

Step Forward America was founded in 2015 to advocate for national service. However, lately we have been focusing more on the related issue of civics education. And now might seem to be a particularly bad time for us to re-focus on expanding opportunities for national service, with our leader Donald Trump being such a poor example of serving the public good, even having attempted to defund AmeriCorps. That said, however, it turns out to be a rather good time to address national service, for a couple of reasons.

All evidence shows our youth disillusioned with the value of a college degree and insurmountable debt to afford same, diminishing employment opportunities for new college grads and a lack of self-esteem, all of which can be addressed by an opportunity to serve.

And, more significantly, on March 12, Representative John Larson (CT-01) and Senator Jack Reed (RI) reintroduced the America's Call to Improve Opportunities Now (ACTION) for National Service Act that would:

- Reduce the burden of student loan debt by ensuring young people who serve two full terms of service are rewarded with an educational benefit equal to four years of average in-state tuition.
- Support at least one million full-time federal service positions a year—providing all who wish to serve the opportunity to do so.
- Increase access to national service opportunities by raising AmeriCorps living stipend amounts.
- Create a 21st Century American Service Outreach Program to notify eligible individuals about opportunities to serve.

- Advance national and community service as a civic and national priority by elevating the Corporation of National & Community Service (CNCS) to a new Cabinet-level agency.

Proponents have determined that AmeriCorps more than pays for itself, one study back in 2020 indicating that every federal dollar invested in AmeriCorps...generates over \$17 in benefits to society, program members and the government.”

Why wasn't ACTION previously enacted when it was first introduced in 2021 with significant bi-partisan support? If the service participation was mandatory, we could understand, Americans, no matter how generous or socially conscious, don't like to be told what to do, But this is voluntary, albeit with enough carrots and sticks that it would hopefully become de facto mandatory in a generation or two. Part of the problem has to lie with our legislative process. No matter how attractive a proposal might be, unless there is a clamoring from enough directly affected constituents or now, of course, from the President, it gets set aside in committees due to workload or, in many cases, by the Speaker of the House who sees no political advantage in moving it to the floor. Referring to typical time management studies assigning actions to four categories depending on their importance and urgency, this issue falls into the “important, but not urgent” category and keeps getting kicked down the road. Then too, in many cases, issues with strong bi-partisan approval don't get approved for fear of “other party” getting the credit.

Let's take a look at the history leading up to the re-introduction of the ACTION act. When we first promoted universal national service back in 2015, I referred to previous attempts, some successful, others not so, including of course FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps and later Kennedy's Peace Corps---LBJ's VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America, Clinton's AmeriCorps, and BUSH 43's Freedom Corps with his request

for all Americans to devote 2 years of their life to national service. In 2012 the Aspen Institute implemented the Franklin Project which morphed into a national service pilot program, the Service Year Alliance, under the direction of General Stanley McChrystal. It was this last effort that really spurred our interest and the following milestones from then until today have further encouraged us.

- Perhaps, of most significance was “Inspired to Serve,” the 2020 final report of the 3 year study by the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service of the nation’s desires and needs for a comprehensive national service program. This report includes approximately 100 specific recommendations to elevate and advance all forms of service and to strengthen emergency national mobilization.
- In 2021, Massachusetts Senator Edward Markey introduced the Civilian Climate Corps patterned after FDR’s Civilian Conservation Corps. It would employ 1.5 million Americans to complete federally funded projects to help communities respond to climate change. President Biden included it in his Build Back Better plan, but unfortunately, it didn’t get past the Senate.
- Also in 2021, Representative Jimmy Panetta (CA-201) introduced the Inspire to Serve Act with new and expanded national service and civics education programs stemming from the recommendations of the above mentioned 2020 report of the National Commission.
- In 2022, More Perfect, a collaboration of the 12 Presidential Centers, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and over 100 partners was formed to advance 5 Sustainable Democracy Goals, Goal 2 of which is national service.

- In 2023, Governor Wes Moore of Maryland established his Department of Service and Civic Innovation providing access to entry-level positions at nonprofits and state agencies providing social services. At the end of the minimum nine-month term, all participants get a \$6000 stipend toward college or a downpayment on a home or other living necessity.
- In 2025, Representative Panetta re-introduced the above mentioned bi-partisan Inspire to Serve Act provisions of which include noncompetitive eligibility for federal employment for national service alumni.

Over this time, many other highly respected elected officials and other pundits advocating strongly in favor of national service included David Brooks, Fareed Zakaria, Rahm Emanuel, Susan Rice, Pete Butegieg, Hillary Clinton, and Senators Chris Coons, Elizabeth Warren, Kirsten Gillibrand, and Richard Blumenthal.

Regardless of any of the President's actions with which most of us can agree, for example tightening up the southern border or attempting to control at the source the flow of drugs coming into our country, half of us also agree that he has the nation on a downward spiral. Those of us who participated in last weekend's No Kings Day protests need only to have looked at the posters and banners, including the ones some of you may have carried, to realize our depth of despair about both his lack of competence and his lack of character.

Most of us have at one time or another been in violent disagreement with past presidents about some of their policies or actions. Still, we were proud that with all our faults we were the responsible leaders of the free world trying to make the rest of world a better place by promoting democracy.

But now we are faced with a sense of shame or collective responsibility and national guilt---about the way we treat immigrants with no

criminal records whom we allowed to enter, live and work in our country---about our leader's total lack of respect for our decorated heroes and iconic patriots, as evidenced by his degrading remarks, first about John McCain for having been captured, then claiming Mark Kelly should be executed for advising the military that they didn't have to obey illegal, orders, and just recently cheering the death of Bob Mueller---about throwing our courageous and valuable ally, Ukraine, under the bus, and siding with their invader, war criminal Putin, not only siding with him, but literally rolling out the red carpet in welcome--and about Trump's disrespect for our NATO allies by withholding support for their neighbor Ukraine, a bulwark against potential Russian expansion into NATO territory, while at the same time expressing his ignorance of their support for us after 9/11.

We are a seriously divided country, almost exactly half of our voters opposing the administration for many reasons in addition to those character issues just outlined. The other half, while not necessarily disagreeing with those reasons, support the administration based on many justified, or at least partially justified, societal issues some of which relate to excessive welfare for groups that they identify as underserving, some of which relate to spending their taxes on international conflicts and aid that could best be spent at home i.e., America first, and some of which relate to civil rights afforded some minorities at the expense of their own civil rights.

National service, and especially the military, is a good opportunity to get the young from different political, social and economic backgrounds living, learning, and working together and discussing conflicting views on social, economic and political challenges, leading to a life of productive citizenry. But more important in today's environment it's an opportunity to improve self worth considering diminishing employment opportunities for those planning for, or already holding, a costly degree that they're still paying for, and to bolster self-respect in a nation that is

rapidly losing all of its values that have in the past warranted worldwide respect.

What can we do not only to promote national service but also to help get us back on track to save democracy?

- Write your federal Senators and Representative asking them to support the America's Call To Improve Opportunities Now (ACTION) for National Service Act just recently reintroduced by Representative Larson and Senator Reed
- Start or continue to participate in your area protests to save democracy and, if possible, get more involved as your protest leaders suggest
- Those first 2 are easy, this is a little more difficult: Open a dialog with at least one of your friends or family members who may be opposed, in some cases vehemently, to you on the current state of the union---addressing the above bi-partisan ACTION Act might be a good door opener.

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