

In my April newsletter “A New Call for National Service” I repeated the original mission of Step Forward America promoting national service as a good opportunity to get the young from different political, social and economic backgrounds living, learning, and working together and discussing conflicting views on political challenges, leading to a life of productive citizenry. But more important in today’s environment it’s an opportunity to improve self esteem 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.

I also mentioned that Representative John Larson (CT-01) and Senator Jack Reed (RI) in March reintroduced the America’s Call to Improve Opportunities Now (ACTION) for National Service Act (S4068). This has now been referred to the Committee on Finance, but as yet there is no cost estimate.

A couple of new developments prompt me to again devote our newsletter to national service.

First, we are all concerned that at present, employment opportunities for both high school grads and college grads are diminishing, at least partially due to AI eliminating the need for many entry level positions. Whether this is permanent or not remains to be seen. One school tells us that AI will create new opportunities that have as yet emerged---a good reason for an interim term of national service, military or civilian.

Second , and this relates specifically to military service, the hardened “warrior” label and image that Pete Hegseth would like to apply to all our service men and women, and the diversity label that he would like

to eliminate don't appear to me to fit with the realities of current warfare as demonstrated in Iran and Ukraine. Conducting combat via drones and missiles somewhat removed from the "front lines" now requires a large number of soldiers not necessarily suited to what we think of as traditional front line service. Current physical eligibility standards for the military could readily be revised to accommodate the large number of applicants who don't meet the current weight and strength requirements but could readily serve in these new roles. The Army, once Hegseth is gone, might consider another classification of service with less stringent physical capabilities to accommodate support roles.

While I have focused more on the civilian side of national service, the prime example AmeriCorps, I have been remiss in not sufficiently touting the opportunities afforded by the military, starting with those from different political, social and economic backgrounds living, learning and working together as discussed above. Of course, this opportunity also applies to some AmeriCorps and other civilian service assignments, but not all.

And there are so many other benefits to the military enlistee. If you visit www.GoArmy.com, you will find they include salary, bonus, healthcare, tuition assistance after service and more. Job training is available in a variety of disciplines, from those specifically related to the military to others like financial management, intelligence, engineering and transportation for those not making the military their career.

The Navy has similar benefits and career offerings as presented at www.Navy.com With over 150 career roles to choose from including arts and communication, business, construction, electronics and technology, legal and medical, the Navy offers a chance not only to

“defend freedom and strengthen our nation,” but also to “create a future built on purpose and pride.”

And the Air Force makes the same case for enlistment stating that “The advanced training and leadership skills you’ll gain in the Air Force will help you beyond your career as an Airman in whatever future goals you set. Whether you go on to pursue work in the civilian sector or would like to explore other ways to serve in the Air Force, your experience will make you a competitive candidate.”

The Marines, as we would expect, put a little different spin on the advantages of joining, saying “Here you’re not climbing a corporate ladder---you’re standing for something that matters. You won’t find stock options for moral courage. No bonus checks for honor. But ask any Marine, and they’ll tell you: the pride, the purpose, the unwavering community---these are the rewards that last.”

All of that said about military national service, here is something that until recently was completely new to me and I assume to most if not all of you. Margaret Cope with whom I have recently opened a dialog has been working for many years on a new voluntary but incentivized National Service Framework. Margaret, a retired Air Force Colonel, is an independent consultant with over 30 years of success as a leader and executive in the U.S. government, including 15 years of senior logistics management experience leading national strategic plans. Her specialties focus on national security and national service. She has an M.A. in strategy and policy from the U.S. Naval War College .

Here is Colonel Cope’s case for national service that includes some similarities with ours albeit expressed somewhat differently:

- “Many of our young people between the ages of 18 and 26 can tell you the price of any cell phone on the market but not the three branches of our government
- Many feel disenfranchised from society, do not trust the government and believe they are being left behind
- Many are deeply depressed and turning to deadly drugs and crime as a way out
- All this while 6 million jobs go begging because they do not have the skill sets to fill them”

“Despite facing critical national challenges....the U.S. lacks a comprehensive system for identifying , developing, and deploying its most promising young talent.”

She goes on to say “If we are to continue to succeed as a nation, our young people need to be educated and experienced in what it means to be an American, they must be made to feel that they, like previous generations, have a stake in the long-term well being of our country. They need to know that their lives and work are meaningful, and that futures are bright.”

The goal in her words is specifically to “provide opportunities where young people can learn skills to thrive in this challenging 21st century work force. At the same time, they would be receiving an education in what it means to be a valued service provider, what it means to have a stake in the communities they serve---and in their lives. What it means to be an American.”

As in most national service programs, incentives are key. “Participants would receive lodging, uniforms, healthcare and good allowances, as well as stipends. Upon completion of two years of service, they would be entitled to numerous government incentives including an education debt reduction or education allowance like the GI Bill....”

Just as we advocate, Colonel Cope sums it up beautifully when she says that “it would give our curious young people the chance to experience parts of America and the world they’ve never been to before, to see and understand how other people live, work and play.”

Now here’s where we diverge. Rather than basing the program solely on AmeriCorps, VISTA, the Peace Corps, the military and other existing service organizations, her program would operate under a new unifying umbrella including these existing corps plus additional specialized individual corps covering Administrative Services, Education, Cybersecurity, Civilian Conservation, Medical, Legal and Law enforcement, Journalism, Caregiving, and others. Classroom training, laboratories, and homework, would start a pathway into both civil service careers and private sector jobs. And this is based on her above mentioned “6 million jobs [going] begging because {our youth does} not have the skill sets to fill them” and her vision of a “skilled, adaptable workforce ready for the challenges of the 21st century.” While we haven’t previously made this specific case for the need for a national service program, I certainly wouldn’t argue with it, bearing in mind of course that AI will have a significant effect on this challenge of the 21st century.

Colonel Cope is working on her implementation plan with Unpolitics, a platform for collective engagement in solutions to societal challenges that brings together scientists, policy thinkers, organizers, technologists, and public leaders to turn knowledge into real-world action. She will be coalition building after determining who is currently receptive to national service concepts across political, defense, civic and other sectors---and then addressing “how service efforts could be advanced incrementally.” As a proponent of national service in any form, we will be enthusiastically following her progress.

Last Sunday the Opinion section of *The New York Times* was headed “It’s America’s birthday. What are we celebrating?---250 years in, opinion writers offer 16 reasons that the national experiment endures.” I think the writer Carlos Lozada, when reflecting on his and others’ naturalization ceremonies, said it best by referring to remarks Ronald Reagan made the day before he departed the White House: “You can go to live in France, but you cannot become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Turkey or Japan, but you cannot become a German, a Turk or a Japanese. But anyone, from any corner of the earth, can come to live in America and become an American.”

For comments, further information or requests to unsubscribe, contact me at tedhol@charter.net

Ted Hollander www.StepForwardAmerica.com