



# BACKGROUND

*Published by the Truman National Security Project*

## Issuing a Call to Service

Benjamin Rhodes, Research Director

18 June 2007

At a time when America faces enormous challenges at home and abroad, it is striking how little is being asked of the American people. Citizenship has traditionally been fostered through programs of education and service, recognizing that a strong democracy depends upon an active and engaged citizenry. To build on this rich legacy, progressives must put forward a more advanced agenda for citizenship and service in the 21st century.

### Not Living up to a Legacy of Service

With the passing of another D-Day anniversary last week, the living memory of that day fades further into history. Yet the image of young Americans storming the beaches of Normandy is etched in America's collective memory. To suffer losses in the thousands and to move directly into enemy fire stands as the ultimate price paid to achieve the great and just goal of securing America and liberating Western Europe. To be worthy of that sacrifice stands as a goal for the nation.

Citizen service extends well beyond the battlefield in the American tradition. In the darkest days of the depression, Franklin Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), putting tens of thousands to work developing American parks and infrastructure. In the face of a global struggle with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of the developing world, John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps to provide idealistic Americans an opportunity to serve while spreading goodwill. To foster civic engagement, Bill Clinton created AmeriCorps to galvanize a national volunteer network.

After 9/11, as the nation celebrated the service of uniformed first responders and thousands of Americans lined up to give blood, the time seemed ripe for an ambitious call to national service. Yet the only real call was to our volunteer armed forces. After Katrina, as Americans watched in horror and dismay as their fellow citizens were abandoned to the elements and decrepit conditions, the time seemed ripe to enlist a massive civic effort to rebuild the Gulf region. Yet the task fell to small pockets of volunteers, and New Orleans in particular has struggled to get back to its feet.

Progressives have rightly criticized President Bush for his post-9/11 call to Americans to go shopping. Yet this criticism is often issued to oppose post-9/11 tax cuts, or to lament the extraor-

inary burdens placed on our National Guard by Iraq. Cutting taxes for the wealthy and shifting the burden for a long war onto a small group of Americans is worthy of criticism, but does not represent an alternative vision. Citizenship must be about more than paying taxes, and the conservative embrace of patriotism must be met with more than opposition to ill-considered conservative policies.

### Options for a Service Agenda

73 percent of the American people believe the nation is on the wrong track. With the nation so unmoored, progressives must enlist the American people to turn things around. Existing programs like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps must be funded, but more can be done.

*The most stirring political rhetoric of the 20th Century - "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" - enlisted a generation to serve. It is time to issue the call to the next generation of Americans.*



Here are several options, with a focus on international service programs.

**Military Service:** We are in the midst of the longest war in American history without a draft. Reinstating a draft is both infeasible and unwise, as it would lower the quality and commitment that has been a hallmark of America's professional military. However, without a draft, we face a military weighted toward lower-income Americans and a lack of veterans in public office - both of which harm civilian-military understanding and the social fabric of our country. To increase military service, other remedies should be explored, including the option of shorter tours of duty and non-combat service.

**Compulsory Service:** As in many other countries, Americans could be selected to perform a compulsory 12 months of service. These Americans would choose from a menu of service options, including the armed services and civilian service such as the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps. This service could be performed at different stages of life - not necessarily when you are young and just out of high school. Estimates place the cost for implementing such a program upwards of \$60 billion. However, the benefits - in services rendered, and in the fostering of a greater civic identity - would be substantial.

**Civilian Reserve:** Several proposals call for a more voluntary "Civilian Reserve," notably General Wesley Clark during the 2004 presidential campaign. All Americans would have the opportunity to register, highlighting specific skills or types of service ranging from medicine to truck driving to engineering. In event of an emergency, these reserve forces could be called up for a term of duty: to provide support to fellow citizens after a hurricane or during a forest fire, or to help overseas in the aftermath of a disaster like the Asian tsunami or in a complex reconstruction effort. Rights and benefits in return for this service would be similar to those afforded to those in the National Guard. John Edwards has similarly proposed a 10,000 person strong "Marshall Corps" of civilians trained to work in stabilization and reconstruction missions.

**Global Service:** Congress could establish Global Service Fellowships. This would build upon the good work done by a range of NGOs, faith-based groups and universities abroad by identifying congressionally nominated individuals for U.S. government support to promote development abroad. A proposal out of the Brookings Institution estimates that an annual investment of \$50 million could support 10,000 of these fellowships. This modest investment would substantially enhance the impact of international programs, provide thousands of Americans with international experience,

and serve as a powerful tool of public diplomacy and goodwill. Senators Feingold and Coleman recently introduced the "Global Service Fellowships Program Act of 2007" to advance this idea.

**Supporting Skills:** During the Cold War, Congress funded numerous grant programs to encourage universities and individuals studying the Communist bloc and relevant languages. These programs bolstered American expertise and contacts, and provided a path to service, as many of these students entered government. Similar investments and scholarships in areas like Islamic studies and Arabic and other languages could create a pool of new expertise, and be tied to terms of government service.

The most stirring political rhetoric of the 20th Century - "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" - enlisted a generation to serve. It is time to issue the call to the next generation of Americans.

This Paper Can be Found at

[www.trumanproject.org](http://www.trumanproject.org)

Two Weeks After its Original Release Date.

By signing up as a member you can receive this paper on a regular basis upon its release.

Published by:

**Truman National Security Project**

1 Massachusetts Ave NW, Suite 333

Washington, DC 20001

Telephone: 202-216-9723

Fax: 202-682-1818

[info@trumanproject.org](mailto:info@trumanproject.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the Truman National Security Project or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.