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"NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE
IN
A TRANSFORMING SOCIETY"

by

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& Conservation Corps
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Let me say how delighted I am to have this opportunity to congratulate you on the excellent work you do and to say a word about "National and Community Service In A Transforming Society."

It has become fashionable in recent years to identify with the vision of community stated so eloquently by John Winthrop, the first Governor of Massachusetts. On board ship in the Salem Harbor in 1630, he spoke of a city on a hill in which we delight in each other, seek to make others' condition our own, rejoice together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.

Four centuries after the Puritans arrived to build their city on a hill, some Americans have chosen, deliberately, to "make the condition of others" their own. In a badly fractured world they work to bring healing and wholeness.

Organizations like the Corps you represent, all in their own way give hope and help to many who walk only in the shadows of the American dream. I want, therefore, to congratulate Kathleen Selz for the superb job she has done in strengthening NASCC and expanding the number of corps across the country. I want to thank each of you for caring; to remind you that in working to promote the general welfare in this way, you continue the tradition of what Alexis deTocqueville described as the habits of the heart of the American people.

In Eastern Europe, Southern Africa and Central America, people

have in recent years given new meaning to the idea of civil society as they have taken to the streets to topple old governments, to endorse new leaders or change directions. They continue to remind us of the importance of preserving that intermediate space between government and the individual where private energy can be mobilized and deployed for the public good.

A few years ago in our own country, under the leadership of Martin Luther King whose memory we celebrate this week, black and white Americans spoke in one voice of a good society, the idea that sustaining a caring community depends as much on the goodness of individuals as it does on the soundness of government and the fairness of laws. They reminded us that a good society is a just society, that people who feel that they have a stake in a community are more likely to work for order in that community.

Building on these two visions of community, I would like to add the idea of a transforming society, the notion that when neighbors help neighbors and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are transformed. It has been my experience that when that which was "their" problem becomes "our" problem the transaction transforms the relationship, creating the possibility for new communities of meaning and belonging.

I accepted President Clinton's invitation to serve as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service because it provides an opportunity to help build a transforming society. I have spent a lifetime making the condition of others my own. I know firsthand the public benefit as well as the personal meaning and satisfaction that come from serving others.

In the mid 1960s, I spent a summer in West Africa in a small village in Ghana where we built a community center, bringing people together to plan and shape their own future. A year later, I took a group of students and faculty from California for a summer in Mississippi where we provided voter education and assisted in voter registration, helping people to understand their rights and to exercise their responsibilities as citizens.

Throughout the sixties, I encouraged and help students to tackle the problems of the time, working in the community off campus, with Cesar Chavez in Delano and the Catholic church across the border in Mexico. I can remember both the successes and failures of those efforts, but I also remember the exhilaration that comes from helping people to help themselves, from making the condition of others our own.

The opportunity has come once again to help solve serious social problems; to help promote an ethic of service; to help form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility and to

promote the general welfare. Like you, I have dreamed for some time of a national commitment, embodied in legislation and provided with resources, to engage large numbers of Americans in serving their communities.

Like Thoreau at Walden Pond, we have been building castles in the sky; now is the time to put foundations under them. Now is the time to come together, to work together, to make what we have been given work for the common good. The legislation was not perfect, the process was not perfect, and the Corporation will not be perfect, but we must play the hand we have been dealt to help build a city on a hill, to help make the condition of others our own.

Let me, thus, shift gears and say a word about the role of community service in a transforming society. I would argue that it must promote community vitality, helping people to take matters into their own hands; not as a substitute for the legitimate social role of government, but as a vehicle for self-help, an important alternative to the governmental process. It must build on community values, recognizing that no one group in our society has a monopoly on such virtues as self-discipline, hard work, honesty, responsibility and the desire to create a better life for themselves and their children. It must help build and reflect community vision, seeking to transform the laissez-faire notion of

live and let live to the moral imperative of live and help live.

Let me look briefly at each of these in turn, beginning with the role of community service in promoting community vitality. For a number of years, many Americans thought we could find common ground in our political culture, in citizen participation and our common commitment to democracy. More recently, we have sought common ground in our economic culture, emphasizing the interdependence of the economy, the urban/rural connection and the common need for jobs. It may be, however, that our common ground can be found in the emerging service culture with its shared vision of both a benevolent government and a benevolent people.

I share with President Clinton the hope and dream "that national service will remain throughout the life of America, not a series of promises, but a series of challenges, across all generations and all walks of life, to help us rebuild this beautiful but troubled land." I share with him the belief that "national service recognizes a simple but powerful truth, that we make progress not by governmental action alone, but we do best when the people and their government work at the grassroots in genuine partnership."

In service programs across our nation, people are getting things done; helping children learn, fighting disease, providing shelter, making neighborhoods safe. It is imperative, therefore, that we keep national

service beyond partisan politics, reinforcing the notion that in every community, independent of government, someone is solving a serious social problem or meeting a critical social need.

The second role of community service in a transforming society is to build on common values, to widen the circle of community. Service brings people together. The Corporation for National and Community Service, if successful, should have three kinds of impact: 1) on communities by getting things done through direct and demonstrable service in education, public safety, human needs, and the environment; 2) on communities by bringing together both institutions and individuals to cooperate in effecting lasting and constructive change; and 3) on participants by developing leadership skills, fostering active, productive citizenship and enhancing educational opportunity.

Each of these roles is important, but unless we understand the many ways in which our communities are changing, we will fail in all three. Our communities are changing conceptually from the notion of a network of neighbors to the paradigm of a company of strangers.

They are changing functionally from the notion of three sectors, with one driven by profit, another by the ballot and the third by compassion, to the idea of a fourth sector driven by public/private partnerships. They are changing geographically with local and national boundaries no longer defined by a line in the sand.

They are changing demographically and they are changing technologically with some of our citizens disadvantaged by race and others by the lack of access to the new technology.

Finally, we come to the role of community service in helping to build and reflect community vision, addressing specific problems, but recognizing and emphasizing the fact that community needs hardly ever arise in separate categories -- problems are connected to other problems, needs to other needs. We must encourage people to see the link between issues, to work across divisions to strive to address needs in thoughtful and collaborative ways, keeping our eyes on the long-term as well as the most immediate.

So there you have it. I hope that when asked why you care, why you do what you do as leaders of both urban and rural corps, you will respond that helping others is a civic duty, that a good society depends on the willingness of some of its citizens to address serious social problems through individual initiative and alternative means. I am not naive enough to believe that private efforts like those represented by your Corps are the total and complete answer, but you have demonstrated that it is an important part of the answer.

I hope that you will say that serving others is not simply a civic duty, but a moral imperative, that each of us has a responsibility to help build a better life for ourselves and our communities. I fully realize that

many of those with whom you work are motivated by the struggle to survive rather than civic or moral duty, but I hope that they, too, will want some day to return something to their communities.

Finally, I hope that you will say that serving others is a transforming experience, that when neighbors help neighbors and strangers help strangers both those who help and those who are helped are transformed.

The work and growth of NASCC reminds me of the Greek mathematician, Archimedes, who is reported to have said "give me a lever long enough and I can move the world." Those of you who are the leaders of the Corps have been given the lever; I hope you will go out and move the world.