

WebMemo



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How Americans Can Provide Real Public Service

Brian Brown

Barack Obama's "Call to Serve" speech¹ made public service a major theme of his campaign. In this speech, and in his "Blueprint for Change," he gave two main reasons for this emphasis on public service. The first is that there are many national problems with which coordinated government volunteers could help. The second is that the character of the country needs a change in favor of selfless service instead of individualism and greed. He thus proposes to make increasing public service—mobilizing America in a new spirit of selflessness—"a cause of my presidency."²

But if Obama truly wishes to see the American people engaged in real, effective public service, he must opt for genuine change.

Obama's Solution: Make It Bigger. Some of the President-elect's proposals to increase public service are novel: Expanding programs for public service into such emerging areas as public diplomacy and "green jobs"; using the Internet to make the federal government a central figure in connecting people with service opportunities; and increasing government involvement in the non-profit sector. But most of his proposed plan is based on expanding what already exists. He wants to increase AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000 workers, the Peace Corps to 16,000, and Youth-Build to 50,000. He wants to revive President Bill Clinton's idea of giving college students a tuition break for participation in such programs, to reallocate 25 percent of work-study funds to favor public service jobs, and to expand high school service-learning programs.³

However, by merely mimicking the programs of the past, Obama's proposals also repeat yesterday's mistakes:

1. They encourage the wrong motivations for volunteering;
2. They confuse government work with public service; and
3. By centralizing control, they reduce the individual and community empowerment that fosters public spiritedness.

Why Obama's Proposals Will Worsen the Problem

Problem #1: They encourage the wrong motivations for volunteering.

AmeriCorps "volunteers," for example, are paid, and some receive housing. If they complete a term of service, they also receive work-study funds or tuition stipends. In either case, the message sent by the government is that people should participate in these programs, but not for the kind of selfless reasons Obama wishes to foster. Paid employees, by definition, are not volunteers. There is a difference between the person who volunteers at the hospital after a hard day's work and the doctor performing surgery. Both do good, but only the first is a volunteer. The second is doing his job. And it is volun-

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teering, not jobs, that Obama claims to want to increase with these programs.

Problem #2: They confuse government work with public service.

America remains the most generous nation in the world. Nearly 84 million American adults volunteer an average of 3.6 hours every week in private-sector volunteerism (a number the AmeriCorps expansion would increase by only 0.2 percent).⁴ Yet Obama has argued that AmeriCorps “turns away tens of thousands of applicants a year because of limited funding,” as though those people were then unable to serve their communities or their country.⁵

This implication highlights the real philosophical and practical significance of many of the federal service programs: Participants in these programs do not work directly for their communities—they work for federal bureaucracies. This fact reflects the early 20th century Progressives’ idea of serving “the public,” a nebulous term personified by government bureaucrats. In such a world, the only necessary relationship for public service is that between the individual and the state.

Yet in truth, “the public” is a meaningless term if it does not, first and foremost, encompass the families, neighbors, and institutions that make up one’s local community. Obama’s program detaches the idea of public service from the people it is supposed to benefit. Government “volunteers” are accountable to bureaucrats rather than neighbors and local institutions. Bureaucracies do not foster community or discourage selfish individualism—relationships do.

Problem #3: They centralize control and thus reduce the individual and community empowerment that fosters public spiritedness.

This divorce between community and “public” service has very practical consequences: Obama will increase the administrative centralization of the pertinent programs, apparently running as much public service as possible under the supervision of the federal government. This leaves communities with even less control over their own affairs than they had under the Bush and Clinton versions of the programs. Such federal control does not empower citizens and communities to improve their conditions, since the new tools for any such accomplishments remain under the control of the federal bureaucracy.

In fact, such a system can actually *promote* selfish individualism by robbing the individual of a meaningful role in his environment. Alexis de Tocqueville described what happened to 18th-century European nations a generation or two after the government had successfully subsumed local responsibilities and relationships in this way:

It never occurred to anyone that any large-scale enterprise could be put through successfully without the intervention of the State.⁶

The inhabitant considers himself a kind of colonist, indifferent to the destiny of the place he inhabits. ... The fortune of his village, the policing of his street, the fate of his church and of his presbytery do not touch him; he thinks that all these things do not concern him in any fashion and that they belong to a powerful foreigner called the government.⁷

1. Barack Obama, “A Call to Serve,” December 5, 2007, at http://www.barackobama.com/2007/12/05/obama_issues_call_to_serve_vow.php (November 21, 2008).

2. *Ibid.*

3. Obama for America, “Helping All Americans Serve Their Country,” at <http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/NationalServicePlanFactSheet.pdf> (November 21, 2008).

4. Independent Sector, “Giving and Volunteering in the United States 2001—Key Findings,” at <http://www.independentsector.org/PDFs/GV01keyfind.pdf> (November 24, 2008).

5. “Blueprint for Change: Barack Obama and Joe Biden’s Plan for Universal Voluntary Public Service,” at www.barackobama.com/pdf/ObamaBlueprintForChange.pdf (November 21, 2008).

6. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Anchor Books, 1983), pp. 69–70.

7. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 88.

Tocqueville insightfully pointed out that the result of this state of affairs was the deterioration of local relationships, interdependency, and an understanding of personal responsibility to one's community—the very virtues Obama says he wants reinstated. Tellingly, this occurred despite the government's provision of much the same kind of "opportunities" Obama believes are needed today.⁸

People, Not Programs. Obama has a great opportunity to make a real change by using his popularity to motivate people to serve. But he should do so *by urging them to participate in actual volunteer*

work in their communities. He should resist the urge to expand social control and instead unleash the civic force that is the American citizen. Real volunteers invest in others' lives because they want to serve—not because they want money, a national *esprit de corps*, or participation in national programs. That spirit of charity cannot be fostered in a country where paid government work is the measure of a good citizen.

—Brian Brown is Research Associate in the Center for American Studies at the Heritage Foundation.

8. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, p. 34.