

## **DRAFT History of the Idea of National Service**

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**Key idea:** National service is an expression of *long standing political ideals* catalyzed by *need*, constrained by *political realities/balance of power*, informed by previous *experience*, including new *innovations* in design

### **Overview**

The idea of national service in the United States is an expression of deeply rooted political values that can be traced back to the origins of this country. Because national service is meant to address important public needs, contrasting conceptions of the role of government and the nature of citizenship have shaped perspectives on national service. Just as politics change over time, national needs and priorities have shifted over time and the focus of national service has changed in response. The form service ultimately has taken over time has been a function of incremental learning about what has worked and the political climate of the time. Popular attitudes towards national service have been shaped as citizens come into contact with the institutions of national service that they see in the communities or here about from others.

### **Origins of national service**

What does it mean to serve the nation? This is the central animating question of national service.

Modern American observers may tend to think of national service in terms of its current form, AmeriCorps, VISTA, and a host of other programs targeted at specific populations. AmeriCorps, the largest program in the portfolio, engages citizens, primarily young people, across the country in direct service for a year in their communities to address educational and other pressing needs. But national service is a much broader idea, one that has been with us since the founding of our country, and which can be traced back to the first democracy in ancient Athens.

National service has always been closely linked to important **national needs**. The original national need, and some argue the only truly national need<sup>1</sup>, is military defense. A nation cannot continue to exist without protecting its boundaries and its people from outside threats. In ancient times, every able-bodied man was required to contribute to defense through military service. Today, many countries around the world still require some form of military service from its citizens. Beyond national defense, democracies have other needs and they often depend on their citizens to perform at least some of the functions of government. These needs include holding public office, sitting on juries and voting, among others. The **structure and term** of these services varies significantly, but they are all essential to the good health of a nation and should be thought of as forms of national service. Throughout history, a variety of experiments have been tried in which these duties have either **voluntary or mandatory**.<sup>2</sup>

#### *National service in early America*

The first need the American colonies faced after they declared their independence from Britain and became a sovereign nation was defense. The Revolutionary War presented an extremely compelling and complex challenge for the fledgling United States: how to defend their independence once declared?

American citizens responded with a structure familiar to them from England and congruent with their political values: local militias. Valuing their freedom highly and angry with what they perceived to be the unreasonable demands and despotic ways of the British monarchy, they resisted investing too much power in the central government. This militia system, which is the origin of the National Guard, involved **universal compulsory short-term** military training and service under local officers.<sup>3</sup> States held

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<sup>1</sup> An example? Some conservatives say this

<sup>2</sup> Citation?

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, it is still a matter of US law (*10 U.S.C. § 311(a) (1982)*) that every able-bodied male between 18 and 45 is a part of the “unorganized militia” of the United States. Therefore, there has always been a form of universal service in the US, as a matter of principle if not practice.

the power to draft men to serve in the Continental Army, but they denied George Washington's desire to be able to draft at the national level.

In fact, Washington was quite skeptical of the value of a decentralized militia as a form of military service.

*To place any dependence upon Militia, is, assuredly, resting upon a broken staff. Men just dragged from the tender Scenes of domestick life; unaccustomed to the din of Arms; totally unacquainted with every kind of military skill, which being followed by a want of confidence in themselves, when opposed to Troops regularly train'd, disciplined, and appointed, superior in knowledge and superior in Arms, makes them timid, and ready to fly from their own shadows....*

*The Jealousies of a standing Army, and the Evils to be apprehended from one, are remote; and, in my judgment, situated and circumstanced as we are, not at all to be dreaded; but the consequence of wanting one, according to my Ideas, formed from the present view of things, is certain, and inevitable Ruin; for if I was called upon to declare upon Oath, whether the Militia have been most serviceable or hurtful upon the whole; I should subscribe to the latter.<sup>4</sup>*

The ranks of short-term citizen soldiers were augmented with a smaller group of **professional long-term volunteers** who enlisted into what later became known as the US Army.<sup>5</sup> These volunteers, drawn primarily from the young and the disadvantaged, signed up for combination of religious, patriotic, economic reasons, or because of social

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from George Washington to the President of Congress, Sept. 24, 1776, in 6 THE WRITINGS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON 110, 112 (J. Fitzpatrick ed. 1931-1944).

<sup>5</sup> There could be some confusion with how we generally think about volunteers in the context of civilian national service. In civilian service, volunteers (e.g. AmeriCorps members) are contrasted with the professional staff of nonprofit organizations. In contrast, under a universal system of short-term military service, the long-term volunteers are also the professionals.

pressure or a desire for adventure.<sup>6</sup> A standing **professional** army can be trained extensively and can achieve high levels of competence through experience, but average **citizens** may possess a more passionate sense of purpose and their service may have more lasting effects in terms of training the citizenry and developing a valuable sense of patriotism contributing to a lifetime of public service.

An interesting early national service proposal attempting to reconcile the tensions between a professional standing force and a system of local citizen militias was made by Henry Knox, the first secretary of war.<sup>7</sup> He suggested establishing a number of “Camps of Discipline” in remote locations, “to avoid the vices of populous places,” in which militia volunteers would be trained not only to fight, but also inculcated with civic virtues.

*Every legion must have a Chaplain, of respectable talents and character, who, besides his religious functions, should impress on the minds of the youth, at stated periods, in concise discourses, the eminent advantages of free governments to the happiness of society, and that such governments can only be supported by the knowledge, spirit, and virtuous conduct of the youth. To be illustrated by the most conspicuous examples of history.*

Although his proposal was never implemented due to resistance by those who were suspicious of the nationalization of the local militias, it shares a number of important similarities to the Civilian Conservation Corps eventually created under President Franklin Roosevelt.

The forms that national service took were a reflection of the political debates of the day. Federalists like Madison and Hamilton argued with Republicans like Jefferson over the appropriate amount of power to invest in the **central** government vs. retained at the state

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<sup>6</sup> [http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah\\_019500\\_conscription.htm](http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_019500_conscription.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Knox, H. “A Plan for the General Arrangement of the Militia of the United States,” 1786.

and local levels. The balance of **compulsory vs. voluntary** service was a response to disagreements over the nature of freedom and the appropriate balance of **rights** and **responsibilities** in the face of a clear threat and a need for immediate action.<sup>8</sup> There were **moralists** who believed people should serve out of a sense of responsibility, and there were **capitalists** who argued that a system of incentives to serve would yield the best outcome.<sup>9</sup> But all factions could agree on the general principal that an effective democracy requires the service of citizens who take both their rights and responsibilities seriously. It was the specifics where disagreements arose.

*“What constitutes a State?*

*Not high-raised battlements, or labor’d mound,*

*Thick wall, or moated gate;*

*Not cities proud, with spires and turrets crown’d;*

*No: men, high minded men;*

*Men, who their duties know;*

*But know their rights; and knowing, dare maintain.*

*These constitute a State.”<sup>10</sup>*

Non-military forms of public service were also common in early American life, even before independence, although primarily at a local rather than national level. The French observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, was struck by the intensive and extensive use of ad hoc civic associations at the community and parish level to accomplish what the government would provide in other countries.

*Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations...In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others...In every case, at the head of any new*

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<sup>8</sup> As another example, in the early years after the formation of the fledgling nation, the debates over the legitimacy of taxes and the responsibility to pay them was quite heated.

<sup>9</sup> George Washington - “I know [patriotism] exists, and I know it has done much in the present contest. But a great and lasting war can never be supported on this principle alone. It must be aided by a prospect of interest, or some reward.”

<sup>10</sup> Thomas *Jefferson: Writings*, Library of America, 1984, p. 1394. Letter to John Taylor, May 28, 1816, quoting Sir William Jones, “An Ode in Imitation of Alcaeus,” 1781.

*undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association.*

Associations were used to provide collective goods including everything from caring for the elderly and infirm, dealing with bad crops and hard winters, constructing public buildings, and clearing blocked intersections. Most of these community services were performed voluntarily out of a sense of fellowship, often among members of a religious congregation, but it is important to note that some **essential non-military civic duties were considered mandatory**, including holding public office.<sup>11</sup> Volunteer fire-fighting groups, first established in their current form by Benjamin Franklin, may be perhaps the best known of the non-military forms of public service.

Early in his life, Franklin had outlined three general steps he believed led to a strong democratic republic, which he applied to number of projects, including fire-fighting: the creation of "virtuous" citizens, the formation of small groups with a common purpose and commitment to the collective good, and the establishment of networks that grew from these groups.<sup>12</sup> The first "Mutual Fire Society" was created in Boston in 1711, and many more followed soon after that. The members of these fire societies came to each other's aid when one of their houses caught fire. Benjamin Franklin borrowed this idea for implementation in Philadelphia in 1733, but made an important revision: fire societies there would be for the general benefit of all citizens rather than only the participating members. Members purchased their own equipment and even voluntarily assessed fines within the group when a member failed to attend a meeting or arrive for fire-fighting duty.<sup>13</sup>

*The brave Men who at Fires are active and speedy with their best Advice and Example, or the Labour of their Hands, are uppermost in my Thoughts...Ye Men of Courage, Industry, and Goodness, continue thus in*

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<sup>11</sup> P. D. Hall, Jossey-Bass, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz, S. A. "Dr. Franklin's Plan," *Smithsonian*, June 2001.  
<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/holidays/july4/franklin.htm>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.firefightersrealstories.com/volunteer.html>

*well doing; and if you grow not ostentatious, it will be thought by every good Man who sees your Performances; here are brave Men, Men of Spirit and Humanity, good Citizens, or Neighbours, capable and worthy of civil Society, and the Enjoyment of a happy Government.*<sup>14</sup>

By and large in American political culture there is a strong preference for, and faith in, **decentralized, bottom-up, voluntary solutions** like these to social problems. These early associations are the origins of what is now called the nonprofit or voluntary sector, which today contributes more than \$400 billion to the US economy. But within this sector, there have been significant historical differences in how they were organized by different states. States like Virginia and New York channeled resources into **public organizations**, like universities and hospitals, whereas a more **laissez-faire** approach was taken in New England. There, resources were allowed to flow to private organizations and new organizations created by social entrepreneurs were encouraged.<sup>15</sup> Thus, although there is a general preference for decentralized solutions, there is no one “American model” for the delivery of public services – instead there is a diversity of perspectives and approaches. As we will see, this diversity is present in modern national service as well. National service is thus an old idea, well predating the founding of the United States. Predominantly military and occasionally civilian, national service is generally instituted to meet important national needs of the day and changes its shape as those needs change. Furthermore, the form that national service takes is a function of deeply rooted American values – and conflicts of values. Debates over service have brought out fundamental differences in opinion about the nature of American democracy.

### **The 19<sup>th</sup> Century and William James**

Throughout the 1800’s, the only form of national service in the United States – public service at the national level – was military. Given that the majority of conflicts during

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<sup>14</sup> Franklin, Benjamin. “Brave Men at Fires” Benjamin Franklin: Writings. Ed. J.A. Leo LeMay. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1987. 220-223. The actual Franklin work was written on December 1, 1773 and published in Franklin’s Pennsylvania Gazette on December 20 of the same year. The town he refers to is Philadelphia. <http://library.thinkquest.org/22254/bravefire.htm>

<sup>15</sup> P. D. Hall, Jossey-Bass, p. 7.

this time were limited and sporadic, a small, voluntary full-time army was augmented in times of need by a locally raised but federally financed and controlled force of citizen-soldiers.<sup>16</sup> The first mandatory service at the national level was introduced during the Civil War given the need for massive numbers of troops on both sides.<sup>17</sup> Conscription was very controversial at the time, despite the tremendous need, because of numerous exemptions made, primarily for the privileged class, who were allowed to buy their way out of service.<sup>18</sup> Racism was also a factor as some less than sympathetic Northerners resisted fighting in “the nigger war.”<sup>19</sup> There were a number of draft riots throughout the North, most notoriously in New York City, where racially motivated lynchings compounded the violence. However, not every potential recruit shared this perspective: there was a minority of volunteers in the Union Army who were there, at least in part, for the altruistic reason of ending slavery.

*Our cause is nobler even than the Revolution for they fought for their own freedom, while we fight for that of another race... If the doom of slavery is not sealed by the war I shall curse the day I entered the Army or lifted a finger in the preservation of the Union.*<sup>20</sup>

The draft was also used in WWI, but without as many exceptions: only conscientious objectors were given reprieve.<sup>21</sup> This increased fairness in combination with a less conflicted public prevented a repeat of the draft riots of the Civil War.<sup>22</sup>

In 1906, philosopher William James wrote an influential essay entitled, “The Moral Equivalent of War” which many point to as the origins of the idea of modern civilian national service. In this piece, he noticed that there are a wide array of positive indirect benefits associated with external threats and war, which was a troubling fact for

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<sup>16</sup> [http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah\\_019500\\_conscription.htm](http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_019500_conscription.htm)

<sup>17</sup> The Enrollment Act of Conscription, 1863.

<sup>18</sup> Religious pacifists were also allowed to perform alternate, non-military service.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, L. *In the Shadow of Slavery*. <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/317749.html>

<sup>20</sup> McPherson, J.M. (1997). *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 117.

<sup>21</sup> Selective Service Act of 1917.

<sup>22</sup> [http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah\\_019500\\_conscription.htm](http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_019500_conscription.htm)

him as a pacifist. Foremost among these benefits are the forging of a national unity and the development of civic virtue among the citizenry.

*Militarism is the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood, and human life with no use for hardihood would be contemptible...We should get toughness without callousness, authority with as little criminal cruelty as possible, and painful work done cheerily because the duty is temporary, and threats not, as now, to degrade the whole remainder of one's life...All the qualities of a man acquire dignity when he knows that the service of the collectivity that owns him needs him...So far, war has been the only force that can discipline a whole community, and until an equivalent discipline is organized [civilian national service], I believe that war must have its way.*

These **indirect benefits** are clearly quite important in and of themselves: social cohesion, patriotism, individual character development, investment in national infrastructure, and strengthened civic habits among the citizenry. As will be discussed in more depth in the chapter on the various ways people conceive of national service, some consider these indirect benefits of primary importance. To adherents of this view, the direct instrumental goals of the service are almost irrelevant.

James' essay raised several questions for national service. What is the ultimate purpose of national service? Is universal service a requirement of a healthy and strong nation? Does that service need to be military? What would a civilian form of national service look like?

These questions have remained a part of the public conversation over service and citizenship despite attacks from realists and hawks who see war as a permanent fixture of human nature, and those of a libertarian bent who dispute that civic responsibility is important (or possible) for the federal government to cultivate.<sup>23</sup> At the time, James saw

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<sup>23</sup> Doug Bandow at the Cato Institute has taken this perspective. *National Service: Utopias Revisited*. <http://cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-190.html> Richard Neuhaus has also criticized James' essay from the Christian concept of a "just war." "There is no moral equivalent of war and we shouldn't want there to be a moral equivalent of war." Evers, W. *National Service: Pro and Con*, p. 119.

his position in contrast to the imperialism of Governor Teddy Roosevelt demonstrated in the Philippines.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Great Depression and the CCC**

The staggering unemployment of the Great Depression in the 1930's presented an extremely compelling national need, one that demanded intervention on a grand scale. How to address the crisis? As might be expected, key debates in American political culture surfaced as the country grappled with developing a recovery plan. For example, how much responsibility did the affected individuals vs. the government bear for righting their situation? Many wanted a decentralized, market-based approach, but others wanted more direct government intervention. The first major initiative was the National Recovery Administration (NRA). The NRA sought to provide incentives for employers to treat employees well, primarily by permitting participating businesses to put a blue eagle in their window and on their products. This eagle was a way to apply social pressure on employers, but was later ruled unconstitutional. It was not until this decentralized, voluntary solution was tried and failed that the federal government took more direct action.

That action took the form of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was the first time that a non-military service program was implemented at the national level in the United States.<sup>25</sup> It represented an innovative response to a new need, but one based on experience with previous forms of national service and informed by the relatively new ideas of William James. President Roosevelt presented the bill, and Congress passed it quickly and easily, given the urgency and depth of the employment problems facing the country.

*We face a future of soil erosion and timber famine. It is clear that economic foresight and immediate employment march hand in hand, in the call for the reforestation of these areas. In so doing, employment can be given to a million men. That is the kind of public work that is self-sustaining. . . .*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.bu.edu/partisanreview/archive/2001/3/strout.html>

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<sup>26</sup> FDR Acceptance Speech

*More important than material gains, will be the moral and spiritual value of such work. We can take a vast army of the unemployed out into healthful surroundings. We can eliminate to some extent at least the threat that enforced idleness brings to spiritual and moral stability.<sup>27</sup>*

The CCC was foremost a jobs program, but also explicitly a conservation program as well as a civic strengthening program. FDR touted it as multi-layered investment in the country's future. 250,000 young men ages 18-28 were enrolled on a temporary basis to work on federal lands, doing much of the work to create our national park system. It was the original youth corps. **The work was extremely varied** from camp to camp and from month to month, but most of the work was done on teams and all of the projects were **concrete and tangible**: planting trees, building trails, firebreaks, lookout towers, telephone lines, small dams and bridges among others. There was **no explicit citizenship or educational component** built into the program, but it is generally agreed that overall the camps had a vitalizing rather than stultifying effect on the young men who participated.<sup>28</sup>

## **WWII and the GI Bill**

The attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the US into WWII represented a major shift in the nation's foremost needs. No longer were jobs a problem – in fact, women entered the workforce for the first time in large numbers to meet the demand – but instead national defense was primary. The CCC was ended and conscription was reinstated. Over time, 10 million men were drafted and 6 million eventually enlisted.

The major innovation in national service during this period was the GI Bill and ROTC scholarships, both of which provided education assistance to those who served in the military as an incentive and reward for service. In this way, a national norm of civic

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<sup>27</sup> Message to Congress on Unemployment Relief, Washington, D.C., March 21, 1933

<sup>28</sup> *A history of national service*, Peter Shapiro, p. 39.

**reciprocity** was fostered. In total, over seven million people were reached by these scholarships, representing over half all veterans and well in excess of anyone’s expectations. These awards in themselves were of service to the nation by making a huge investment in the nation’s human capital.

The acknowledged architect of the bill, Harry Colmery, veteran and former national commander of the American Legion, wanted to avoid the painful experiences returning veterans faced after World War I.

*The burden of war falls on the citizen soldier who has gone forth, overnight, to become the armored hope of humanity. Never again, do we want to see the honor and glory of our nation fade to the extent that her men of arms, with despondent heart and palsied limb, totter from door to door, bowing their souls to the frozen bosom of reluctant charity.<sup>29</sup>*

Many in higher education were originally fearful of the idea. James Conant, then president of Harvard, at first opposed the bill expected it would undermine academic standards, but later changed his mind going so far as to concede that “World War II veterans were the best students Harvard ever had.” Most historians tend to agree, considering the GI Bill to be one of the single most successful investments ever in the health and strength of the nation.

The link between education scholarships and national service has continued over the years, during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, but financed at lower levels. **Scholarships for civilian service** were also instituted later in the form of National Defense Student Loan Program in 1958 and the National Teacher Corps, both of which supported people who agreed to serve as teachers in areas of national need. These were followed by other programs like the National Health Service Corps for health professionals.

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<sup>29</sup> “The Birth of the GI Bill,” <http://veterans.house.gov/benefits/gi60th/birth.html>

- Women, Rosie the Riveter, etc? Other ways people contributed (non-militarily) at the time. Should these be considered “national service” as well?

### **Communism and the Peace Corps**

The 1950’s were a time of relative peace and prosperity, certainly in contrast with the previous two decades. With the end of WWII, the beginnings of the reconstruction of Europe with the assistance of the Marshall Plan and the creation of the United Nations, Americans came to see themselves as a major force for beneficial development across the globe.<sup>30</sup> Some even began to talk about the idea of voluntary international service by individual citizens.<sup>31</sup>

But what really brought this proposal to the fore was the growing perception of communism as a growing threat to developing nations, to the power of the US, and to a democratic future for mankind. Thus, preserving democracy and the American way of life became an important national need at this time.

*The United States and a few other fortunate nations are part of an island of prosperity in a worldwide sea of poverty. Our affluence has at times severed us from the great poverty stricken majority of the world's people. It is essential that we demonstrate that we continue to be aware of the responsibility we fortunate few have to assist the efforts of others at development and progress.*<sup>32</sup>

It was the communist threat that led President Kennedy’s to create the Peace Corps in 1961 as way to win the hearts and minds of citizens in the developing world, particularly those in countries at greatest risk of “falling” to communism. The Peace Corps was to be

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<sup>30</sup> This impulse is a long-standing one in American political culture, dating back at least to the 1840’s and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. It could be argued that it goes back much further, tapping into the missionary zeal of the first Pilgrims. [And continues today in the war against terrorism!]

<sup>31</sup> *A history of national service*, Shapiro, p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> 1963 - *Letter to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House transmitting bill to strengthen the Peace Corps*

a youth corps like the CCC, but different in that volunteers were to be **college educated professionals**, trained to assist with economic development projects, and would serve as individuals or in small groups dispersed through partner countries. The inspiration for the Peace Corps came as much from the tradition of missionary work familiar to many from their religious traditions as from the CCC.

It was also a much smaller program, which may be because the national need was not as politically compelling as the joblessness of the depression. The Peace Corps has continued to this day, but it has remained a small program, averaging less than 5,000 volunteers annually across the globe.<sup>33</sup> Some observers even suggest its permanence as an American institution is due largely to its symbolic power as a memorial to President Kennedy.

The **impact** of the Peace Corps is often debated. Does it actually improve the lives of people in the **developing world**, or is it a part of a cynical pacification agenda supporting American hegemony? Or is it a **citizenship** development program, primarily of benefit to the volunteers as a way to expand their horizons? (A large number of returned Peace Corps volunteers continue on in one form of public service or another.<sup>34</sup>) There are many convincing anecdotes on all sides of these debates, but there is little authoritative research on the topic. Interest to note is that its purpose was even debated by those who had participated. In May 1970, the Committee of Returned Volunteers wrote a letter calling for the termination of the Peace Corps.

*We went aboard to help Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans develop their resources and become free people. Once abroad, we discovered that we were part of the U.S. worldwide pacification program. We found that U.S. projects in these countries are designed to achieve political control and economic exploitation: to build an Empire for the U.S. As volunteers we were part of that strategy; we were Marines in velvet gloves.*<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In recent years, AmeriCorps has had nearly 10 times the number of members in the Peace Corps.

<sup>34</sup> Citation?

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Hoffman, E. C., *All You Need Is Love*, p. 217.

## **Poverty and the Great Society**

The next major challenge facing the nation was a domestic issue: poverty, particularly urban poverty. **!!! statistics?** In general, the 1960's was a time of great optimism for the future, but also a growing awareness of fundamental inequalities in the United States. This tension between a sense of what was possible and the limitation of the current reality led to widespread activism on a number of fronts, including poverty.

President Lyndon Johnson, seizing onto this popular spirit and believing in the efficacy of an active, hands-on federal government in addressing national problems, set an ambitious multi-point agenda which he called the Great Society. One of the many programs created by President Johnson was VISTA: Volunteers in Service to America. VISTA was described as a “domestic Peace Corps,” both to help the general public understand it as well as to leverage the political support for the Peace Corps. VISTA volunteers served in similar placement structures as the Peace Corps, focusing on capacity building projects working through existing local nonprofits in disadvantaged communities to foster greater self-sufficiency. These were citizens cultivating the participation of other citizens in their communities to address their needs together.

VISTA, like the Peace Corps, was no jobs program: the focus was on the communities being served, not the volunteers. But one major difference is that people from the communities being served also served as VISTA volunteers themselves. The idea was that **developing “indigenous” leadership** within those communities was a powerful way to **build capacity**, as well as bringing in outside skills and knowledge. This resulted in a much more diverse corps than in the Peace Corps – or the CCC – , in terms of privilege, formal educational attainment, age and race. Bringing together this diversity of participants working together towards a shared purpose had the important indirect benefit of developing new **social capital**, creating ties across lines of difference that were usually difficult to bridge.

VISTA, also like the Peace Corps, is still in existence, having become part of AmeriCorps. In terms of scope, VISTA has had approximately half the number of members as the Peace Corps, but the annual enrollment has varied significantly with its political fortunes. Under Presidents Nixon and Reagan, vigorous efforts were made to kill the program, or at least reduce it and redirect it from activism, community organizing and other activities that challenged power structures to a focus on working within those structures and supporting social service delivery. C.R. Lane, acting director of VISTA under Nixon stated his intentions:

*VISTA is no longer going to be this place where you can do your own thing...especially if that means confronting the establishment. We hope, predict, and are striving for a new type of volunteer who will work within the system and lower the noise level.<sup>36</sup>*

Under Presidents Johnson and Carter the corps was larger and more activist in its orientation, taking on more controversial projects (**examples???**) that arose the ire of conservatives. This is one of a variety of divides in terms of how people think about national service, which stem primarily from differences in what they consider to be national needs. What is a fact of life and what is possible? Whose interests matter? What problems are tractable? Who are the key actors and where is the leverage? What makes a difference and what difference do we want to see?

Some think that national defense is the only legitimate national need. Others of the CCC school tend to believe that **concrete infrastructure projects** should be the focus. Still others see **immediate human needs** as primary, making them proponents of direct human services. Those focused on individual responsibility and developing self-sufficiency want to channel resources in ways that **equalize opportunity and support people in helping themselves**. Institution builders emphasis **organizational capacity building** efforts. Marxists want to **empower the poor** and change the balance of power. Systems thinkers want to explore why problems persist and identify and attack **root**

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<sup>36</sup> David Pass, “The Politics of VISTA in the War on Poverty: A Study of Ideological Conflict,” Ph.D. thesis for Columbia University, 1976, p. 194. (Quoted in Schwartz book on VISTA.)

**causes**, whatever they may be. Libertarians feel the whole enterprise is misguided, because government involvement is bound to do more harm than good through **bureaucratic failure and the corruption of politics.**

### **Conservation and the 1970's**

In addition to VISTA, there were also a few new federal experiments with youth conservation corps in the model of the CCC during the 1970's. The Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) was created in 1970 as a summer employment program for teenagers, riding the wave of concern over the state of the environment at this time. (The first Earth Day was organized in 1970.) The YCC eventually grew to 34,000. The Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) followed on its heels in 1978, focusing on unemployed 16-23 year olds in particular. What was unique about this federal program was that it was implemented in a **decentralized** way, organized under small state-level offices. The success of these state programs varied widely, with the California Conservation Corps as the most notable model.

Youth corps came to be seen primarily as an alternate model of poverty alleviation: workforce development. The idea was to build the skills of the poor and improve their employability through a variety of service learning opportunities and apprenticeships. By providing a supportive learning environment and a structured, disciplined experience, corps members could learn a wide range of job skills including technical skills like carpentry, but more importantly general workplace skills like teamwork, problem solving, and general personal responsibility.

### **The 1980's: Service programs go local**

The federal youth corps were eliminated through the new Job Training Partnership Act in 1982 under President Reagan, who believed in a different model of workforce development, one that worked more closely with the business community and did not

require the federal government to run the programs. But the youth corps continued at the state level in pockets around the country where there was still political support for them, eventually banding together into the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps. This association organized replication projects across the US with the support of private foundations. At the same time, high school and collegiate service and service learning began to grow with the support of national nonprofits like the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) and the Campus Compact.

Those involved in youth service began to notice the wide range of programs as well as the growth of interest in service. In 1985-86 Youth Service America (YSA) was founded to begin to unify these efforts into a coherent framework. The YSA was instrumental in persuading President Bush, Sr. to establish the Office of National Service at the White House. President Bush, believing in the importance of volunteering, particularly in a decade known for its self-serving materialism, sought ways to promote it, eventually creating the Points of Light Foundation to serve this purpose in 1990.

At the same time, several national service bills were introduced into Congress. With the championing of Senator Edward Kennedy, who could evoke President Kennedy's association with service and who had experience with service corps like City Year in Boston, the National and Community Service Act of 1990 was passed. This bill was informed by all of the learning and experimentation of previous national service programs, but particularly the experience of the 1980's. One of the key lessons learned was that national service need not exist as an operating program at the federal level. The US government could act more as a grantmaker to replicate programs and bring existing initiatives to scale, something not even the private foundations could do alone. Innovative pilot projects and promising local programs could be funded and those that demonstrated their ability to produce results would be expanded. This "new paradigm" of national service bridged a key ideological divide between Democrats favoring the federal intervention and Republicans promoting local action, winning national service new support. There was also bipartisan support for linking financial aid with service, emphasizing the reciprocity of service.

President Bush’s administration was still skeptical of “paid volunteerism,” as civilian national service was framed, but was willing to support a pilot program, partially due to the support of Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, a Mormon familiar with the benefits of youth service from the Mormon’s Mission program.<sup>37</sup>

### **AmeriCorps and Modern National Service Debates**

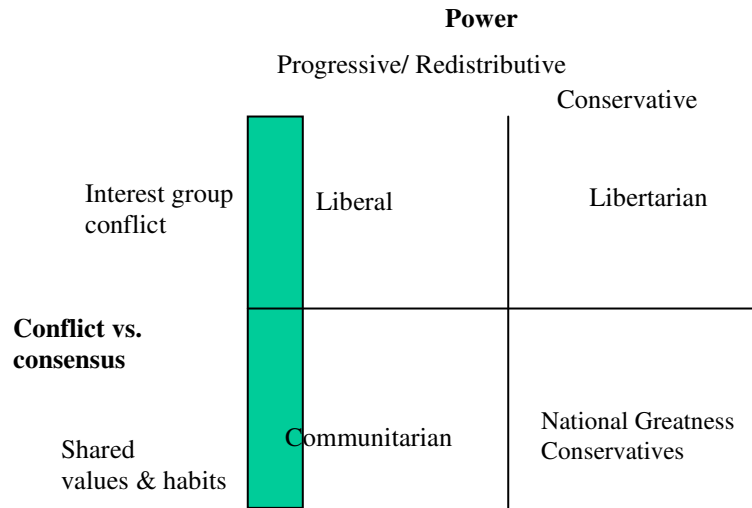
The modern perspectives on national service can be roughly divided into four camps: liberal, libertarian, communitarian, and “national greatness” conservative. The communitarian view, associated with Amitai Etzioni, **others?** may be the most familiar in the context of service. In this view, a citizenry needs a stock of social trust and shared, deeply held civic values to remain strong. Some communitarians like Harry Boyte, Benjamin Barber and Robert Bellah emphasize not only values, but also the shared practices and habits of co-creative citizenship. National service is promoted as a way to build trust, socialize people to civic values, and train people in the practices of associational democracy. Liberals, like Barry Checkoway (**better example?**), support these ideas, but consider them somewhat naïve, firmly believing in the inherent conflict and struggle involved in democracy. Instead of focusing on developing civic values, they would rather see resources put into advocacy and organizing efforts to empower the poor, coupled with the centralized provision of social services and welfare.

Libertarians, like Doug Bandow, find these proposals both absurd and dangerous, skeptical that the government can do anything valuable and trusting the marketplace of individual actions and decisions to naturally lead to the best outcomes. They want government organized national service dismantled so that the natural volunteering impulse can act unimpeded. “National greatness” conservatives like William F. Buckley and David Brooks differ from their libertarian colleagues, believing in the importance of

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<sup>37</sup> Shapiro, p. 137.

national values, but tend to think in conservative terms of a return to the lost social values that have made this country great. They may support national service, but are more likely to support civics and affirmative history classes and strengthening social institutions like the church and the family.



During the 1992 campaign, service figured in both the platforms of President Bush and then Senator Clinton and these intellectual debates shaped their respective positions. President Bush advocated for letting “1000 flowers [of volunteerism] bloom,” with the support of the Points of Light Foundation, promoting increased **episodic volunteering**. Senator Clinton had bigger plans in mind, wanting to create a link between financial aid for college and a year or two of national service that would involve many more young people in **full-time stipended service**.

Soon after President Clinton’s inauguration, he signed into law the National Service Trust Act of 1993 that created AmeriCorps and funded the financial aid and stipends for the AmeriCorps “members,” but not without a great deal of public debate and wrangling in

Congress first. Newt Gingrich and libertarian-leaning conservatives wanted to kill it. Communitarians rallied for it and sought to embed it in communities and focus it on developing public values. Most liberals argued for a national identity and a more activist orientation, although some expressed concerns that linking it to education would undermine equal opportunity. Some wanted service to be mandatory, making the responsibilities of citizenship explicit. National greatness conservatives resonated with the idea, but didn't like that it was associated with Clinton and certainly didn't want to be funding liberal activism. The final bill reflects all of these influences.

What was unique about AmeriCorps in the history of national service in the US was that there was no clear and compelling national need, unlike previous incarnations like the CCC or the Peace Corps. It was more difficult to answer the question, "National service for what?" One answer might be the general decline in community, social and civic capital in the US described in Robert Putnam's seminal book *Bowling Alone*. The "new paradigm" of federally-funded but decentralized national service that AmeriCorps reflected may have made it possible for the first time to fund ongoing service to chip away at the whole range of social challenges faced in the US, where diffuse national needs like these had not been seen as sufficient justification in the past. This model created a big tent, allowing for many interpretations, local adaptations and experiments in national service, which was a strength, but was also seen by some original supporters as unfortunate, and perhaps fatal, compromises.

Despite its politics at the national level, AmeriCorps has steadily grown so that now the most members ever serve annually (70,000), and that number even under a Republican president during a time when the nation's attention is focused outside the US on terrorism and the war in Iraq. AmeriCorps has also continued to gain the support and admiration of governors and local citizens, both Democrats and Republican, across the country as they had a chance to experience the program first hand. So much so that when it faced a huge funding cut in 2001 to reconcile accounting irregularities at CNS, a huge wave of support, in the form of the Save AmeriCorps Coalition, was rapidly generated to defend it. **!!more on coalition?**

Given the flexibility of the AmeriCorps legislation, debates over the direction of the program continue to burn. But most of the debates are familiar, reflecting long-standing tensions in American political culture. Should service be voluntary or compulsory? How much federal coordination and oversight is needed vs. how can we harness the natural associational tendencies of the American people? Should social service work be done by permanent professionals or by temporary citizen volunteers? Should service be compensated to provide incentives, or should service come from purely altruistic motivations? Are there any obligations that come with the rights of citizenship? Is it important to intentionally foster a sense of national unity? Is it ok to place AmeriCorps volunteers in federal, state or local government agencies, or only in independent non-profit organizations?<sup>38</sup> Are the tangible results of the service most important, or is the indirect character and citizenship building that comes with the service paramount? Is service primarily for the server or for the served? Is service about meeting today's needs, or about building the capacity so that service is not needed tomorrow? Is activism of service?

But national service itself is simply a natural extension of the tradition of associations as a tool of civic problem solving that can be traced back to the founding of our country. The problems may be more complex and interdependent, requiring more sophisticated forms of organization, but the essence of national service is citizens coming together voluntarily to address the problems we face together.

**!!! Say more about the political power realities** and what decisions were made and why? Political realities: decentralization, not compete with workers, not activist,

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<sup>38</sup> Volunteers and public service have long played an integral role in a variety of federal programs and initiatives ranging from 4-H in the Department of Agriculture, to the National Parks Service, to SCORE in the US Small Business Administration and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Volunteering with state and local government entities have a even richer and more familiar history in the form of volunteer fire companies, the Neighborhood Watch Program, jury duty and the service of congresspeople and senators. See S. j. Rehnborg, "Government Volunteerism in the New Millenium," *ARNOVA special issue 1:2 for much more on this topic*.

compulsory, not needs based: inclusive (reaction to Great Society) etc. Relatively small program. Getting things done emphasis. Presidential initiative: no real interest group for national service.

**(Quotes here perhaps from Dionne book for current perspectives)**

### *Conclusion*

National service as a concept has existed since the first Greek democracies. In the United States, national service programs have crystallized in times of compelling national need. As these needs have changes, so has the nature of the service. But national service is a permanent fixture of American life, drawing on values embedded deep in our political culture and democracy generally.

The perspectives on the essential purpose of national service are as diverse as our population, but there are few common themes, as well will see in the next chapter [conceptions]. But regardless of the ultimate aim, we have learned a great deal about what works and why over the past several centuries. Whatever purpose emerges naturally from our democratic process, we have a responsibility to put this knowledge into practice. This book advances that agenda investigating our past 10 years of experience with national service in great detail. !!! etc etc...