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The Continuing Need for National Service

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John Swomley and I had a brief debate on national service on the pages of *The Christian Century* in 1967. His article appeared on January 11 and my reply on April 5. Now, a generation later, each of us has a chance to address the same topic under changed circumstances.

The changes are readily apparent. Young men are no longer being drafted, but they are being required to register for a possible draft in the future. Some young men agonize over the registration issue, and a few refuse, but their numbers are minuscule compared to the numbers who, two decades ago, agonized over the draft and the numbers who sought alternatives ranging from going to Canada to conscientious objection, from the military reserves to divinity school.

Some things haven't changed. The need for service remains high. In a 1965 survey for the War on Poverty, Greenleigh Associates found a need for some four million people to work full-time on the alleviation of poverty. Most of the work suggested could be done by 18-24 year olds. In 1984, a Ford-funded survey found a need for a little over three million to do similar kinds of work.

In 1967, the federal government supported some 15,000 persons,

aged 18-24, in full-time civilian service with the Peace Corps and VISTA. Today that figure has fallen to about 3,000. This drop is only partly compensated for by the rise in state and local programs. Such programs now engage approximately 5,000 of these 18-24-year-olds in full-time, year-round civilian service.

Several of the larger religious denominations sponsor youth service programs, but, like the programs of today's federal, state, and local governments, their efforts are nominal compared to the need and to the resources available. Only the Mennonites and a few of the other, smaller denominations engage a substantial fraction of their young people in full-time service. We did a very rough calculation last year and estimated that, if the mainline churches sponsored full-time youth service projects to the extent the Mennonites do, there would be several hundred thousand young people in service today!

Although the issue of the military draft has faded, other issues are much the same as they were in 1967. The best national service proposals are multi-dimensional, providing benefits to those served, to those who serve, and to future employers as young people gain constructive work

experience, as well as to the nation as they invest in it. This characteristic complexity makes national service difficult to present to a public that prefers answers that can be read off the television screen and digested in thirty seconds or less.

A continuing issue to some people is, "Where does the responsibility lie for meeting these unmet social needs—in the public or the private sector?" If all the energy that has gone into debating the issue and passing the buck had gone into meeting those needs, there would be fewer needs facing us. The magnitude of need is sufficient to engage the energies of the church, other private sector entities, and the state.

Probably the biggest problem in the extended debate over national service is that the debaters so seldom agree on what would constitute national service. Those opposed to the idea sometimes call it slavery, and those in favor sometimes call it freedom. Such confusion is partly understandable, since something with the name "national service" could take a number of different forms.

The National Service Secretariat made an attempt to break through this confusion in 1970 with its issuance of a "Statement on

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National Youth Service." It sets forth, in fairly broad brush, a set of principles which many students of youth policy believe should form the basis for national service. I think most of my colleagues would agree with me when I say that I would rather see something based on these principles and called "XYZ" than something counter to those principles called "National Service." The Statement in full reads as follows:

Statement on National Youth Service

The service needed by society—in such fields as education, care for the very young and the very old, conservation, and municipal services—is enormous. Many of these needs could be met by young people from all walks of life. By helping to meet these needs, young people would be able to test themselves through service to society, and would receive valuable experience for their careers. By having invested in their country while young, they would become better citizens as they mature. By having first-hand, constructive experience with major problems in society, they would be better equipped to deal with them in future years as parents, employers, leaders, voters, and volunteers.

In order to meet many of our most pressing needs, and to permit young men and women to become engaged in the building of a better society, WE ENDORSE A PROGRAM OF NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE, which would have these basic features:

1. *Service opportunities would be available to all young people.* The main criterion for admission would be willingness to serve. All young people would be encouraged—not required—to serve, and would be rewarded with an educational entitlement upon completion of service.

2. *Each participant would both serve and learn.* Learning would range from development of specific skills to growth in self-knowledge, problem solving, and working with people.

3. *Service activities would be directed and financed at the local level to the extent permitted by available resources, and would include projects organized and directed by young people.* Thus, maximum local initiative would be encouraged.

4. *Service activities would be underwritten by a public foundation at the national*

level. Such a foundation, which should be removed from political pressures but which would receive both Congressional appropriations and private contributions, would assure support for all needy projects.

5. *The basic raison d'être for national youth service is the need society has for the service of youth.* Main areas are tutoring, literacy training, day care, elder care, conservation, and various kinds of community service. By serving in these fields, young people would be able to test themselves through service to society and would receive valuable experience for their careers.

6. *Young people who seem poorly qualified by conventional standards could serve effectively.* High school dropouts are today serving as tutors, and doing a good job; others are receiving specialized training for responsible hospital positions. Each participant would receive the training and supervision needed for the assignment.

7. *There would be a transition phase.* Growth of national youth service would be constrained by identification of useful tasks, finding enough

trainers and supervisors, and obtaining sufficient funding. The transition phase would permit experimentation with various techniques and activities.

8. *Participation would be by means of a contract, voluntarily entered into by all parties.* The contract would spell out the responsibilities of the participant, the sponsoring agency, and the funding agency.

9. *Duration of service would range from a minimum of six months to a maximum of four years.* The value of the educational entitlement would be proportional to the time in service.

10. *Participation in national youth service would be viewed as fulfillment of a person's peacetime service obligation.* If a peacetime military draft is reinstated, persons who are liable for the draft, and who complete a period in national youth service equal to the draft period, would be placed at the end of the draft queue, together with those who had completed military service.

This statement has been endorsed in the past two years by Senator Daniel J. Evans; Representatives John Lewis and Leon Panetta;

Mayors Henry Cisneros, Dianne Feinstein, Don Fraser, and Vincent Schoemehl; college presidents Derek Bok (Harvard), Johnnetta B. Cole (Spelman), Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh (Notre Dame), Donald Kennedy (Stanford), and Donna Shalala (University of Wisconsin); and former Cabinet members John Gardner, Ray Marshall, and Willard Wirtz. Other leaders who support the Statement include Ernest L. Boyer (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching), George Gallup, Jr., LaDonna Harris (Americans for Indian Opportunity), John E. Jacob (National Urban League), and Jacqueline Grennan Wexler (National Conference of Christians and Jews). Among the organizations supporting the Statement are the American Veterans Committee, the National Alliance of Business, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Inter-religious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors.

With support from so many who are vitally concerned with youth policy, and who would help to shape national service once it comes into existence, it is surprising that opponents of national service tend to go outside this framework for their assumptions about national service.

There is plenty of room for various national service models within the framework, as was the case with the Peace Corps. From mid-1960—when Sen. Hubert Humphrey introduced the first Peace Corps bill—until early 1961—when President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps by executive order—persons interested in the idea have offered a wide array of designs. The Peace Corps debate lasted less than one year. The debate on national service has been going on since William James gave his “Moral Equivalent of War” speech at Stanford University in 1906!

The Statement offers a standard against which to judge current proposals for national service. The major proposals now before the country are the proposal of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) for a Citizens Corps; the Youth Service Act of 1988, making its way through the House of Representatives; and the nascent national service plan of Gov. Michael Dukakis.

The major political figures behind the DLC plan are Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia and Chuck Robb, former governor of Virginia, and a 1988 candidate for the U.S. Senate.

The DLC envisions a Citizens Corps of some 800,000 persons.

There would be 600,000 young people in one-year civilian service receiving a subsistence stipend; 100,000 young people in two-year military service receiving one-half the usual pay and allowances; and 100,000 elderly persons working part-time for \$5 per hour. The young people in civilian service would earn a \$10,000 voucher (\$20,000 for those who serve two years) that could be utilized for education, training, or the purchase of a house. Those in military service would earn a \$24,000 voucher that could be used for the same purposes. To enter the Citizens Corps, young people would need a high school diploma or its equivalent.

The DLC proposes to pay for its Citizens Corps by replacing Pell grants with the above vouchers, by restricting loans to students who have completed a period of civilian or military national service, and by reducing expenditures for a variety of current budget items.

The DLC plan is in fairly close accord with the Statement except for its high school graduation requirement. Most mentally retarded persons—who could provide useful services and whose lives would be enhanced as a result of the experience—would be excluded. The same is true of school dropouts, who comprise about one-quarter of the youthful

population. They would be denied the chance to serve, and with it the opportunity to find themselves and re-direct their lives.

Some national service advocates oppose the provision of the DLC plan that calls for making higher education grants and loans contingent on a period of national service. It is largely a matter of timing. Had the DLC plan been proposed 35 years ago, before Sputnik and the federal aid plans that followed it, many higher education supporters would have applauded it for its support of higher education. Today, many educators consider Pell grants as a cornerstone of federal support for higher education, and would oppose any attempt to eliminate them, even though an equal amount of money might become available as vouchers.

The Youth Service Act of 1988 is a consolidation of several national service bills introduced into the House of Representatives in 1987. From Rep. Leon Panetta's bill, it provides \$50 million for matching grants to states and localities with youth service programs. From Rep. Morris Udall's bill, it provides \$70 million for an American Conservation Corps. From separate bills by Reps. Gerry Sikorski and Robert Torricelli, it provides \$2 million for a study and evaluation of national service. Finally, the Sub-

committee on Employment Opportunities, chaired by Rep. Matthew Martinez, added \$15 million for in-service education and training and an equal amount for post-service education and training.

This combined bill, H.R. 18, is also closely akin to the statement. Its major divergence is that it would be run out of existing federal agencies rather than a new public foundation.

Gov. Dukakis's approach to national service suggests no overall plan, but has recommended several elements of national service. He has called for a Literacy Corps, a National Teacher Corps, and for student loans that could be written off through a period of community service. Dukakis has not as yet spelled out his proposals in enough detail that we can measure them against the Statement.

An underlying national service issue is illustrated by the different approaches pursued by John Swomley and toward the delivery of needed services. Both of us reject the argument of those like Milton Friedman who contend that a non-military service is not really needed unless the marketplace provides for it. Swomley would meet the need for day care, elder care, and so on with a public employment

program at prevailing wages. Given the huge budget deficits of recent years, I don't believe such an expensive measure will be enacted any time in the foreseeable future. By contrast, a national service program—with stipends below prevailing wages, with earned educational benefits gradually replacing those which are unearned, and most of all, with the growing recognition that this kind of experience is a good thing for our children and grandchildren—has a chance.

What to Look For

Persons interested in national service should maintain close watch of these developments:

What the Presidential candidates have said about national service and, following Election Day, what the newly-elected President promises to do about it, if anything.

What the Coalition for National Service recommends in its action agenda for national service in the 1990's. This booklet is scheduled for publication in late 1988. (Write: the Coalition for National Service, 5140 Sherier Place, NW, Washington, DC 20016.)

Whether Sen. Sam Nunn (joined by Chuck Robb if he is elected) introduces a bill for the Citizens Corps and whether

he pushes hard for it. Compare the bill with the DLC plan put forward in May 1988.

The fate of H.R. 18. If authorized by Congress, watch what level of appropriations it receives. If it does not pass in 1988, watch whether it is re-introduced in 1989.

If the Congress decides to move forward with national service, how it reconciles the DLC plan with H.R. 18 and possibly other measures.

A Footnote and a Hope

On only two other occasions in the past 50 years has the United States been as close to introducing national service as it is today.

The first time was in 1941, when youth unemployment was seen as a persistent problem in need of governmental intervention, and when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and National Youth Administration (NYA)—both temporary New Deal measures—were seen as sensible solutions. President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to combine these youth service programs and place them in a permanent agency to be known as the Civilian Youth Administration. The bill for this initiative was introduced by Rep. Lyndon B. Johnson within a few days of the American entry into World War II on December 8,

1941. That war and the subsequent economic boom solved the youth unemployment problem for many years.

The second time was in 1966, when an unpopular war and an unpopular military draft system led President Johnson to recommend consideration of national service, with both military and civilian options, as a way to make the draft more equitable. Before his own commission had completed its study, he had decided—in late 1966—to escalate the war in Vietnam at the expense of his domestic initiative known as the War on Poverty. The decision effectively ended serious consideration of national service for rest of the 1960s.

Interest in national service on those occasions was sparked by employment problems and an inequitable draft. Today it is sparked by a sense of service and a sense of citizenship. With no draft, and with war much less of a threat than it was in 1941 and 1966, there is a clear opportunity to advance toward the promise of national service. Let's do it.

Donald Eberly has written several books on national service; the latest is *National Service: A Promise to Keep* (John Alden Books, P. O. Box 26668, Rochester, NY 14626), an autobiographical account scheduled for publication in December, 1988.