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The Death of Public Service: Serve America Act Sends Volunteerism to Hooverville

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Voluntary service, according to virtually every President since the early 20th century, has been a vital factor in America's success. It provided the groundwork from which 13 disparate colonies could grow into a mighty nation. It survived centuries of wars, depressions, and partisan politics. But today it is dead.

So implies the Serve America Act (S. 277).¹ Serve America is the Senate's attempt to turn into reality President Obama's campaign promises about public service. Since the campaign, Obama has described these promises as the start of a new era of selflessness and civic responsibility. But in practice, the bill (and its House companion, the Generations Invigorating Volunteering and Education Act, or GIVE²) harkens back to an old era and to the old ideas of someone Congress should hesitate to mimic in a recession: Herbert Hoover.

The Rhetoric in Favor of Expansion. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama suggested the government create a few new programs for public service in new areas such as public diplomacy and "green jobs," use the Internet to make the federal government a central figure in connecting people with service opportunities, and increase government involvement in the nonprofit sector. He also wanted to expand and create federally funded financial incentives for students to spend time volunteering. But mostly he wanted to expand existing programs so as to employ more workers—AmeriCorps to 250,000, the Peace Corps to 16,000 and YouthBuild to 50,000.³

Much of this and more has made it into Serve America, which supporters contend makes a statement about the government's dedication to invigorating public service. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), co-sponsor of the bill, released this comment: "Many years ago, on the fifth anniversary of the Peace Corps, I asked one of those young Americans why they had volunteered, and I will never forget the answer: 'It was the first time someone asked me to do something for my country.'"⁴ This emotional angle has been used to ensure the bills meet little opposition from proponents of limited government.

Beneath the Words. There are, of course, other underlying goals—President Obama had originally pushed the national service proposal partly in order to meet certain infrastructure needs, such as construction projects and school improvements.⁵ The economic meltdown provided added rationale for this notion, as these projects could be performed by workers on the federal payroll, thus reducing unemployment.

These goals are important, because they highlight the bill's real statement about public service, the one that has lurked in the President's rhetoric

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since the campaign: that public service cannot meet its objectives—and may not even be able to survive—without federal funding. It seems that without Washington's assistance and coordination, people like Senator Kennedy's young friend will never be asked to serve their country—indeed, the implication of the person's statement is that involvement in a federal program is what *constitutes* serving one's country. If Congress believes that public service can only survive as a government-funded job, it is indeed dead.

Renewing a Failed Idea. But this logic is merely revived logic from another economically difficult time: the Great Depression.

In July 1932, President Herbert Hoover begged Congress for a special appropriation of funds to support his office for unemployment relief. "Should this organization be discontinued," he wrote, "not only would its important functions of stimulation of private giving and coordination be destroyed, but there would be grave danger of national, state and local volunteer groups concluding that services such as they have rendered were no longer necessary."⁶ He acknowledged the popular opinion that independent volunteers are both the most effective and the most important kind, because they know local conditions and have a sense of responsibility to their neighbors. But he argued that "continuance of this organization with its background of experience is, in my opinion, most essential to the intelligent carrying out of the provisions of all relief activities whether private or public."⁷

Congress rejected his request at the time but shortly thereafter agreed with Hoover on the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932, which significantly expanded the federal government's involvement in volunteerism. It funneled far more substantial funds (over \$1.5 billion in 1932 dollars) into federal loans for states and private organizations in order to provide employment in "reproductive construction work of a public character."⁸ Just as with Serve America, it was tempting in a struggling economy to buy the argument that public service needed to be propped up by federal funds.

Yet even Hoover's bill was more moderate than Serve America. Hoover was a Progressive, but he did not buy into the statist nationalism of the ideology as much as had his predecessor Woodrow Wilson. Wilson had argued that the new way of public service demanded federal organization, which is now present in Serve America,⁹ but Hoover insisted on temporary loans to help public service organizations get back on their feet rather than a large administrative expansion. In Hoover's view, public service was very sick—but not dead.

As troublesome as such a "stimulus" today might be to proponents of limited government, Serve America goes further. It uses Hoover's ideas minus the self-restraint, expanding Washington's involvement as a bureaucracy, making participating states and organizations permanently dependent on the government for their service activities. Even Hoover recognized that such a move would signal a belief in the death of real voluntary public service. He conse-

1. Serve America Act, S. 277, 111th Cong., 1st Sess., Section 151.
2. Generations Invigorating Volunteering and Education Act, H.R. 1388, 111th Cong., 1st Sess.
3. Obama-Biden National Service Plan Fact Sheet, pp. 1–9, at <http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/NationalServicePlanFactSheet.pdf> (March 20, 2009).
4. Susan Milligan, "Kennedy Promotes National Service Bill," *Boston Globe*, March 10, 2009, at http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2009/03/kennedy_promote.html (March 17, 2009).
5. Obama for America, "Helping All Americans Serve Their Country," pp. 1–2, at <http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/NationalServicePlanFactSheet.pdf> (20 March 2009).
6. Herbert Hoover, "Message to the Congress Requesting a Special Appropriation for the President's Organization on Unemployment Relief," July 5, 1932, at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=23150&st=&st1> (March 17, 2009).
7. *Ibid.*
8. Herbert Hoover, "Statement About Signing the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932," July 17, 1932, at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=23170> (March 17, 2009).
9. Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: A Call For the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (New York: Bibliobazaar, 2007), p. 139.

quently called his bill what it really was: a government jobs program.

One Thing Not to Imitate. For all his faults, Hoover knew there was a difference between *public* service and *government* service, and he sought to keep the former alive and well while using the latter to help revive a struggling economy. Yet his approach failed to stop the slide into depression. (In fact, Hoover's overall efforts are generally credited with worsening the problem.) Meanwhile, by

linking public service with government dependency, Hoover opened the door for the possible death of volunteerism. Today's congressional leaders are fond of comparing today's economic situation to the Great Depression. Do they really want to imitate this Hoover idea to try to get America out of the current crisis?

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