reliable and effective, it would be wrong, perhaps shameful, to use our wealth to get noncitizens to fight for us. This is something we should do for ourselves as a self-respecting people. A similar moral principle applies as well in the purely domestic sphere, among citizens.

Consider military recruitment during the Civil War. In April 1861 President Lincoln called for, and quickly received, 75,000 volunteers. But hopes for a quick and easy Union victory were soon dashed, and the first conscription act was passed in March 1863. The act contained two opt-out provisions: An individual facing conscription could pay a \$300 fee to avoid a specific draft notice, or he could avoid service altogether by paying a substitute to volunteer for three years.

This law created a complex pattern of individual incentives and unanticipated social outcomes, such as anti-conscription riots among urban workers. Setting these aside, was there anything wrong in principle with these opt-out provisions? I think so. In the first place, there was an obvious distributional unfairness: The well-off could afford to avoid military service, while the poor and the working class couldn’t.

Historian James McPherson observes that the slogan “a rich man’s fight, but a poor man’s war” had a powerful impact, particularly among impoverished Irish laborers already chafing against the contempt with which they were regarded by the Protestant elite. Second, even if income and wealth had been more nearly equal, there would have been something wrong in principle with the idea that dollars could purchase exemption from an important civic duty. As McPherson notes, this provision suffered a poor reputation after the Civil War, and the designers of the World War I-era Selective Service Act were careful not to repeat it.

We can now ask: What is the difference between the use of personal resources to opt *out* of military service and the impact of personal resources (or lack thereof) on the decision to opt *in*? As a practical and a moral matter, the difference is less than the current system’s defenders would like to believe. To begin with, the decision to implement the AVF has profoundly affected the military’s educational and class composition. During World War II and the Korean War (indeed, through the early 1960s), roughly equal percentages of high school and college graduates served in the military, and about one-third of college graduates were in the enlisted (that is, nonofficer) ranks. Today, enlisted men and women are rarely college graduates, and elite colleges other than the service academies are far less likely to produce military personnel of any rank, officer or enlisted. As a recent lengthy feature story in *The New York Times* put it, today’s military “mirrors a working-class America.” Most of the young American men and women dying in Iraq represent working-class families from small-town and rural America.

Many have argued that this income skew is a virtue, not a vice, because the military extends good career opportunities to young men and women whose prospects are otherwise limited. There’s something to this argument, of course. But the current system purchases social mobility at the expense of social integration. Today’s privileged young people tend to grow up hermetically sealed from the rest of society. Episodic volunteering in soup kitchens doesn’t really break the seal. Military service is one of the few experiences that can.

The separation is more than economic. The sons and daughters of the upper-middle classes grow up in a cultural milieu in which certain assumptions tend to be taken for granted. Often, college experiences reinforce rather than challenge these assumptions. Since Vietnam, moreover, many elite colleges and universities have held the military at arm’s length, ending ROTC curricula and banning campus-based military recruitment. As a Vietnam-era draftee, I can attest to the role military service plays in expanding mutual awareness across cultural lines. This process is not always pleasant or pretty, but it does pull against the smug incomprehension of the privileged.

In an evocative letter to his sons, Brookings scholar Stephen Hess reflects on his experiences as a draftee and defends military service as a vital socializing experience for children from fortunate families. His argument is instructive: “Being forced to be the lowest rank . . . , serving for long enough that you can’t clearly see ‘the light at the end of the tunnel,’ is as close as you will ever come to being a member of society’s underclass. To put it bluntly, you will feel in your gut what it means to be at the bottom of the heap. . . . Why should you want to be deprived of your individuality? You shouldn’t, of course. But many people are, and you should want to know how this feels, especially if you some day have some responsibility over the lives of other people.” It’s a matter not just of compassion, Hess continues, but of respect: “The middle-class draftee learns to appreciate a lot of talents (and the people who have them) that are not part of the lives you have known, and, after military duty, will know again for the rest of your lives. This will come from being thrown together with—and having to depend on—people who are very different from you and your friends.”

A modern democracy, in short, combines a high level of legal equality with an equally high level of economic and social stratification. It is far from inevitable, or even natural, that democratic leaders drawn disproportionately from the upper ranks of society will understand the experiences or respect the contributions of those from the lower ranks. It takes integrative experiences to bring this about. In a society in which economic class largely determines residence and educa-

tion and in which the fortunate will not willingly associate with the rest, only nonvoluntary institutions cutting across class lines can hope to provide such experiences. If some kind of sustained mandatory service doesn't fill this bill, it is hard to see what will.

It is one thing to invoke civic arguments in favor of universal service, quite another to make them real. As we reconsider the all-volunteer recruitment model for armed service, we should also return to Clinton's vision of national service as a package of responsibilities and privileges available to every young American. AmeriCorps has survived repeated efforts to strangle it in the cradle and now enjoys broad bipartisan support. It is time to put our civic money where our civic mouth is—to move steadily from today's quota of 75,000 participants each year to a system in which there's a place for every young American who wants to serve his or her country.

Granted, the financial and administrative burdens of incorporating more than 3 million young people into civilian or military service each year would be prohibitive, at least in the short run. A reasonable goal would be to build over the next decade toward a system that offers 12- to 18-month service opportunities for at least 20 percent of each cohort of physically and mentally eligible 18-year-olds. A random lottery from which only a small percentage are excluded would be (and I believe would be seen as) a fair selection mechanism.

Military manpower requirements would take priority in allocating the service pool thus created. Young people, both in and outside of the pool, could still volunteer for military service, just as they do now. If all slots in the armed forces were filled, the remaining members of that year's service pool would choose among civilian options. If young people did not volunteer in sufficient numbers to satisfy the military's needs, the armed forces would select from among the rest of the pool, for a period of service not to exceed 18 months.

The service pool would function as a floor rather than a ceiling. If 18-year-olds outside the pool wanted to volunteer, they would be guaranteed full-time service opportunities, although they might not have access to their preferred choices.

Creating this program would be neither cheap nor easy. But consider that we have spent decades creating programs that enhance individual self-improvement, consumption, and choice. If we work as hard to foster an ethic of contribution and reciprocity, we can create a richer civic culture that summons, in the words of Lincoln, the better angels of our nature.