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Conversation Piece: National Service, *is it for Us?*

Carl A. Bade

*Secretary for Special Programs
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Many of the writers, conceptual developers, and advocates of a National Service Program for the United States credit William James with issuing, in 1910, the first call to youth to be enlisted in a program entitled "The Moral Equivalent of War." The program was envisioned to engage youth in industrial work and social service, according to their skills and interests. While that did not come to fruition, we saw some forms of it instituted during the bleak days and years of the Great Depression in the 1930's. Thousands of youth were enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps beginning in 1933, and even more thousands of youth were employed under the National Youth Administration. These programs came to an end as we entered World War II, and the nation sent its young men and some young women to war. Meanwhile, all of America entered a war economy.

Immediately after World War II, the American Friends Service Committee, Service Civil International, and many of the churches began workcamp and voluntary service programs to help rebuild war-torn countries and address social problems. These programs grew, reached their peak in the 1960's, and continue today in somewhat modified form.

In addition to the church programs, we saw the creation of the Peace Corps in 1961, and of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) in 1964. These programs, like the church programs, peaked in the late 1960's; they continue today in somewhat modified form, with a smaller number of participants.

Parallel to these developments in church and state voluntary service programs in the private sector, a call for a National Service Program was initiated and has continued unabated through the years. The suggestion is thought first to have surfaced on the campus of Oberlin College in the late 1940's. Since that time, persons or groups inside and outside of the government have been advocating such a Service Program. At first they advocated a universal program for all youth 18 to 20 years of age, who were to serve for two years in either military or civilian service. Such a program has never been established by Congress. Consequently, more recently, the call has been for more modest, noncompulsory National Service programs, engaging at the maximum 3,000,000 youth. We have also seen in recent years the establishment of city and state youth service programs which are modeled after the 1930's Civilian Conservation Corps.

At present we are experiencing a resurgence of service amongst our youth, college students, and older adults. Simultaneously, we have the establishment of a new Coalition for National Service, whose goal is the ultimate implementation of a National Service Program in the United States. Legislators and political parties are giving increased attention to the concept, by introducing a number of bills in Congress attempting to establish some form of a National Service Program.

Over the past several decades, church voluntary service administrators, along with others in American society, have consistently opposed a compulsory National Service Program. Today such a program is not being advocated. Instead, a variety of non-compulsory programs are being discussed and promoted. Given these changes, and aware of the renewed interest in Congress in some form of National Service, the Commission on Voluntary Service and Action and the National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors organized a Consultation on the subject in Washington, D.C., November 2-4, 1987. The articles in this issue emanate from that consultation, and bring the issue to your attention.

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