

BROOKINGS

Executive Education

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“Public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly,” said the late Senator Margaret Chase Smith. “It must be a complete dedication to the people and to the nation.”

Since 1985, Public Service Recognition Week has honored the men and women who spend their professional lives promoting the welfare of the American people and country.

This year, Public Service Recognition Week kicked off May 6 and will conclude May 12. As part of the celebration, Brookings Executive Education’s May newsletter features personal reflections on the meaning of service and observations on the first generation of public servants.

HONORING THE PEOPLE WHO SERVE



For the past two decades, I have had the extraordinary opportunity to engage with career public leaders in my roles at the Brookings Institution and Brookings Executive Education. When I first started at Brookings, I was tasked with redesigning its hallmark Executive Leadership in a Changing Environment class. In the nearly 20 years I facilitated that program, I have been inspired by the stories of service shared by leaders from across government and the military. I never leave the course without a renewed sense of purpose and meaning, all derived from the interaction with the women and men who serve our country.

My commitment to public service was instilled at an early age. My aunts dragged me to a railroad station in a town north of Boston to help pass out leaflets that supported the presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy. Even at the tender age of 6, I sensed there was something thrilling about politics and government. Like many others of my generation, I knew Kennedy's call to ask what I could do for my country was noble and purposeful. By the time I came to Brookings, I assumed those attending the course would have experienced a similar calling.

To learn about course participants attending residential programs we ask them to complete a short background form on why they entered public service. Early in my tenure, I was completely disheartened that the vast majority of the participants submitted statements like the following: "It was the only job I was offered." "I was offered decent pay and benefits." "It provided stability." Where was their dedication to mission, purpose and meaning?

Shortly after the first few iterations of the Executive Leadership in a Changing Environment class, I realized that I needed to add this second — and, hopefully, more-fruitful — question: "Why do you *remain* in public service?"

In the 18 years since I added the question, the response from hundreds of senior leaders has been consistent. They reply, "I stay in public service to make a difference."

The people who have worked in government for two or more decades know no other career is as rewarding and fulfilling as public service. They have learned that the day-to-day actions they take keep our nation safe, our citizens protected and supported, and our democracy strong. In taking an oath to the Constitution, they have dedicated themselves to making the Constitution more true, to creating a more perfect Union. Public leaders are the bedrock of our governing institutions, and we are blessed they dedicate their professional — and, often, personal — lives to service and mission.

In recognition of Public Service Appreciation Week, I am happy to share with you some of the statements that demonstrate Kennedy's call for public service to be a "proud and lively career" has been realized.

Mary Ellen Joyce
Associate Dean and Executive Director

“People in government are here for a bigger purpose. We’re committed to the mission of our agencies, and we rise to the challenges of a changing nation and world.”

“I enjoy serving. I’m not motivated by profit. I want to do the right thing and help set the direction we take as a nation.”

“To make a positive difference in the lives of our fellow citizens.”

“Every day, I help disadvantaged people and the entire population with their health care choices.”

“I have a heart for service. And I work for an outstanding agency that touches the lives of every American and helps the most vulnerable in our society.”

“I live for impact and the belief that every new day affords the opportunity to lead positive change that affects the inhabitants of our planet.”

“I serve because I enjoy being part of something larger than myself and because I believe that the Army, specifically, and government, generally, are values-based organizations.”

“I remain because I want to make the world a better place.”

“It’s a privilege to help veterans as they return to civilian life. I don’t believe there’s a more-noble calling in government.”

“I contribute to an organization that’s dedicated to serving the needs of the public and the environment. Our humanitarian missions make a difference to so many lives.”

“I knew almost immediately that my job was making an actual, positive difference in people’s day-to-day lives.”

“I remain in the U.S. Navy because I have had the opportunity to consistently do meaningful work with outstanding people and been able to contribute to the security and success of the United States.”

“I remain because it’s a great place to be.”



“What did the nascent U.S. government do, and how did it do it?” These are the questions that keep Peter Kastor up at night — and keep him working on his new book and digital archive, “Creating a Federal Workforce, 1789-1829.”

“Questions about public service are as old as the republic,” said Kastor, professor of history and American culture studies at Washington University in St. Louis. “Tension was baked into the cake of the nation’s founding. On the one hand, the country needs a responsive federal workforce to achieve its national goals. On the other hand, many citizens fear a too-powerful centralized government.

“The first generation of public servants faced a lot of the same challenges public servants face now: namely concerns about politicization, performance assessment and the selection of qualified employees. The individuals wouldn’t have used these terms, but the aforementioned issues consumed their time and attention. Americans have always argued about what services the government should deliver. The roots of the resources-versus-overreach disagreement go deep.”

Kastor shares anecdotes on public service — including an interesting story on Meriwether Lewis and William Clark — with participants in Brookings Executive Education’s [Daring to Lead](#) residency, held at Washington University.

“Most people think of Lewis and Clark as explorers,” Kastor said. “In reality, Lewis and Clark were surveyors commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson to extend federal authority in the territorial West. In other words, they were public servants tasked with motivating and

mobilizing members of the Corps of Discovery.

“The expedition came in the midst of their extended public careers. Lewis and Clark served as commissioned officers in the U.S. Army and as territorial governors. They supervised civil and military personnel, negotiated with European and Native American leaders, and viewed themselves as leaders of the new federal government.”

Through the years, the federal workforce has evolved from a “government that was vital to national objectives but often out of sight to a government that is part of people’s daily lives. Lewis and Clark helped build a stable society and strong democratic institutions.”

For more insights, read Kastor’s paper on the [early days of the civil service](#).

WHY I SERVE



By Leneer Bassett-King

I always knew government was special. But I never thought about why I serve until I attended Brookings Executive Education’s [Executive Leadership for America](#) residency — and went on to pursue my [Master of Science in Leadership](#) degree. Every single Brookings Executive Education class offers precious moments to reflect on public service and commitment to a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.”

I grew up in Washington, D.C, where government and service were part of my family. During World War II, my grandmother worked for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing at the U.S. Department of the Treasury. As a lifelong Boy Scouts den mother, she lived by the Boy Scout Oath: “On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country”

One of my grandfathers was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen. My other grandfather was a Navy Seabee, and my father served in the U.S. Army, then spent his entire career working for the District of Columbia government.

So public service felt natural to me. It’s what my family did, what my brother and I still do.

How do I explain my passion to people who work in the private sector? I question them on all the important government services they take for granted.

“Who rescues you when your city is under water? Who puts out massive forest fires? Who tells you what nutrients are in the food that you buy? Who helps you refinance your mortgage? Who develops messages on the dangers of drinking and driving — or texting and driving?”

Today, I continue to serve because I believe I can inspire individuals to be greater than their circumstances. I love to converse with federal employees and help them see the difference they make.

Some people may believe that public service is a thankless endeavor. Every day, my job is to help “form a more perfect union” and contribute to a purpose much greater than myself. Thankless? No, I’m thankful — and grateful — I have the opportunity to serve.

UPCOMING COURSES

Most Brookings Executive Education spring courses are sold out. Register early for fall courses to reserve a seat in your preferred class (or classes). The 2018-2019 course calendar is available [here](#).