

A RETIRED GENERAL CALLS FOR A NATIONAL SERVICE

The Franklin Project promotes a voluntary culture of national service

By Stan McChrystal

This article is excerpted from two articles by Stan McChrystal. The first "A Million Young People to Empower America," published by CNN Opinion can be found at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/02/opinions/mcchrystal-national-service/>. The second, "Securing the American Character," published by the Democracy Journal can be found at <http://www.democracyjournal.org/33/securing-the-american-character.php?page=all>.

Duty. Honor. Country. These words were chiseled in granite above me, printed on the diploma in my hands and engraved on my class ring.

The year was 1976. I had just graduated from West Point. In return for four years of education, I owed the nation at least five years of Army service. I had become a "service member." But like most of my peers, I wasn't really thinking much about service. At age 21, I was focused on the adventure of becoming a good officer and leading soldiers.

After 34 years in the U.S. military, I learned that armies are built soldier-by-soldier, platoon-by-platoon. Like the bricks in a house, the soldiers in each unit contribute to a great military, just as the citizens of each neighborhood help determine whether the nation stands strong. Nothing is more important than developing in our citizens a sense of

responsibility to each other - and to the nation.

Service confers a measure of empathy, patience, and a willingness to sacrifice in those who are fortunate. It can empower those who are less so. Active citizenship, when tied to a common endeavor, instills pride in a nation. Civic participation grants a sense of ownership to citizens.

I believe our country would benefit greatly if we were to unite around a commitment to such service.

A call to high school graduates

The Franklin Project is an initiative that I chair at the Aspen Institute. Our goal is to have 1 million young Americans complete a civilian service year by 2023. We envision an American national service that is voluntary, but socially expected.

What would the concept of a service year entail? A young person would perform a year of full-time service between the ages of 18 and 28 and receive a modest stipend.

In a manner similar to participation in existing programs such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, he or she would complete the "service year" at a host institution: a non-profit, university, or other institution, working in an array of fields from education to conservation, and performing tasks like building homes, serving meals to the elderly, and helping veterans transition back to civilian life.

This would not be a big new government program. Rather, the service year would be funded through public-private partnerships enabled by a national-service technology platform that would connect young people who want to serve, organizations that can host them, and funders.

As part of this effort, I've been calling for a few cities across the country to step up and lead by becoming Service Year Cities.

What if, upon graduating from high school, every young person in these cities is given an opportunity to complete a



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The author spent time getting to know some of the local Afghans when he served as commander of the U.S. and International forces.

service year with other young people? Each city could commit to a plan with an initial goal of having at least 25 percent of their graduating students from high schools stay in their communities to serve for a year.

Like many Americans, I believe our country would benefit greatly if we were to unite around a commitment to service. Creating model towns and cities of service across America could provide powerful local examples that capture our collective imagination and create ripple effects for more service opportunities.¹

What every citizen should do

This reciprocal notion of citizenship is as old as the concept of self-government. In one State of the Union address, President Barack Obama told members of Congress

and the nation, “That spirit that has always moved this nation forward. It’s the spirit of citizenship—the recognition that through hard work and responsibility, we can pursue our individual dreams, but still come together as one American family to make sure the next generation can pursue its dreams as well.”

President George W. Bush earlier said, “Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves. When this spirit of citizenship is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it.”

Many Americans’ sole connection to the country is through paying taxes and voting—not nearly enough to bind

people to their communities. Our politics lurch from one bitter breakdown to the next, consumed with petty partisan controversies.

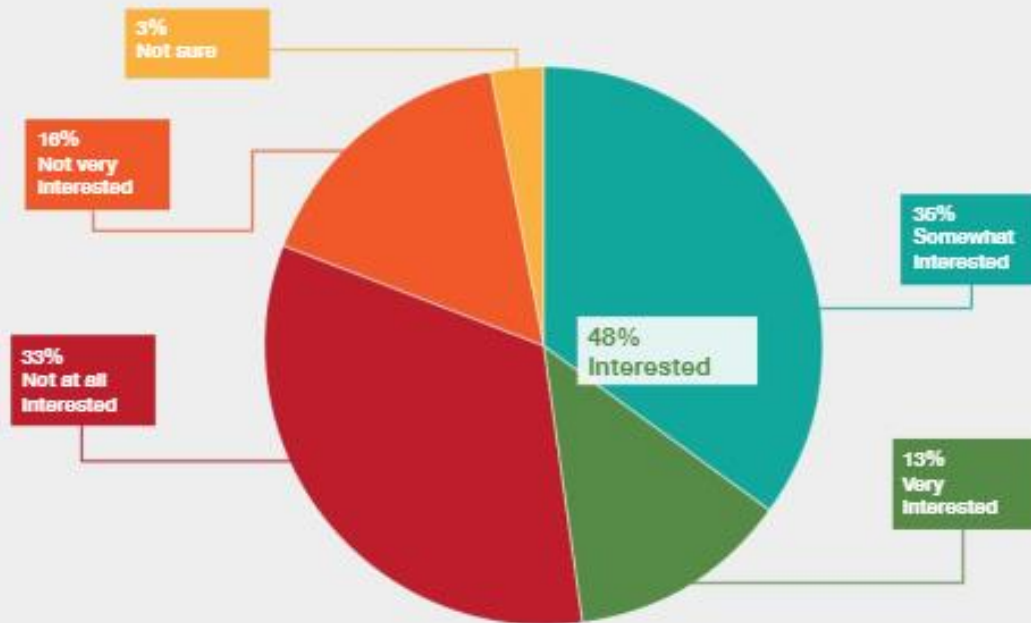
We are losing our concept of citizenship. The sense of responsibility and contribution that John F. Kennedy trumpeted, and the willingness to sacrifice for an idea that Abraham Lincoln immortalized in 272 words at Gettysburg, feel like faint echoes from earlier, nobler times.

Today, the need for such a common experience of citizenship is more poignant than ever. We are drifting apart. Contrary to the illusion of constant connectivity, Americans are isolated—geographically, ethnically, economically, religiously, and culturally. An affluent student from Greenwich, Connecticut will never meet a student from Harlem.

¹ The first portion of this piece is an excerpt from the piece originally written for CNN Opinion and the remainder of this piece is an excerpt from a piece originally for Democracy Journal.

Perspective of American voters on national service

How interested would you be in participating in a voluntary national service program at some point in the future?



Report from the Franklin Project at the Aspen Institute, June 2013.

A notion now more achievable

Young people want to serve, institutions of all kinds have the capacity to host them, and the technology exists to connect young people, institutions, and funders.

The demand for service exceeds the supply of service opportunities. AmeriCorps had more than 580,000 applications for just over 80,000 slots in 2011. In the same year, Teach For America had some 48,000 applications for just 5,200 slots. Peace Corps received 23,000 applications in 2015—the highest in two decades—but they can only take about 7,000 in any given year.⁷

A common pathway large enough to accommodate such enthusiasm no longer exists. According to a Pew survey, “relatively few millennials—just 2 percent of males—are military veterans. At a comparable stage of their life cycle, 6

percent of Gen-Xer men, 13 percent of Baby Boomer men and 24 percent of Silent men were veterans.”

It would be easy to look at these numbers and say that young people simply don’t want to join the military, but that’s not the case. The military is smaller than it was, and relatively fewer young people are considered fit for military duty.

Rather than expanding the military simply to provide more service slots, the country should work to create a new civic institution—the service year—that’s reflective of young people’s enthusiasm even as this national service functions to give everyone a stake in the outcome of the country.

To endure in the long run, national service and the service year must be something that young people want to do. Conscription movements fail, and become counterproductive, when they become

something that wealthier young people can avoid.

All young Americans, then, should have the opportunity—and feel the responsibility—to serve their country. What we need is to create a culture of service in America, one in which a year of service is culturally expected, if not quite mandatory by law. And we need a realistic pathway and mechanism for young Americans to be able to serve.

A year of local service

The Franklin Project is working to connect service-year positions to existing civic institutions like schools, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and businesses.

When there were attempts to institute such a system of national service in the past, the nonprofit industry was not at the scale it is currently. In 1995,

⁷ This information was not in the original version of the piece, but has been added based on new data from Peace Corps from 2015.

nonprofits reported \$1.39 trillion in total assets. In 2012, the nonprofit share of GDP was 5.5 percent. By December 2013, that number had risen to \$4.76 trillion, far outpacing inflation.

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, there are more than 1.4 million tax-exempt organizations in the United States.

While a new system of national service would be expensive, we estimate it would cost \$22.3 billion for one million service-year positions. The return on investment is over three-to-one.

In fact, only a fraction of nonprofit organizations would need to host young people doing a service year, and that \$22.3 billion represents a fraction of the money that exists in the non-profit sector today.

To be sure, some Americans will continue to devote periods of their professional lives to public service, whether in the military, State Department, Peace Corps, AmeriCorps or intelligence community. Some Americans will choose careers as police, firefighters, EMTs, teachers, or some other civic profession.

These institutions should not be expanded simply for the sake of letting everyone serve—this is not federal make-work. The service year is intended for Americans who would otherwise live their entire adult lives as private citizens.

Start with school

We are failing our children—the very Americans for whom we are most responsible. Every year, 25 percent of young Americans don't graduate from high school, making them essentially unemployable in a modern economy. Many of those who do graduate are not, in any real sense, educated.

Nearly seven million 16- to 24-year-olds are out of school and out of work, costing our nation billions of dollars every year in increased social services and lost productivity. More than two-thirds of fourth-graders in the United States do not read proficiently.

A recent study of an AmeriCorps service year program, called Minnesota Reading Corps, found that the "average

kindergartener with an AmeriCorps tutor performed twice as well as students without one," and that "students with higher risk factors (such as dual-language learners and students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch) who received AmeriCorps tutoring significantly outperformed students who did not."

Universities will find that service-year alumni are better students. Of the 20 million Americans enrolled in college, a strong majority do not graduate on time. A Harvard study published in 2011 found that just 56 percent of students at four-year colleges graduated within six years.

Life on its own terms

A service year could provide an opportunity for a young person to mature and prepare for college. Such an experience would be more meaningful than a traditional "gap year" of taking a year off to travel.

Furthermore, our understanding of what predicts success in a career has shifted over time, from cognitive measures such as IQ and conscientiousness to non-cognitive measures such as creativity, grit, and persistence.

Creating a cultural expectation that every young person does a year of challenging, meaningful national service—whose goals are big and where success means solving complex, dynamic problems—would encourage more young Americans to have an experience that reinforces and instills values like grit and persistence, the very skills that predict career success and that employers are seeking.

In the 1970s, surveys of Fortune 500 companies demonstrated that employers were looking for skills defined by reading, writing, and arithmetic. But surveys of employers within the last year showed that the top skills they sought were the ability to work in a team; to make decisions and solve problems; to plan, organize, and prioritize work; and to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization—all skills that service years would foster.

In addition, depending on the nature

of the service program, young people can also develop specific hard skills associated with their area of service. For example, with YouthBuild and the Green City Force Corps, members learn construction skills. With City Year and Teach For America, members learn skills needed to work in education. FEMA Corps members learn disaster relief skills.

Mending the American society

We have become a country of people who do not know how to relate to one another. More important than the skills a service year would impart on those serving is the ability of a year of service in the community to mend an increasingly shorn society.

People of different income levels interact with one another less and less and the income gap grows. The middle class shrank dramatically from 65 to 42 percent between 1970 and 2009, while the percentage of families living on the extremes more than doubled, from 15 percent to 33 percent.

Presidents have recently called for active citizenship, but I fear we've devolved to a condition that's heavy on rights and light on responsibilities; as a nation we've allowed our civic muscles to atrophy. Service has become someone else's job—an interruption on an otherwise straight path.

Despite dwindling social trust, there is much to be hopeful about. Young people are, in fact, more likely than their predecessors to try to serve in some way. More than half of millennials reported having volunteered in the last six months, according to one Pew survey. Thirty percent identified doing meaningful work as the single most important factor in a successful career. More than 70 percent identified meaningful work as one of the top three most important factors.

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