



Should some form of national service be mandatory?

THERE IS GROWING interest in requiring young Americans to participate in some form of national service program. While this could include serving in the military, it might also involve a variety of options so that a person could work at an urban library, a homeless shelter or a health-care institution, to name a few.

Supporters insist that at a time when the United States is threatened by outside forces, national service would help to cure the apathy within the nation's borders. It would boost a sense of civic responsibility, help young people learn new skills and create better, more productive citizens.

Opponents argue that making national service mandatory is tantamount to indentured servitude. They add that it would be bad for the economy, would generate significant costs and would replace low-paid service workers with unpaid national service workers, forcing some people into poverty. What do you think?



Find out more about this topic on the Web:

- www.everyoneserves.org/
- www.time.com/time/specials/2007/printout/0,29239,1657256_1657317_1657570,00.html
- <http://volokh.com/posts/1190618819.shtml>

YES

from members:

George Futas
Bellevue, WA



It's an opportunity for each young person to gain an understanding that freedom comes from responsible participation.

Cynthia Lally
Windsor, CT



There is a need for help out there, it's very educational and it teaches responsibility.

Trina Nelson
Cedar Hill, TX



It's critical we train people to work in our communities, i.e., shelters, nursing homes, elementary schools, etc., not just the military.

NO

from members:

Donna Loucks
Centennial, CO



Americans should donate their time at their discretion. Maybe some kind of scholarship program for hours donated.

Steve Moroz
Huntley, IL



America is still the country of free choice. Too many of our rights have been taken away—we need to keep the few we have.

Rob Crow III
Rockville, MD



The idea of serving in this sense is very honorable, but it should remain a choice and strictly voluntary.

from experts in the field:



Charles Rangel (www.house.gov/rangel) is a U.S. congressman who represents New York's 15th District.

DESPITE THE SIGNING bonuses and college aid that we are throwing in to support our current economic draft, troops are being redeployed three, four and sometimes five times. That is unfair to these soldiers and their families. All who enjoy the benefits of living in this free society should share the burden of making this country safer, at home and abroad.

That is why I have frequently called for a mandatory national service requirement. It would require all legal residents between the ages of 18 and 42 to serve this country in some form.

While the first priority would be to replenish our military ranks, those not assigned to the battlefield would serve domestically for two years in our sea- and airports, schools, hospitals and other facilities. To ensure that the burden is shared, no deferments would be allowed beyond the completion of high school, up to age 20, except for conscientious objectors or those with health problems.

The benefits go beyond meeting our military needs. Locally, these national service participants would help reinforce and expand the work of police officers, firefighters, teachers, nurses and doctors. It would help free up the National Guard and Reserves so they can be available to assist when disasters strike domestically and internationally. That kind of goodwill not only educates and saves lives, it also creates the kind of strong relationships that we need to fight the extremism that fuels terrorist threats worldwide.

Just as important, national service would give young and old alike a shared experience and a continuous stake in some of the nation's most pressing issues, from the decision to go to war to education and social programs.

So many young people are already trying to do their part by joining the military, volunteering in local organizations and joining programs like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps. Imagine what could be done if there were more, supported by both the public and private sectors. Imagine the kind of world we could have if we each played an active role in the well-being of our nation and our neighbors. ☞

from experts in the field:



Will Marshall is president and founder of the Progressive Policy Institute (www.pponline.org), a center for policy innovation in Washington, D.C.

MAKING NATIONAL SERVICE compulsory is the wrong way to go. Consider first the problem of scale. About 4 million men and women graduate from high school each year. Assigning them to tasks in either the military or civilian service would quickly overwhelm our existing service infrastructure. It would inevitably lead to the creation of make-work jobs

that risk discrediting the national service in the public's eyes. To get around this obvious problem, some draft proponents have called for a lottery. But it's doubtful that a system that drafts, say, one of every four or five members of each year's graduating class will be seen as fair by those whose numbers are picked at random.

Even if there's a case today for a purely military draft to relieve overstretched U.S. forces, there's absolutely no precedent in American history for drafting citizens into civilian service. That's as it should be. Too much government coercion risks crushing the spirit of volunteerism that traditionally has distinguished American democracy.

Thinking in terms of incentives rather than compulsion, it is possible to envision a voluntary path to universal service. In our book *The AmeriCorps Experiment and the Future of National Service*, Marc Magee and I propose linking federal student aid to national service. The federal government spends lots of money on college aid—more than \$26 billion on grants and loan subsidies. We propose that eligibility for public help be conditioned on students' willingness to serve their communities. Making college aid an "earned entitlement" would give lots of college-going youths a powerful inducement to sign up for national service. And we would raise the current education reward for service from \$4,750 to \$10,000 per each year of service—which would cover the average cost of two years' tuition at a public university.

Rather than a "draft," the model should be more like the GI Bill, which educated millions of World War II veterans. The bill we propose would tackle unmet social needs. It would allow national service to grow gradually to truly national scale, so that it one day becomes a common rite of civic passage for young Americans. ☞

DECEMBER DEBATE RESULTS:

Do Americans pamper their pets too much?



Percentage reflects votes received by December 10, 2007.



NOVEMBER DEBATE UPDATE:

Should government legislate "appropriate" dress codes?

YES: 39% NO: 61%

Percentage reflects votes received by November 30, 2007.



See Dialogue pages for more debate responses

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