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Administering Maturity: The Emergence of Youth Service As a Rite of Passage to Adult Citizenship

BY TIMOTHY DOLAN, Ph.D.

Those as hunts treasure must go alone, at night, and when they find it they have to leave a little of their blood behind them.

Related to Loren Eiseley by a black girl in Bimini.
In Eiseley, *The Night Country*, p. 222.

Introduction

Over the course of the 1980s, a literature describing a new lost generation in America has caught the popular imagination, fueled to no small extent by the anxiety of aging baby-boomers over their offspring's fate.¹ One manifestation of particular interest at the policy level has been a growing sentiment by opinion leaders in favor of establishing youth service as both a pragmatic remedy for meeting social needs, and as a rite of passage to bona-fide citizenship status.²

It is not a matter confined to transformations in demographics. Other factors such as continuing distortions in America's socio-economic structure, technological impacts, the decline of traditional institutional vehicles to adulthood, and new narratives celebrating communitarian America are also involved. In combination, these influences have added to the complexity of social relations at the individual-level, especially in

fixing one's relationship with the state. While certainly no single policy prescription can encompass the nearly infinite diversity of paths to maturity, service has the clear capability of effectively involving the individual with the practices of the state. If the state can draw substantial numbers of youth into service, it will have established a new means of determining maturity.

This generates a host of issues that deserve treatment, especially in the areas of the epistemology of the politics of human development, and the role of the state in determining individual obligations. Inquiry in those directions is endorsed, but this piece refrains from engaging those lines since it would deserve a fuller treatment than can be adequately undertaken here. It will instead first review the probable outcomes of the newly installed national youth service legislation. The second section is a description of the alliance assembled to shape youth service over the coming decade. The third section will touch upon the

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metaphor of the heroic journey and the two-tiered rite of passage that may be the most viable means to inform any policy dedicated to the promotion of adult citizenship.

The National and Community Service Act of 1990

National youth service allegedly commenced on October 24, 1990, when the House of Representatives voted to accept the conference committee report recommending passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990. This concluded the spirited congressional debate on youth service for the 1990s, leaving it symboli-

there has been a persistent element class determinism implicit in the contemporary discussion of youth service policy which the other scenarios would end up supporting to the detriment of a long-term service policy. The general tenor of the present youth corps movement is fixed on low-socio-economic status (SES) youth, tutoring them in the values of a positive self-image, disciplined work ethic and educational credentialing.⁸ This over-identification with low-SES youth is of great concern as the class structure continues to grow more rigid, and as youth service programs begin to appear increasingly as the exclusive domains of refuge for the marginal. Environmental and social service may provide an avenue for under-

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cally endowed, but fiscally deficient.³ To focus strictly on the underappropriation of youth service would be to miss the more subtle, but likely long-term significance of the action taken by Congress. The real significance is in the formal embrace of a national youth service policy just as economic conditions deteriorate into an alarming erosion of the middle class.⁴ If conditions continue to be severe nationwide, federal involvement in a civilian youth service may proceed in the manner of a resurrection of the Civilian Conservation Corps approach.⁵ If a large-scale economic crisis is somehow averted, youth corps will probably level off to only about 10,000 to 20,000 participants nationally.⁶ A third scenario suggests a more gradual but steady economic decline reminiscent of post-WWII Britain. This would have the effect of institutionalizing a class-gap in the United States which would most likely create a corps structure determined by socioeconomic status.⁷

It is the third scenario that appears most probable as providing conditions favorable to the ideal vision of national service. This is because

class youth into the middle class much as military service had done earlier, but this presumes a conventional economic structure that can accommodate them. This potential is most likely to be realized if truly meaningful post-secondary educational incentives are offered in the face of continuing rises in the cost of higher education. These conditions will probably drive increasing numbers of middle-class youth into service in order for them to meet college expenses.

The Alliance for Youth Service

The primary influences on the future configurations of youth service are political-economic in nature. The state is necessarily highly involved in both shaping and meeting the expectations of youth. Overt subsidies to youth such as job training, educational grants-in-aid and loans, and military service may no longer be available due to increasingly formidable budgetary constraints. If economic conditions broadly decline over the next decade, youth service might flourish as the state seeks a more productive (sic non-

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militarist) solution to meeting those expectations that persist in the tradition of the American dream. There would emerge a coalition of institutional and popular forces that would support its establishment in the classic tradition of American pluralism. These players can be anticipated to press for a policy which would essentially be an amalgamation of their respective interests. These players include political leaders, administrators of institutions of higher learning, the more thoughtfully inclined political activists, low-SES groups (especially women), corporate elites, the media intelligentsia, service administrators, and former service participants. These groups would be the most interested and influential in the process of forming and directing programs of youth service. Non-participants would form the antithetical elements in the emerging dialectic of youth service policy.

The interest of most political leaders in youth service should be, by now, self-evident. Having an appreciation of how a youth corps might come to support the provision of a wide array of services, elected officials have already responded with measures supporting youth service. National youth service was discussed at the first Democratic party presidential candidates' forum in December 1991, albeit with generally poor grasp.⁹ Their collective approval of service has been reactive, which is to say, consistent, with their roles as politicians. Their support functions more as a sounding board, amplifying and articulating the sentiments of the other groups they feel are important to bring into alliance. In the case of Jerry Brown, his association with the California Conservation Corps is fairly well known to the point of his mistakenly being called its founder.¹⁰ In the case of Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, the support is more suspect in that Arkansas currently has no conservation or service corps of any sort.

Administrators of post-secondary institutions, from the voc-tech-ed schools to the elite universities, would welcome the formal institutionalization of youth service for several reasons. First, many of the elite college heads are philosophically allied to the concept, and have publicly worked to promote it. They see merit in a public

policy that provides funding for the pursuit of post-secondary education. Programs of youth service offering meaningful educational incentives would keep enrollment levels high without lowering standards or forcing the recruitment of more foreign students.¹¹ Many voc-tech-ed institutions have already benefited from education funds distributed to state and local corps participants. With the scaling down of the GI Bill and related military-subsidized education programs, a civilian service which features higher education incentives would help offset the expected decline in enrollments. Another attribute of post-service students not lost upon academic administrators and faculty is that they would be more mature and ready to learn than those entering directly from high school. The opportunity to impart a quality undergraduate education instead of having to engage in extensive remedial work would have great appeal to both faculty and administration in any educational institution. These motivational factors suggest a close relationship between youth service programs and higher education, with higher education welcoming the association.

Civilian youth service as an alternative to military service, which was the original vision of William James, may have come full circle. Recent remarks by Defense Secretary Cheney notwithstanding, those seeking to promote a demilitarized society must confront the social welfare function that the armed forces do in fact provide. It is this hidden yet real attribute of the American military structure that allows it to persist long after credible external threats to the U.S. are available. No other institution is as effective in affording the low-SES, minorities, and immigrants a pathway to upward mobility. This point is elaborated upon in Moskos, 1986 and by *Ebony* magazine which has consistently listed the military as a promising career route for blacks.¹² Reducing American military force levels might have the ironic effect of creating a greater domestic security threat than since the Civil War. Thus, while the more doctrinaire activists might view youth service with suspicion for its having any connection with the federal government, it would probably win support from most peace groups.¹³

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As the effects of fiscal crisis in the public sector become more acute, and economic conditions send more households into the margins of the lower-middle class, or impoverishment, the sentiment for youth service might turn into mobilization on its behalf. This is already being cultivated by corporately sponsored appeals to service, as well as by the new Points of Light Foundation. The Foundation, for all of its present calculated emphasis on pure voluntarist sentiments, might provide inspiration for non-alienated, middle class youth to enter into service if circumstances preclude other options for them. Success would depend upon transforming the perception of voluntarism from an activity best engaged in by the financially secure, into activities that might also yield material benefits.

Corporate elites, again out of pragmatism, would embrace the movement as it would act to sustain the system against more radical alternatives, by instilling an integrative work ethic that youth would carry with them into adulthood. Many elites could be expected to place their own sons and daughters into service activities consistent with the legitimizing practices of the privileged historically to social leadership. Environmental or social service could easily become the 1990s equivalent to military stints, or a term in the Peace Corps to be used as an investment to enhanced status and power.

There is left the issue of the role of service in marking the rite of passage for females. Traditionally, the feminine rite of passage has been an entirely different ceremony associated with the first mense, or in more recent times, the marriage ceremony itself.¹⁴ Service may actually have a bridging effect between the genders in that it provides a common means to make their claims to adult citizenship much more effectively than schooling has done. Service, much like traditional apprenticeships, better displays the talents and capabilities of individuals as they would be required to perform in the civic world than does academic performance. Female youth may actually be advantaged by being better able to display the diligence, patience and receptivity to the needs of others that are the essential characteristics of

service. In a society that appears to be manifesting an increased receptivity to feminist influences, service may express those values in a positive way. For this reason, feminist activists might come to support youth service, and in so doing, introduce a more non-militarist strain to the mixture of available service program models.

The groups noted above may seem an unlikely combination for a coalition, yet they all share a common stake in a collective identity that they have invested in too heavily to disregard in the pursuit of their own individual agendas. Americans, as a whole, are not very keen on sustaining the national drift of the post-Vietnam era which was symptomatic of a national-level identity crisis. Youth service, if fully developed at the national level, would likely have a strong relationship with the next generation of policies supporting social re-integration. Social re-integration, in this case, would extend to the full range of class, ethnic and gender divisions that youth service would mediate within its membership. The apparently successful use of national youth service in ethnically and developmentally diverse societies such as Malaysia and Nigeria points to a similar application in the U.S. as well. An elite-led, mass media-orchestrated sentiment toward national integration might be the final and best alliance for the establishment of youth service.

The Rite of Passage to Youth and the Rite of Passage to Adulthood

The creation of an alliance and its supporting role for youth service does not guarantee an acceptance of the policy among youth themselves, for in attaining triumph in Congress, the alliance has risked doom at the lower end of the adolescent/youth cohort (14 to 16 years). This is because of a fundamental contradiction regarding the role of government as a provider of security, and the necessity for risk and struggle to be present in the ceremony of passage to youth which is a necessary intermediate step in coming to adult status. In this adolescent-to-youth phase, guidance by authority is its very antithesis.

The state, besides being the arbiter of order,

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is also fully involved in the role of provider of security for the vulnerable, which is precisely the relationship with the state that the adolescent seeks to shed en-route to their vision of adulthood.¹⁵ The problem becomes a true paradox for the state. A case in point is the state of Hawaii's suit to stop the operation of an unlicensed wilderness school on the grounds that it is a danger to youth.¹⁶ The Utah-based organization, Challenger V, engaged in a wilderness therapy program for troubled youth, apparently drawn from affluent homes.¹⁷ The state of Hawaii moved

hood has always featured risk. This risk component is well understood as a requirement for achieving adulthood among the low-SES youth who have often embraced the risky practices of violent sport or entered the underground economies as their rites of passage.

It appears that the element of voluntariness is a principal guiding criteria for determining the acceptability of a challenge within the context as a rite of passage to youth. Yet, voluntariness is more a state of mind than a known and fixed standard, ad hoc and circumstantial in nature.¹⁹

The state is incapable of sponsoring programs that would feature risk as one of its principal elements, because of its primary function of providing public protection, particularly to those segments determined to be vulnerable, such as the young. Yet traditionally, the transition to adulthood has always featured risk.

against the program upon receiving information from a Utah official about the organization's role in the heat-stroke death of a girl participant in a desert trek. The Challenger V program may well have been reckless in its treatment of participants, and the state was certainly correct to be concerned with its operations. However, this episode underscores the fine line that states must tread in limiting their liability while undertaking programs that necessarily expose participants to risk.¹⁸ Outward Bound is similar in its approach and has suffered participant casualties, but enjoys the tolerance of the state by meeting a vague set of criteria that officially endows it with authority and expertise. Inevitably the state will be prevailed upon to make the programs "safe" which could easily defeat the elements of risk that are essential to the success of the programs as a rite of passage.

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Exposure to specific situations of risk, typical of pseudo-rites of passage, are the result of peer pressure, or similarly, performances of identity formation that are confirmed from the outside-in rather than from the inside-out. This holds true even for solitary adventures for they are not validated until related. This is why running away is not a satisfactory rite of passage in and of itself. Somewhere, there must either be witnesses or confidants. In essence, the need for establishing a viable identity may be internally driven, but the specific ceremony through which the identity is established has to be validated from without.

A potential source of confusion in the administration of the transition to adulthood may arise in the failure to discern the difference between the rite of passage from adolescence into youth, and the rite of passage from youth to adulthood. In the former, the peer community has the greatest influence and acts as the authorizing agent. This community sets the standards for the performance of deeds that mark the departure into the world of youth. The transition to adulthood is, however, a larger and more public rite that recognizes true adulthood as the willingness to take on

the day to day practices of responsibility. In the intermediate ceremony of transition to youth, the perception of risk is in an inverse relationship with that of authority. That is, the closer an activity is linked with and sanctioned by the formal institutions of the adult world, the less valid it is to the adolescent aspiring to youth. Their problem is bound up with the issue of creating a distinct and unique identity in relation to the adult world. Adolescents passing into youth are thus suspicious of, and thus tend to reject, authorized programmatic challenges as valid rites of passage for their generation. They instead favor various unauthorized challenges which may change from generation to generation, class to class, and community to community. The common characteristics of the acts of transition to youth are acts declaring a rejection of the authorized life path and undertaking, what Joseph Campbell would call the heroic journey. Recent transition to youth ceremonies have indeed been diverse, again reflecting class-determined tendencies. The heroic journey has included expressions in the forms of wanderings to exotic places, sports endeavors, drug and sexual experimentation, religious conversion, or involvement in cults.

This is the difference between programs of youth service and the more ad hoc and spontaneous adventures that make up the passages from childhood to adolescence to youth. By definition, a rite of passage must be a public ceremony where there is challenge, and an attending element of risk. What is more, *the rite must mark the passage from the small world of the parental family and school chums to the larger world of community and colleagues.* In other words the post-industrial rite of passage marks a return from the heroic journey of youth and a reconciliation with at least some of those values left behind at its start. In this sense it parallels the activities of the church-based youth outreach programs which so often manifest a ring around virtually every college and university campus in the United States. What these organizations attempt to do through the mobilizing instrument of religious duty, the state attempts to do through the instrument of civic duty.

This emerging paradigm is a reproduction

and amplification of the emphasis on duty and experience most fully developed among the middle-aged, and which forms the basis for their claim to community leadership. This claim to authority is reflected in the resumes of virtually any community leader, often manifested in the form of their participation in military service, and in often vast memberships in community service organizations. Presuming a military cutback over the next few years, the opportunity for military service becomes less available, and probably less esteemed.²⁰ The display of civic virtue is much more likely to come in the form of non-military, civic service. This is already understood by the sons and daughters of elites who are advised of the connection between public success and public virtue within their socialization process.²¹ This is the potential that programs of youth service have for fostering personal growth into community that belies the modest status it holds to date.

Conclusion

In the years of research and writing on the topic of passage to citizenship, there has been a constant effort made to identify alternatives to the policy device of service as such alternatives could be known. The alternatives have not been forthcoming under the conditions considered most probable for the coming decade. Of course, those conditions may change radically, as the events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have recently demonstrated. Yet, it is exactly that uncertainty of future events that lends support to the thesis that there may emerge a popular sentiment for a formal passage into solidarity with a wider community or nation. The very flexibility of the concept of service is an attribute that supports its promotion. This naturally leaves open for debate the question of just what constitutes service and just how it would be operationalized. Undoubtedly the basic model would reflect closely the preferences of state and the normative values of the society. The remarkable attribute, demonstrated by the research, is the opportunity for developing a wide variety of activities which could legitimately be called service. This attrib-

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ute conforms with the trend toward diversity exhibited universally, and being cultivated principally through technological innovation. The breadth of this variety may soon become apparent with the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, which created a board to determine which service organizations would be supported. In essence, any social service organization may apply for support which should yield a field of thousands of qualifying groups. Thus

trenchment, especially as a vehicle for mobilizing environmental repair and sustaining the provision of community-level social services. The demographic, economic and political influences are all compatible with this assessment.

The process leading to what may later become the administration of maturity is thus underway. It is important to note here that this movement is dialectical and driven in reaction to the disintegrative forces that have become more pro-

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will be uncovered the "thousand points of light," though the range hues will confound the uniform and unitary implications of the original slogan. Much of what might otherwise be treated as unauthorized yet viable alternatives could then be officially accommodated. Abuses could arise out of catastrophic social disintegration, or totalitarian resurgence which would substitute slavery for service, but this possibility is as likely without youth service as with it.

Youth service, well-established in many states and localities, is expanding as funding allows. A national-level administrative structure has now been constructed to promote further expansion and to begin the process of its institutionalization. While the establishment of a universal youth service appears remote, a significant advance along the lines of the state and local corps models is close to actuality. It can expect further support as a remedy to almost certain public sector re-

nounced over the course of the last two decades.

This movement will eventually undergo a transformation into an institutionalized artifact of what a new generation will see as this century's old order. This should be expected and even welcomed as necessary. The point here is that the youth service movement as it takes shape in the 1990s is an instrument which may effect fairly immediate benefits upon real and current conditions of crisis and malaise. To attack its potential as a proto-fascist agency is to ignore the temporal condition that attends the enterprise of life itself. It is akin to declining to engage in parenthood because the offspring would be doomed to eventually age and die. The fact is that an eventual decline in viability is to be expected. When its continued operation can no longer be justified for whatever reason is a political question best left for evaluation in its time.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹See especially, Robert N. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).
- ²See especially, Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); James S. Coleman, and Torsten Husén, *Becoming Adult in a Changing Society*, (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (OECD): Paris, 1985); Charles Moskos, *A Call to Civic Service: National Service for Country and Community*, (New York: The Free Press, 1988); and Michael Sherraden and Donald Eberly, in Sherraden and Eberly eds., *National Service: Social, Economic and Military Impacts*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983).
- ³The National and Community Service Act, now Public Law 101-610, November 16, 1990, provides for \$56 million for fiscal year 1991, \$95 million for 1992, and \$105 million for 1993.
- ⁴A large-scale economic downturn is likely in the next year or so, especially in the United States, which is now the world's largest debtor nation and is continuing to under-react to the multitude of policies and events that have placed it in this condition.
- ⁵The possible government-sponsored remilitarization of American youth appears unlikely given the greater relative expense of such an undertaking compared to the costs of maintaining a civilian social or conservation service.
- ⁶The 10,000 figure is the 1989 number according to the Coalition for National Service in its survey of full-time servers. See, National Service Secretariat, "Full-Time Youth Service Enrollment Climbs to 10,000," *National Service Newsletter* 57, (August 1990): 2. A Points of Light Foundation effort and the appropriations for state and local youth service made through the National and Community Service Act would be unlikely to more than double these figures at their current funding levels.
- ⁷This scenario is suggested by the research results of the W.T. Grant Foundation Commission's study of non-college youth under the direction of Dr. Samuel Halperin. See, The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, *The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America*, 1988; and *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families*, 1988.
- ⁸Virtually all youth corps offer educational blocks for securing a GED, with 78 percent of them requiring GED study, or high school attendance. (see *National Service Newsletter*). A notable exception is a private-sector effort in Boston that targets college students, and Campus Compact and the College Outreach Opportunity League (COOL).
- ⁹*Democratic Candidate's Forum*, NBC News, broadcast live, December 1991.
- ¹⁰Ironically, then Governor Ronald Reagan approved the creation of a California Ecology Corps as a measure to deal with conscientious objectors during the Viet Nam War. To his credit, Jerry Brown transformed it into a bona fide conservation corps.
- ¹¹Institutions of higher education are currently caught in an enrollment squeeze which is part of the passing of the baby boomers. Many elite institutions are especially vulnerable to this, as well as to the general effects of higher costs. This has led to their adopting more aggressive recruiting efforts, such as promotional spots in the mass media that give the appearance of commercialization.
- ¹²*Ebony*, October 1986, listed military officer as 4th in their list of the 25 most promising careers for blacks.
- ¹³The Hawaii Council of Churches, and members of the Hawaii Peace Institute have promoted youth service. See, "Civic Service in Hawaii." *Hawaii Council of Churches News & Comments*, Kailua,

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Hawaii: Hawaii Council of Churches, September 1989.

- ¹⁴The association of marriage with the rite of passage into the role of wife and mother explains the relatively higher emphasis women have historically placed upon the ceremony itself which has usually been constructed around the bride.
- ¹⁵Ironically, where the state has tolerated what amounts to a ritualistic sacrifice of the young in military service, it would not be so willing for social and environmental defense.
- ¹⁶"State files suit to stop youth therapy outings," *Honolulu Advertiser*, (6 December 1990): A-12.
- ¹⁷ The cost of attending a 64-day wilderness survival program was reported to be \$16,000.
- ¹⁸In 1989, a total of three youth service corps members died. One drowned swimming after completing a corps task, one died in a motorcycle accident, and one was a shooting victim during a robbery attempt. Of the three deaths, only the drowning incident could be linked (and linked tenuously) to a corps activity. The three deaths out of a corps population of some twenty thousand falls well within statistical bounds of mortality for the age group. This underlines the care given by corps administrators to protect participants from extraordinary risk. Reported at the NASCC Conference, September 8, 1990.
- ¹⁹The practices of consumerism supports this contention as it essentially operates from this premise.
- ²⁰The Congressional Budget Office projects a \$14.2 billion cut in defense appropriations in fiscal years 1992-1993 and an additional \$61 billion projected for fiscal years 1994-1997. Figures cited in remarks by the associate director of the military conversion conference held in Washington, D.C. and broadcast on C-SPAN February 20, 1991.
- ²¹This is a message unintentionally delivered, yet delivered forcefully, by William F. Buckley in *Gratitude*, where he invokes the concept of distributive justice, a species of justice that discerns special allowances for the aristocratic, designated so by whatever means was popular at the time. Buckley notes that distributive justice had been sanctioned in this country by the Founding Fathers themselves when they gave voting rights exclusively to white males of property, continuing up to the present-day practice of the veteran's preference, and apparently to the white-collar criminal as well. See, William F. Buckley, *Gratitude: Reflections on What We Owe Our Country*, (New York, Random House, 1990), 63-70.