

# A NATION IN SERVICE

**C**omprehensive national service is one of those numerous ideas praised by many and implemented by none. For the last 30 years, we've had presidents who supported greatly expanding national service. Under the first President Bush, there was the Points of Light Foundation; under Clinton, AmeriCorps; under Obama, the Serve America Act. These programs have been worthwhile, and their members invaluable to the communities they serve. But each has fallen short of the goal of broad national service. AmeriCorps has just 80,000 members at a time when there are more than 30 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 24. More ambitious national-service bills have been introduced, only to end up watered down in committee, tabled by leadership, and otherwise drawn and quartered by legislative inquisitors.

Why? The combination of conservatism's now-unshakable distrust of government with liberalism's individualism and leeriness of militarism and nationalism has made grassroots support for a government-backed service program hard to muster. Anything that smacks of conscription turns off liberals; to conservatives,

even the most noble local volunteering becomes infected with waste and fraud as soon as it receives a dime from the federal government.

Further, the nature of the groups aided by national service makes mobilizing our sclerotic government difficult. Homeless shelters and food banks are not special-interest titans capable of forcing a congressman's hand. Even the benefits of national service can seem vague. Community, service, sacrifice: These are values that have begun to sound as old-fashioned as a mint julep.

Where does all of this leave us? As journalist Richard Just once put it, "Because national service is broadly supported but narrowly understood, it is an issue where 90 percent of the political gain is to be found in the pomp and procedure of announcing one's support for it."

We invited the foremost leaders and thinkers of this movement to lay out what a real national-service program would look like, and explain why it's worth doing. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, invoking William James's "The Moral Equivalent of War," tells us why service matters: for young people, for the communities being served, and, perhaps most importantly, for our country as a whole. Harris Wofford, former senator from Pennsylvania and a veteran of many legislative battles to implement national service, takes us through the history of the national-service movement. Clive Belfield, of Queens College at the City University of New York, details the economic benefits of a broad national-service program. Finally, Shirley Sagawa, author of *The American Way to Change: How National Service and Volunteers Are Transforming America*, explains how, through a private certification system, such a program would not have to be implemented solely by government.

It's a sad irony that words like "service" and "community," when repeated enough, can begin to sound like vague, even uncertain terms. The benefits to all involved are more tangible than almost anything else government does. Service members get to know parts of the country they've never been exposed to before. Rural towns stricken by disaster can receive help rebuilding homes. Schools can recruit youth counselors and start after-school programs without crippling their budgets. Communities for the elderly and developmentally disabled can find volunteers. Those who serve receive education awards and gain work experience. And the nation benefits and is strengthened as people meet and learn to work with other Americans not from their region or demographic group.

With high school and college graduates facing a bleak job market, and rural and urban communities still needing assistance with economic recovery, could there be any better time for a national-service platform?