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PRINCIPLES AND REFORMS FOR CITIZEN SERVICE

MATTHEW SPALDING, PH.D.

In his 2003 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush urged Congress to reconsider the Citizen Service Act of 2002, which would reform and reauthorize several national service programs including AmeriCorps, VISTA, and Learn & Serve America.

Working with the Bush Administration, lawmakers should propose a reformed legislative package that builds on the changes proposed in last year's legislation, takes additional steps to correct the infringement of religious liberty in existing laws, and fundamentally transforms the current government-centered national service agenda into a true citizen service initiative.

PRINCIPLES OF CITIZEN SERVICE

The government-oriented view of national service contrasts sharply with the idea of a "citizen service" that protects and strengthens civil society, focuses on service rather than social change, promotes true volunteerism, and addresses real problems. The following five principles of citizen service should be at the heart of the Citizen Service Act.

1. **Protect and strengthen civil society.** The primary goal of citizen service should be to protect and strengthen civil society, especially the non-governmental institutions at its foundation. Unlike government programs, the personal involvement, individual generosity, and consis-

tent participation that are the hallmarks of private philanthropy have a ripple effect of further strengthening the fiber of civil society.

2. **Focus on service.** Americans have always exemplified a strong sense of civic responsibility and humane compassion toward their neighbors and the less fortunate in their communities and have traditionally supported and participated in a vast array of private service activities. The objective of citizen service legislation should be to promote a renewed commitment to this great tradition of individual service.

- **Promote true volunteerism.** President Bush's first objective for a Citizen Service Act is to "support and encourage greater engagement of citizens in volunteering." To be truly voluntary, an action must be intentionally chosen and

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done by one's own free will, without compulsion or external constraint and "without profit, payment or any valuable consideration."

- **Address real problems.** If the federal government is to encourage citizen service, and if policymakers want to foster a culture of responsibility toward the less fortunate, service programs should be targeted to address serious problems where there is authentic need for assistance. In addition, such assistance should be provided in accordance with the larger traditions of compassionate service.
- **Minimize the role of government.** Government can play an important role in revitalizing citizen service, but that role should be limited and indirect. Citizen service that is paid for and organized by the government encourages individuals and associations to look to the state for assistance. Likewise, the government's funding of charitable organizations to pay for volunteer time reduces the need for private-sector support, making it more likely that citizens will abdicate their civic responsibilities. Reform should reduce government's financial, administrative, and regulatory role in civil society.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers should carefully review and include as a starting point useful reforms proposed in the 2002 legislation. They should also act to remove barriers in existing national service laws that prevent faith-based groups from making employment decisions or choosing volunteers on the basis of religion. More fundamental changes are required, however, to transform today's national service into a citizen service initiative. Specifically, Congress should:

- **Eliminate** the stipends and benefits for AmeriCorps participants, thus ending the program as an employment program. Policymakers could allow AmeriCorps to continue to award modest educational grants, not as a financial incentive but as a nominal award for service completed.
- **Focus** VISTA on helping to solve the most important poverty-related problems and change VISTA from a federally operated program (in

which the federal government selects and supervises members) to a federally assisted program to give sponsoring organizations greater control over recruiting and selecting participants and more flexibility in program design and delivery.

- **End** the Learn & Serve America program. If it elects to keep a smaller program that awards grants to encourage and support traditional notions of community service, Congress should not endorse or underwrite service-learning methods. Any program authorized to replace Learn & Serve America should focus on more appropriate activities.
- **Control** spending on national service programs, investigate administrative problems in the AmeriCorps program, act to organize and minimize an increasingly complicated and confusing national service bureaucracy, and treat citizen service as a short-term stimulus package for revitalizing civil society rather than a permanent federal program.

CONCLUSION

Now, more than ever, at a time when Americans are volunteering and engaging in service to their country in unprecedented numbers and unprecedented ways, policymakers must reject the model of government-centered national service. Volunteer service that is organized and paid for by government goes against the American character and threatens to weaken the private associations that have always been the engine of moral and social reform in this country.

Policymakers should promote a true citizen service that is consistent with principles of self-government and harmonious with a vibrant civil society. Congress should advance a service agenda based on personal responsibility, independent citizenship, and civic volunteerism—all prerequisites for building what President Bush has called a "new culture of responsibility."

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PRINCIPLES AND REFORMS FOR CITIZEN SERVICE

MATTHEW SPALDING, PH.D.¹

In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush issued a call to all Americans to commit 4,000 hours to service and volunteerism over the course of their lifetime. President Bush renewed his challenge in this year's State of the Union address and urged Congress to reconsider the Citizen Service Act of 2002, which would reform and reauthorize several programs—including AmeriCorps, VISTA and Learn & Serve America—as part of his Administration's effort to foster service, citizenship, and responsibility.

Policymakers now have an important opportunity to rethink America's national service programs as they design a reformed version of the Citizen Service Act for consideration by the new Congress. Working with the Bush Administration, lawmakers should propose a reformed legislative package that builds on the changes proposed in the 2002 legislation, takes additional steps to correct the infringement of religious liberty in existing service laws, and fundamentally transforms the current government-centered national service agenda into a true citizen service initiative that is compatible with the highest principles and traditions of American self-government.

THE WRONG DIRECTION

The idea of national service has its origins in the theories of progressive reformers at the beginning

of the 20th century and is today a key aspect of modern liberalism's theory of citizenship. Progressive thinkers such as Herbert Croly and John Dewey argued that the forces of industrialism and urbanization had shattered America's traditional social order and that these conditions in the modern world required a new administrative state to better manage political life and human affairs.

These thinkers further argued that such an unprecedented situation required nothing less than a new relationship between citizens and the federal government that emphasized a public-spirited devotion to a collective social ideal—what Dewey called “the Great Community” and Lyndon Johnson later proclaimed a “Great Society”—and transferred the traditional, local functions of civil society to a progressive, national government focused on social reform. This new idea of citizenship, and in particular the con-

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1. The author thanks Charissa Kersten and Timothy Holbert for their assistance in preparing this study.

cept of national service, was meant to replace the old-fashioned notion of an independent, self-governing citizenship with an updated civic bond to an activist nation-state.

In recent years, this national service agenda received renewed interest in the ideas and policies of former President Bill Clinton, who called for a “new covenant” that would revive a sense of national community and civic-mindedness in response to what he saw as the “gilded age” of the 1980s. The Clinton Administration used these themes as a way to make civic life an aspect of reinventing government, making government more “user-friendly” for citizens and communities while preserving—if not expanding—bureaucratic control of social programs.

This agenda was pursued within the philosophic assumptions and political goals of modern liberalism. The spirit and intentions of this paradigm were epitomized in the program Clinton proclaimed as “citizenship at its best”—AmeriCorps, the largest government program for national service since the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal.²

PRINCIPLES OF CITIZEN SERVICE

The government-oriented view of national service contrasts sharply with the idea of a “citizen service” that protects and strengthens civil society, focuses on service rather than social change, promotes true volunteerism, and addresses real problems—while minimizing the role of government. The following five principles of citizen service should be at the heart of the Citizen Service Act.

PRINCIPLE #1: Protect and strengthen civil society.

The primary goal of citizen service should be to protect and strengthen civil society, especially the non-governmental institutions at its foundation. The great social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville observed that one of the leading virtues of American society is its tendency to create local voluntary associations to meet society’s most important needs.

In other nations, these needs were addressed through and by government; in the United States, private individuals of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions formed associations to deal with societal problems.

“I often admired the infinite art with which the inhabitants of the United States managed to fix a common goal to the efforts of many men and to get them to advance it freely,” Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*. “What political power could ever be in a state to suffice for the innumerable multitude of small undertakings that American citizens execute every day with the aid of an association?”³

The traditional associations of civil society—families, schools, churches, voluntary organizations, and other mediating institutions—sustain social order and public morality, moderate individualism and materialism, and cultivate the personal character that is the foundation of a self-governing society. All of this occurs without the aid of government bureaucracies or the coercive power of the law. Unlike government programs, the personal involvement, individual generosity, and consistent participation that are the hallmarks of private philanthropy have a ripple effect of further strengthening the fiber of civil society.

Policymakers must recognize that President Bush’s call to service will be answered best not by a government program but by the selfless acts of millions of citizens in voluntary associations, local communities, and private organizations that are at the heart of American charity. In 2001, according to Independent Sector and the American Association of Fundraising Counsel, 83.9 million adults volunteered time to a formal charity organization and 89 percent of American households gave a total of \$212 billion to charity.⁴ That same year, the Knights of Columbus alone raised and distributed \$125.6 million (half the AmeriCorps budget) and volunteered 58 million hours of service (almost 90 percent of AmeriCorps participants’ service time).⁵

2. See John Walters, “Clinton’s AmeriCorps Values: How the President Misunderstands Citizenship,” *Policy Review*, No. 75 (January–February 1996).

3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Book II, Chapter V, “The Use Which The Americans Make of Public Associations in Civil Life,” pp. 489–492.

These private voluntary organizations thrive today precisely because their work is privately organized, highly decentralized, and directly focused on community needs and local conditions. If policymakers are serious about promoting a thriving civil society, they should emphasize not only volunteering, but also private philanthropy by promoting proposals such as the Charity Aid, Recovery, and Empowerment (CARE) Act, which would boost both private volunteerism and charitable giving.⁶

PRINCIPLE #2: Focus on service.

Americans have always exemplified a strong sense of civic responsibility and humane compassion toward their neighbors and the less fortunate in their communities and traditionally have supported and participated in a vast array of private service activities. The objective of citizen service legislation should be to promote a renewed commitment to this great tradition of individual service as a way of strengthening the natural grounds of citizenship and civic friendship. As Tocqueville noted, “Sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another.”⁷

The goal of an authentic citizen service initiative should not be to engage citizens in a government program, nor to create an artificial bond between individuals and the state or organization that coordinates their service, but to energize a culture of personal compassion and civic commitment to those in need of service. Citizen service should not be a tool for an educational reform agenda, a platform for political or social activism, or a method of reinventing government. A true citizen service initiative should recognize and support the dynamic

and diverse nature of civil society: It should not promote one particular form of service or suggest that public service in a national, government-sponsored program is in any way better or more dignified than traditional, and nongovernmental, forms of community service.

PRINCIPLE #3: Promote true volunteerism.

President Bush’s first objective for a Citizen Service Act is to “support and encourage greater engagement of citizens in volunteering.”⁸ To be truly voluntary, an action must be intentionally chosen and done by one’s own free will, without compulsion or external constraint and “without profit, payment or any valuable consideration.”⁹ It is this altruistic process by which individuals choose—without coercion or economic benefit—to help others that has the character-forming effect of habituating and strengthening citizens’ sense of duty to help their neighbors.

By contrast, “volunteerism” that is paid for and organized by the government belittles authentic volunteerism both by presenting service as an employment option rather than as the sacrificial giving of one’s time and resources and by implying that money and guidance from the government is necessary if Americans are to help their neighbors. “Dependence,” Thomas Jefferson noted, “begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.”¹⁰ Reform of the national service laws should redesign service programs as an opportunity for true voluntary service rather than a federal jobs program.¹¹

4. Independent Sector, “Giving and Volunteering in the United States 2001—Key Findings,” at <http://www.independentsector.org/PDFs/GV01keyfind.pdf>, and AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy, *GIVING USA 2002: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2001*, “2001 Contributions: \$212.00 Billion by Source of Contributions,” at <http://www.aafrc.org/images/graphics/chart1.gif> (June 26, 2002).
5. Knights of Columbus, press release, “Knights of Columbus Reports New All-Time Highs in Charitable Giving, Volunteerism in 2001,” June 7, 2002, at <http://www.kofc.org/announce.cfm?thisrecord=138> (June 19, 2002).
6. See Joseph Loconte and William W. Beach, “The Senate’s Response to the President’s Faith-Based Agenda: An Analysis of the CARE Act,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1555, May 24, 2002.
7. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 491.
8. The White House, Executive Office of the President, “Principles and Reforms for a Citizen Service Act,” at http://www.nationalservice.org/about/principles/principles_reforms.html (June 24, 2002).
9. Webster’s Dictionary, Unabridged, 2nd Ed., 1958, Vol. II, p. 2049.

PRINCIPLE #4: Address real problems.

There are many social problems in America that are and will continue to be addressed most effectively by voluntary service efforts, with or without the help of government. Historically, these efforts focused primarily on helping those who could not help themselves. Rather than the handouts of charity, citizen service meant personal involvement and “suffering with” (i.e., compassion toward) the poor to provide them with opportunities through which they could rise out of poverty.¹² “I think the best way of doing good to the poor,” Benjamin Franklin noted, “is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of it.”¹³

If the federal government is to encourage citizen service, and if policymakers want to foster a culture of responsibility toward the less fortunate, service programs should be targeted to address serious

problems where there is authentic need for assistance. In addition, such assistance should be provided in accordance with the larger traditions of compassionate service.

In determining which programs to recognize, support, and commend, policymakers should make practical distinctions between programs that meet critical needs and those that are not vital to societal well-being. Programs that help the elderly and serve the poor are on a different level from those that provide wardrobe tips,¹⁴ dance instruction,¹⁵ knitting lessons,¹⁶ art appreciation,¹⁷ or bike clubs.¹⁸

Policymakers should also think twice about validating controversial activities (e.g., teaching sex education¹⁹ or working for programs that promote abortion or refer individuals to abortion providers,²⁰ or that raise awareness about dating in lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gay

10. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX, 1787, as quoted in *The Founders' Almanac: A Practical Guide to the Notable Events, Greatest Leaders & Most Eloquent Words of the American Founding*, ed. Matthew Spalding (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2002), p. 184.
11. A distinction must be made between voluntary service in America's armies of compassion—which are the backbone of the private, voluntary sector—and in the United States military. National service in the armed forces is not volunteerism, or part of the voluntary sector, but is nevertheless voluntary in the sense that no one is conscripted. Housing, paying, feeding, and training individuals to defend the United States as part of a constitutionally authorized activity that is necessary for national security in no way detracts from the duty and honor of voluntary military service; nor does it justify by analogy paying citizen service participants in traditional voluntary (i.e., voluntary-sector) activities.
12. For a general explanation of the virtues and history of compassion, see Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1992).
13. Benjamin Franklin, “On the Price of Corn and Management of the Poor,” November 1766, as quoted in *The Founders' Almanac*, pp. 183–184.
14. AmeriCorps*VISTA participants help Dress for Success collect garments for low-income women with job interviews. See http://www.dressforsuccess.org/who_we_are/partners.asp (February 26, 2003).
15. A service-learning program at Governor's School for Arts and Humanities in South Carolina uses dance to teach abused and neglected children the basics of expression. See www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/south.html (July 17, 2002).
16. A service-learning program in a math class at Nicholas Senn High School in Chicago knits scarves and hats for a local homeless shelter. See <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/learnserve/pdf/LSWinterNews03.pdf> (January 30, 2003).
17. AmeriCorps*VISTA participants help Art for Inner City Youth in San Francisco teach low-income students visual skills and self-esteem and “to view art with a critical eye.” See <http://www.artspan.org/youth.html> (February 26, 2003).
18. AmeriCorps participants work with JustServe in Seattle, Washington, to coordinate bike-based clubs. Program from 9/17/2001 to 8/31/2002. See <https://recruit.cns.gov/searchDetails.asp?listingid='94ASCWA0471901-2'> (March 31, 2003).
19. In Houston, Texas, six AmeriCorps participants make up the “Planned Parenthood of Houston Sexuality Education Team,” which uses dance, rap, poetry, and role-playing to teach about sexuality. See www.plannedparenthood.org/education/update_dec01.html (March 20, 2003).
20. A simple Internet search suggests the extent to which Planned Parenthood makes use of AmeriCorps workers. The Delaware chapter of Planned Parenthood, for instance, currently advertises that it uses an AmeriCorps grant for 20 participants “to provide human sexuality education and referrals for services to teens and their parents.” See Planned Parenthood of Delaware, “PPDE Partners With AmeriCorps,” at <http://www.ppdela.org/partnerships.html> (June 24, 2002).

communities²¹). Nor should they allow as “citizen service” policy advocacy activities (such as VISTA participants’ working for groups that organize opposition to welfare-reform policies,²² or AmeriCorps participants’ coordinating Peace Education camps and student activities²³ or engaging young people “in struggles against racism, sexism, meanness and meaninglessness”²⁴).

Wherever possible, reform should prevent government support (and presumed public endorsement) of frivolous, controversial, and special-interest activities; it should focus instead on encouraging traditional service opportunities that address the real problems of those who are in need.

PRINCIPLE #5: Minimize the role of government.

Any expanded government role in the voluntary sector is unwise and counterproductive. “The more [government] puts itself in the place of associations,” Tocqueville argued, “the more particular persons, losing the idea of associating with each other, will need it to come to their aid: these are causes and effects that generate each other without rest. Will the public administration in the end direct all the industries for which an isolated citizen cannot suffice?”²⁵

Citizen service that is paid for and organized by the government encourages individuals and associations to look to the state for assistance. Likewise, the government’s funding of charitable organizations to pay for volunteer time reduces the need for

private-sector support, making it more likely that citizens will abdicate their civic responsibilities. Institutionalized federal funding and government administration also will have the effect of further reshaping the voluntary sector, as public money and oversight inevitably pushes aside private philanthropy and sets the stage for increased lobbying and public advocacy. The long-term effect would be to shift the center of gravity within the volunteer community from civil society to the public sector.

There already exists between government and many large nonprofit organizations what Leslie Lenkowsky has called a “dysfunctional marriage,” in which government money has led to a significant loss of nonprofit independence. “The partnership has been a Faustian bargain that ought to be reexamined and renegotiated,” Lenkowsky concluded.²⁶ Expanding this relationship to include the voluntary sector generally, and especially those smaller organizations that have thus far eluded the federal reach, would only expand and intensify the problem.

Reform should reduce government’s financial, administrative, and regulatory role in civil society. Government can play an important role in revitalizing citizen service, but that role, of necessity, will be limited and indirect. Policymakers must keep in mind that government can best promote civil service not by creating any particular service programs (given that there is a vast network of private service activities that exist without government oversight or subsidies), but by launching a high-level bully-

21. An AmeriCorps position in Seattle, Washington, organized community action teams to “build consensus, raise awareness, and develop innovative community-based solutions to dating and domestic violence in Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans and Gay communities.” Program from 9/17/2001 to 8/31/2002. See <https://recruit.cns.gov/searchDetails.asp?listingid='94ASCWA0471901-3'> (March 31, 2003).
22. VISTA participants work for the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness in Amherst, Massachusetts, to “educate and expand the anti-poverty movement” through conferences, on-campus workshops, and community training sessions. See http://www.americorps.org/joining/vista/vista_ma.html and www.nscachh.org (February 12, 2003).
23. AmeriCorps participants work with the Peace Learning Center in Indianapolis, Indiana, to organize school peace activities as part of a “proactive force for transformative and positive change in the community through holistic peace education.” See www.peacelearningcenter.org/ameriCorps.asp (March 20, 2003).
24. AmeriCorps participants work with the Institute for Community Service in Seattle, Washington. Program from 11/1/2002 to 8/2/2003. See <https://recruit.cns.gov/searchDetails.asp?listingid='00ASCWA470101-3'> (March, 31, 2003).
25. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 491.
26. See Leslie Lenkowsky, “Philanthropy and the Welfare State,” in Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People from State to Civil Society*, 2nd Ed., ed. Michael Novak (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1996), pp. 85–93. Lenkowsky, who is now the Chief Executive Officer of Corporation for National and Community Service, was at the time the president of the Hudson Institute.

pulpit initiative to encourage, motivate, and honor the efforts of private citizens.

THE CITIZEN SERVICE ACT OF 2002: A GOOD START

The Citizen Service Act of 2002 (which was approved in committee but was never acted on by Congress) contained many useful and innovative changes in existing programs and should serve as the basis for future reforms.

During the Clinton Administration, AmeriCorps participants were assigned to federal agencies and departments, and grants were used to subsidize political advocacy and activities. The Citizen Service Act of 2002 would have prohibited national service grants from going to federal agencies and would not have allowed the use of non-AmeriCorps federal funds to meet AmeriCorps' matching-funds requirements. The proposal also mandated that any programs that teach sex education must not encourage sexual activity or distribute contraceptives and that they must include discussion of the health benefits of abstinence and risks of condom use.

In addition, the bill required recipients to certify that any participants who serve as tutors had earned, or were on track to obtain, a high school diploma. It further required that, to qualify, literacy programs must be rooted in scientifically based research and the essential components of reading instruction as defined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

In designing a reformed Citizen Service Act, lawmakers should go beyond these particular proposals to consider prohibiting state government and political advocacy groups from receiving service grants and to consider prohibiting sex education instruction as a valid "service" of AmeriCorps participants. Nevertheless, lawmakers should carefully review and include as a starting point these and other useful reforms proposed in the 2002 legislation.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Regrettably, the Citizen Service Act of 2002 failed to remove a fundamental obstacle to the religious liberty of faith-based organizations. Current laws for national service programs specifically prohibit any individual operating a national service project from making employment decisions or choosing volunteers on the basis of religion.²⁷ The Citizen Service Act of 2002 recognized that this was a problem but did not adequately address it. The bill merely proposed that faith-based organizations be given notice (and acknowledge in writing) that, by participating in national service programs, they would be subject to "anti-discriminatory" hiring policies and would not be protected by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which grants exemptions for religious groups.

This policy undermines a faith-based organization's ability to select only staff and volunteers who strongly support the values and mission of the organization—factors that are often key to the success of an organization's outreach. This restriction on an organization's staffing decisions directly contradicts existing federal law (the 1996 Charitable Choice legislation): Its application to volunteers is equally debilitating and, in fact, may be unconstitutional.²⁸ Many faith-based organizations depend heavily on volunteer manpower, and many ask volunteers as well as paid staff to agree to a statement of faith.²⁹

These provisions go against President Bush's recent executive order protecting faith-based organizations. They also conflict with regulatory language proposed by a number of federal agencies to encourage faith-based organizations' participation with social service programs and undermine efforts to reduce barriers to such participation. Allowing this language to stand in national service laws would set a disturbing precedent for other programs.³⁰ Any new citizen-service legislation should remove these barriers in their entirety and re-establish full legal protections for faith-based groups involved in community service.

27. See Section 175(c) of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-610, 42 U.S.C. 12635) and Section 417(c) of the Domestic Volunteer Act of 1973 (42 U.S.C. 5057). The Citizen Service Act is intended to amend these laws.

28. In *Boy Scouts v. Dale*, 530 U.S. 640 (2000), the Supreme Court of the United States held that the Boy Scouts, despite access to public facilities, is a private organization and may indeed "discriminate" in choosing volunteer scout leaders that agree to the Scouts' mission statement.

FROM NATIONAL SERVICE TO CITIZEN SERVICE

More fundamental changes are required, however, to transform today's national service into a true citizen service. Reforms should be implemented in the three major activities coordinated by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps was created in 1993 as a major initiative of the Clinton Administration. Today, over 50,000 individuals aged 17 and older participate in various AmeriCorps programs for 20 to 40 hours a week.³¹ Most participants are selected and serve with local and national nonprofit organizations, as well as smaller community organizations, in areas such as education, public safety, housing, health and nutrition, disaster relief, and environmental needs.³²

During the Clinton Administration, AmeriCorps was essentially nothing more than a federal jobs program. The current argument on behalf of AmeriCorps is that it is a managerial program needed to provide the infrastructure necessary to recruit other volunteers. An emphasis on the potential fruits of the program, however, does not change the basic

fact that individuals are paid by the federal treasury to "volunteer" for government-approved service programs.³³

For a full term of service (1,700 hours over 10 to 12 months), AmeriCorps participants currently receive a stipend of at least \$9,600 and an educational grant of \$4,725. This combined income amounts to \$8.43 per hour of service, which is 163 percent of the current minimum wage, and adds up to a compensation package of \$14,325. This is approximately the poverty level for a two-parent family with one child³⁴ and is only slightly less than the annual basic pay and food allowance of an entry-grade recruit in the United States armed forces.³⁵

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the amount paid to an AmeriCorps participant in 2001 exceeded the average hourly wages of maids and housekeepers, farm workers and laborers, child-care workers and personal and home-care aides, and the nearly 10 million individuals who work in food-preparation and serving-related occupations. AmeriCorps participants also made more per hour than the majority of cashiers, retail salespersons, and everyone in personal care and service occupations.³⁶ In addition, full-time AmeriCorps participants are eligible for health-care benefits (which

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29. See, for example, "Churches, Charity and Children: How Religious Organizations Are Reaching America's At-Risk Kids," by Joseph Loconte and Lia Fantuzzo (Philadelphia: Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, 2002).
30. Representative Barney Frank (D-MA), working with the Human Rights Campaign and the Lambda Legal Defense Fund, lobbied to add language similar to that in the national service laws to the faith-based initiative in the Senate last year. Mary Leonard, "Some Target Bias in Faith Initiative Bill," *The Boston Globe*, September 25, 2002, p. A10.
31. A little over half of AmeriCorps participants are full-time, most are white, and 75 percent are under the age of 30. Ann Lorde and Alice Butler, "Community Service: A Description of AmeriCorps, Foster Grandparents, and Other Federally Funded Programs," Congressional Research Service, updated March 18, 2002.
32. About three-quarters of AmeriCorps grant funds goes to state service commissions, which then make grants to local groups and state agencies. Most of the remainder is distributed directly by the Corporation for National and Community Service to support various service activities and national programs through a competitive grant process. In fiscal year (FY) 2002, Congress spent \$257 million to support the AmeriCorps program. In 2003, the Administration asked Congress to increase the size of the program from 50,000 to 75,000 participants and increase funding for the program to \$315 million, but the final budget for 2003 appropriated \$275 million for the program at its current participant level. For FY 2004, the Administration has requested \$364 million, as well as an additional \$75 million to support education grants in the National Service Trust.
33. For an earlier analysis, see Matthew Spalding and Krista Kafer, "AmeriCorps: Still a Bad Idea for Citizen Service," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1564, June 28, 2002.
34. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Poverty Thresholds for 2002 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years," updated February 3, 2003, at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/threshold/thresh02.html> (February 20, 2003).
35. An 18-year-old, single, high-school graduate, Grade E-1 recruit in the continental United States makes a basic annual pay of \$13,809.60 and receives food worth \$2,913.72. "Regular Military Compensation Calculator," Office of the Secretary of Defense, at <http://militarypay.dtic.mil/militarypay/cgi-bin/rmc.pl> (February 20, 2003).

averaged \$766 but ranged as high as \$2,500 per eligible participant in 2002) and, as necessary, child-care benefits (which averaged \$3,785 per eligible participant in 2002).³⁷

Recommendations for AmeriCorps Reform

- **End AmeriCorps as a jobs program.** Policymakers should eliminate the stipends and benefits for AmeriCorps participants, thus ending the program as an employment program and reorganizing it as a true volunteer service initiative. A smaller AmeriCorps organization could become a catalyst for volunteerism by promoting and removing barriers to volunteerism, identifying needed resources and distributing important information about volunteerism, giving out service awards, and providing a clearinghouse to identify and bring volunteers together with service opportunities.³⁸
 - **Keep an education voucher.** Policymakers could allow AmeriCorps to continue to award modest educational grants, not as a financial incentive or an in-kind payment for volunteering, but as a nominal award for service completed. Indeed, there is already a separate account for AmeriCorps education grants called the National Service Trust.³⁹ At current funding levels, eliminating the financial stipend and paid benefits still leaves participants with a considerable educational voucher of \$4,725—nearly double the amount of the average Pell Grant in 2002.⁴⁰ This change would allow Congress to maintain the program at its current participant level while achieving a substantial budget savings or, alternatively, would allow some expansion of the program at current funding levels.
 - **Invest in learning.** Rather than have the Corporation for National and Community Service hold the money and collect the interest on AmeriCorps educational grants, as is now the case, policymakers should direct that the education voucher be transferred to an individual Coverdell Education Savings Account or be used as the basis for an individual Thrift Savings Plan (similar to that which is available to federal employees) that would automatically place funds in a bond account or other safe investment. To encourage participation by individuals who have completed their education, participants could be allowed to transfer their education voucher to an education account for a family member. To retain the objective of the service award, Congress should not allow the education voucher to be traded for a smaller cash stipend (as is currently an option in VISTA) or applied to non-educational expenses or programs.
 - **Increase part-time participation.** As a way to help lower-income citizens who cannot afford to participate in AmeriCorps full-time, policymakers should consider allowing a longer period of part-time service to count toward qualifying for the full educational award. They might also consider lowering the entry-level age of AmeriCorps participants to include high school students who, for part-time voluntary service, could use the education vouchers to save for college or take college prep courses outside of their schools.
- Overall, it would be consistent with the principles of authentic citizen service to discontinue AmeriCorps as paid employment but continue to give participants a modest educational award in the

36. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Employment Statistics,” at <http://www.bls.gov/oes/2001> (February 20, 2003).

37. “Memo on Healthcare and Childcare for Program Year 2002,” prepared by the Congressional Research Service, March 11, 2003.

38. The Administration has recently taken an important step in this direction by announcing the creation of a President’s Council on Service and Civic Participation modeled on the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

39. Awards are made at the end of the term of service in the form of a voucher that must be used within seven years after completion of service; awards are paid directly to qualified post-secondary institutions or lenders in cases where participants have outstanding loan obligations. Awards can be used to repay existing or future qualified education loans, or to pay for the cost of attending a qualified college or graduate school or an approved school/work program.

40. The average Pell Grant in 2002 was \$2,411, and the maximum was \$4,000; 4,812 individuals received awards that year.

form of a voucher. Such a reform would also have the added benefit of removing most of the rules, regulations, and problems that typically follow government money. Furthermore, by decreasing dependence on large, nationwide organizations, reforming AmeriCorps would dramatically increase the scope of service opportunities and the range of charitable locations where participants could volunteer. Both of these additional benefits would make an educational voucher program much friendlier to faith-based organizations.⁴¹

VISTA

President John F. Kennedy first envisioned a domestic Peace Corps program in the summer of 1962. His initial proposal was for a limited program that was service-oriented, decentralized in administration, and focused on substantive, short-term projects.⁴² It was President Lyndon B. Johnson who incorporated the idea into the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and made it part of the Great Society's broad-based "War on Poverty." Along with initiatives such as Head Start, Upward Bound, and Job Corps, the new VISTA⁴³ program became part of a grand strategy to address "structural poverty" through government intervention and social activism.⁴⁴

In the 1970s, policymakers tried to de-politicize VISTA by ending its focus on community organizing and poverty policy and directing its work toward specific projects to address problems in poor communities. However, during the Carter Administration, VISTA returned to its activist culture—supporting such things as a training school

for Tom Hayden's Campaign for Economic Democracy, a lobbying effort for the American Civil Liberties Union, and the political-activist efforts of ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now)—and its focus on government programs. During the 1980s, the Reagan Administration tried to focus VISTA on youth participation and traditional community service, and particular self-help programs were added in the areas of drug-abuse prevention and public literacy.⁴⁵

Today, VISTA is operated as a subset of AmeriCorps, although it maintains an independent status by focusing on eradicating poverty and helping communities to address problems such as illiteracy, hunger, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, and inadequate health care. The agency still emphasizes community organizing and supports such activities as recruiting and training, fundraising and grant writing, increasing public awareness, creating resource centers, and helping to design new programs. Currently, there are approximately 4,000 AmeriCorps*VISTA participants working in almost 900 programs.⁴⁶

Recommendations for VISTA Reform

- **Focus VISTA on specific problems.** In keeping with VISTA's programmatic concentration on poverty, reform should focus VISTA on helping to solve the most important poverty-related problems of the day. One of the principal goals of the welfare reform of 1996 was to increase the number of married two-parent families. Research shows that 80 percent of poor single-

41. In 2001, Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA) introduced the AmeriCorps Reform and Charitable Expansion Act (S. 1352) to voucherize the AmeriCorps program for this reason.

42. William H. Crook and Thomas Ross, *Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1969), Chapter 2. The initial study on a national service program was written by then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

43. The new program was called Volunteers in Service to America to give it the romantic acronym of VISTA, according to the House committee report, as in "the concept of a great new vista, free of poverty, which the Economic Opportunity Act seeks for all Americans." Crook and Ross, *Warriors of the Poor*, p. 45.

44. The theory of structural poverty is that the root causes of poverty are not in barriers to opportunity, but in the inequalities and injustice systemic to capitalism and that the poor are powerless to break this cycle of poverty without government intervention and social activism. For an explanation of the shift from traditional approaches of alleviating poverty to an emphasis on structural poverty, see Charles Murray's classic *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984).

45. By the mid-1980s, as many as one-quarter of VISTA participants focused on increasing literacy rates, most of them as reading tutors. T. Zane Reeves, *The Politics of the Peace Corps and VISTA* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), Chapters 3–6, pp. 43–153.

parent families would escape from poverty if the single parents were married.⁴⁷ VISTA could be focused on strengthening families through groups such as Marriage Savers and the training of mentoring couples who could counsel engaged couples about key aspects of marriage. Another possibility is to focus VISTA activity on mentoring in low-income communities. The Bush Administration has proposed an additional \$100 million per year to recruit and train mentors for disadvantaged children. If the need for mentors is a leading poverty-related dilemma, policymakers should consider focusing VISTA on efforts that address this need rather than creating or funding a new program. Whatever focus is selected for the agency's service activities, in keeping with renewed interest in government accountability, VISTA programs should be subject to appropriate, rigorous, and regular methods of assessment and measurement.

- **De-federalize VISTA.** Given the anti-poverty focus and longevity of the program, policymakers will probably choose to maintain VISTA's paid status and educational grant combination as an incentive to attract the skills and talents required for its particular work. Nevertheless, VISTA should be changed from a federally operated program (in which the federal government selects and supervises members) to a federally assisted program, similar to AmeriCorps. This would give sponsoring organizations greater control over recruiting and selecting participants and more flexibility in program design and delivery, as is appropriate for the civil society context in which VISTA operates, and

would remove the status of VISTA participants as federal employees. It would also eliminate unfair advantages and benefits that accrue to VISTA "volunteers" but not to participants in other domestic service programs as a result of VISTA's unusual status as a federal employment program. (These benefits include worker's compensation, legal liability coverage, non-competitive hiring for federal jobs, and credit for service time toward a pension in the Federal Employees Retirement System.)

Learn & Serve America

Created in 1993, Learn & Serve America provides grants to schools, colleges, and nonprofit organizations to encourage, create, and replicate "service-learning" programs for students of ages five to 17. The Corporation for National and Community Service funds state education agencies, state commissions on national and community service, and nonprofit organizations, which, in turn, select and fund local service-learning programs.⁴⁸

The problem with Learn & Serve America is fundamental and lies in the very concept of service learning that it promotes and funds. Service learning is a particular teaching methodology in which participants engage in "thoughtfully organized service" that "is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program" and provides "structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience."⁴⁹

It is certainly possible to find good projects that are being done in the name of service learning (e.g.,

46. Participants serve full-time for at least one year (and no more than three) and receive a stipend of \$9,300 and either an educational award of \$4,725 or an additional stipend of up to \$1,200. In addition, participants receive health insurance, training, child-care allowances, liability insurance, eligibility for student loan deferment and travel, and relocation expenses. Most participants are between 18 and 27 years old, 60 percent are white, and nearly 80 percent are women. Lordeman and Butler, "Community Service: A Description of AmeriCorps, Foster Grandparents and Other Federally Funded Programs." The program's budget for 2002 was \$85 million; \$94.3 million was appropriated FY 2003, and the Bush Administration has requested \$95 million for FY 2004.

47. Robert Rector and Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., "The Effects of Marriage and Maternal Education in Reducing Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 02-05, August 2, 2002.

48. Seventy-five percent of the funding goes to school-based and community-based grants, and a smaller amount supports a higher-education program. In addition, Learn & Serve supports the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (for information and assistance) and the National Service-Learning Exchange (a peer network of service-learning practitioners). In FY 2002, Learn & Serve America's budget was \$43 million. Congress has appropriated the same amount for FY 2003, and the Bush Administration has asked Congress for the same amount in 2004, increasing to \$65 million by 2006.

a service-learning project that has been initiated to celebrate the Ohio state bicentennial⁵⁰), but the vast majority of service-learning programs promote social policies, many of which are controversial. In 2002, the Corporation for National and Community Service recognized service-learning “Leader Schools” with projects that built an eagle observation site and restored wetlands to teach environmentalism,⁵¹ used tutoring and mentoring projects to teach multiculturalism and racial diversity,⁵² and invited the homeless to read their poetry in the classroom as a way to teach about the evolution of homelessness.⁵³ The Nicholas Senn High School in Chicago used its Learn & Serve grant money to design programs that used food banks as the basis for teaching hunger policy in history class and taught geometry by having students knit scarves and hats for the homeless during math class.⁵⁴

Moreover, while all education is strengthened by real-world experience and service is, in itself, educational, service-learning projects by their very nature push beyond the boundaries of service into the arena of advocacy. Integrated into the curriculum along with teacher-led reflection, most of these programs place less emphasis on an individual’s service (and the virtues that may be acquired through such service) and more emphasis on societal problems, social messages, and policy conclusions that can be linked to a particular service experience.

Advocates of service learning speak of advancing “tolerance,” “diversity,” and “social justice.”⁵⁵ With roots in the experiential teaching theories of John Dewey and other early education reformers, the larger objective of service learning is not learning or service but engaging individuals in social and political change.

Recommendations for Learn & Serve Reform

- **Discontinue Learn & Serve America.** Congress should end the Learn & Serve America program. If they elect to keep a smaller program that awards grants to encourage and support traditional notions of community service, lawmakers should make it clear that they do not endorse the philosophy of service learning and its strategy of pushing a particular teaching method into the academic curricula of schools and colleges. Learn & Serve should not exclusively or primarily fund service-learning programs or projects that contribute to service-learning programs in states and local school districts. To the extent that it does fund service-learning activities, these programs should “enhance” but should not be “integrated into” academic curricula. At a time when the main focus of education reform is to improve the basics—reading, writing and arithmetic—policymakers should not be underwriting new pedagogical theories of questionable value.⁵⁶

49. See Section 101, Definition 23 of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (Public Law 101–610, 42 U.S.C. 12511).

50. See “The Ohio Bicentennial Service-Learning Schools Project,” at <http://www.acs.ohio-state.edu/glenninstitute/obs.htm> (August 20, 2002).

51. Wilkinson Junior High School, Middleburg, Florida, and Langley Middle School, Langley, Washington. See Corporation for National and Community Service, “List of Leader Schools: 2002 Leader Schools,” at www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/wilkinson.html (January 30, 2002) and www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/langley.html (January 30, 2002).

52. Elida High School, Elida, Ohio, and Greely High School, Cumberland, Maine. See *ibid.*, www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/elida.html (January 30, 2003) and www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/greely.html (January 30, 2003).

53. Tamanend Middle School, Warrington, Pennsylvania. See *ibid.*, www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/tamanend.html (July 17, 2002).

54. Nicholas Senn High School, Chicago, Illinois. See *ibid.*, www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/nicholas.html and <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/learnserve/pdf/LSWinterNews03.pdf> (January 30, 2003).

55. See, for example, “Every Student a Citizen: Creating the Democratic Self,” Report of the Education Commission of the States, Compact for Learning and Citizenship, Denver, Colorado, 2000.

56. Even a recent sympathetic report notes that the claims of service learning are ahead of the scientific data, which have been short-term, have produced ambiguous results, and have not compared service learning to traditional forms of service. See *The Civic Mission of the Schools* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2003).

- **Refocus the program.** If policymakers choose to authorize a program to replace Learn & Serve America, they should make sure that it focuses on appropriate activities. One idea would be to focus on service that supports public safety, emergency response, and civil defense by educating and training students and younger Americans to teach others about the threats of terrorism and ways to defend and protect Americans from potential terrorist attacks. Another possibility would be to create a civic education and service program that would teach about citizenship as the basis of voluntary service. Given that the civic-education aspect of such a program would be of little consequence if it is badly designed (as was the case with previous pilot programs) or lost in an emphasis of service over citizenship, policymakers should consider whether the Corporation for National and Community Service is the right agency to assume this important function.

Administrative Problems

AmeriCorps has been plagued by administrative problems since its creation in 1993. During the Clinton Administration, several independent audits of the program pointed out mismanagement and serious cost overruns, with an actual per-participant cost that was considerably higher than reported.⁵⁷ Under the Bush Administration, the program has been run more efficiently and has passed several audits, and there is much more accountability in its activities. Nevertheless, serious problems persist.

A Corporation for National and Community Service decision last November to suspend enrolling

new members and reassign two managers prompted investigations by the CNCS Inspector General and the U.S. General Accounting Office.⁵⁸ In 2000 and 2001, the CNCS surpassed its enrollment target and, as determined by the Office of Management and Budget, improperly used interest on educational funds to pay for additional participant stipends, causing a \$64 million shortfall in its \$100 million educational trust fund for 2003.⁵⁹

Recommendations for Administrative Reform

- **Control Spending.** As the lawmaking and appropriating branch of government, Congress has a responsibility to investigate the use of federal funds at the Corporation for National and Community Service and consider the possibility of any misconduct or wrongdoing. Until these issues are addressed and the problems are corrected, policymakers should maintain a cap on participation and neither expand existing programs nor create new national service programs. Nor should Congress provide additional funds to cover program misallocations. As a budgetary matter, spending on citizen service should not exceed, and if possible should be less than, that provided by the fiscal year (FY) 2003 budget.⁶⁰
- **Minimize the level of bureaucracy.** In general, Congress should act to organize and minimize an increasingly complicated and confusing national service bureaucracy; consolidate duplicative programs wherever possible (e.g., the National Civilian Community Corps, which emphasizes homeland security and disaster relief, and the new Citizen Corps, which

57. See Kenneth R. Weinstein and August Stofferahn, "Time to End the Troubled AmeriCorps," *Heritage Foundation Government Integrity Project Report*, May 22, 1997.

58. "AmeriCorps Freeze Draws Two Investigations," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2002, p. A4. At its Web site, the CNCS explains that although "it appeared to those preparing the budget that the funds on hand were adequate to support the requested AmeriCorps members," enrollments were suspended because it "did not have in place adequate procedures for tracking enrollments and estimating their [cost] impact." See "Background on the AmeriCorps Enrollment Pause," at <http://www.americorps.org/enrollmentupdate/background.html> (February 23, 2003).

59. The Office of Management and Budget took the accounting move "to protect the integrity of the program" and "to operate programs within the law," according to an OMB spokesman. "Budget Glitch Shortchanges AmeriCorps," *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2003, p. A25.

60. For further analysis of the importance of freezing non-defense discretionary spending, see Brian M. Riedl, "Balancing the Budget by 2008 While Cutting Taxes, Funding Defense, and Creating a Prescription Drug Benefit," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 1635, March 12, 2003.

focuses on homeland security efforts in local communities); streamline programs as much as possible (e.g., consolidating various state offices to better leverage resources); and exercise greater legislative oversight over the reformed programs.⁶¹

- **Treat citizen service programs as a short-term stimulus.** The aftermath of September 11 has presented an important moment to encourage Americans to help their fellow citizens by participating in voluntary service programs. While there is a strong case for government involvement at this time, policymakers should regard the government's role in promoting citizen service as a short-term stimulus package for revitalizing civil society rather than as a permanent federal program. Congress should limit the number of years that organizations can take AmeriCorps and VISTA participants, and should cap the number of years and amount of funds any one organization can receive through any of the programs authorized by the Citizen Service Act. A reformed Citizen Service Act should reauthorize citizen service programs for no more than five years, and any endorsement should include a sunset clause to emphasize the non-permanent nature of these programs. The citizen service programs of the federal government should go out of existence unless Congress acts to continue the programs within 60 days of a mandated General Accounting Office report evaluating the overall success of the programs according to the principles of citizen service.

CONCLUSION

The ideas of volunteerism, civic engagement, and community service have long been a part of conservative thought, from Edmund Burke's defense of

the "little platoons" as the backbone of civil society to Ronald Reagan's Private Sector Initiative. The concept of citizen service has deep roots in the principles and practices of republican self-government envisioned by the American Founding Fathers and described by Alexis de Tocqueville.

From the beginning, citizen service has been at the heart of the "compassionate conservatism" of George W. Bush and the domestic policy agenda of the Bush Administration. "I ask you to be citizens," President Bush said in his inaugural address, "citizens, not spectators; citizens, not subjects; responsible citizens, building communities of service and a nation of character." The invitation acquired added meaning after September 11 as Americans throughout the nation displayed a degree of heroism, generosity, unity, and patriotism not seen in recent years.

Now, more than ever, at a time when Americans are volunteering and engaging in service to their country in unprecedented numbers and unprecedented ways, policymakers must reject the model of government-centered national service that undermines the American character and threatens to weaken the private associations that have always been the engine of moral and social reform in America. The better course is to bolster President Bush's noble call to service by creating a true citizen service that is consistent with principles of self-government, is harmonious with a vibrant civil society, and promotes a service agenda based on personal responsibility, independent citizenship, and civic volunteerism—all prerequisites for building what President Bush has called a "new culture of responsibility."

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61. One practical problem is that no one committee has authority over all of the many national service programs, which makes it difficult to legislate wisely and perform good oversight.