A CALL TO CIVIC SERVICE

National Service for Country and Community

Charles C. Moskos

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Foreword

Citizenship is a matter of rights—and of obligations. The advent of the all-volunteer army during a period in which Americans were focusing on ensuring individual rights and entitlements while neglecting the teaching of civic responsibility resulted in a loss of a sense of civic obligation. National service, the term used to describe short-term participation in public service jobs by young citizens for little pay, offers a way to instill a sense of civic responsibility in today's youth.

Falling rates of voter participation and the problems of the all-volunteer army led the Trustees and staff of the Twentieth Century Fund to consider the pressing need to instill the idea of civic responsibilities in young Americans. We decided that any worthwhile study of national service would have to examine not only the history of national service but broader questions of social policy. National service has many benefits—it can instill work habits, provide job training and basic education, serve unmet social and environmental needs—but unless it is considered principally as a means of enhancing citizenship, there is a danger that it will be viewed as make-work or welfare.

In Charles C. Moskos, professor of sociology at Northwestern University and author of *The American Enlisted Man* and *The Peace Soldiers*, we found a scholar who saw national service in a broad policy context. Moskos wanted to provide a historical and comparative look at the ideas and programs that have, over the years, been encompassed in the term national service, and then suggest a comprehensive national service program for youth

that would both build on historical precedent and take into account current political trends.

Moskos has succeeded admirably, presenting a reasoned case for national service that will enlighten the debate over this difficult policy issue. We are grateful to him for his efforts.

M. J. Rossant, Director
The Twentieth Century Fund
April 1988

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my draft board. My service in the peacetime army of the late 1950s led to my interest and, eventually, to a very satisfying academic career in military sociology (and a good living to boot). Although my initial concept of national service began as a draftee, over time it has come to include the civilian server as well as the citizen soldier. Indeed, the underlying commonality of military and civilian service is the unifying theme of this book. The civic service called for here thus presents a blueprint for a voluntary program of national service encompassing both military and civilian forms.

I want to extend my gratitude to Marcia Bystryn, whose letter from the Twentieth Century Fund about doing a book on national service came at precisely the time I was pondering such an undertaking. Also at the Twentieth Century Fund I am grateful to Murray J. Rossant, Nina Massen, and Beverly Goldberg, who stroked me when I needed stroking and prodded me when I needed prodding. My debt is enormous to Michael Massing, whose editing on behalf of the Twentieth Century Fund taught me to think as well as write more clearly.

Many people helped out in the collection of the materials covered in this paper, and I have departed from normal practice by acknowledging them in appropriate end notes in order to recognize their specific help. More generally, I have profited greatly from discussions (indeed, often debates) with many individuals, and I wish to single out Bernard Beck, Wendell Bell, Peter Braestrup, Richard Danzig, Edwin Dorn, Arnold S. Feldman, Richard Halloran, Thomas E. Kelly, John Kester, James

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Much of my professional and intellectual life centers around the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, an "invisible college" of scholars which I am privileged to head. The Seminar served as the intellectual incubator for my thoughts on national service. I wish to thank especially the following Seminar colleagues: John S. Butler, John B. Keeley, W. Darryl Henderson, John J. Mearsheimer, Sam C. Sarkesian, David R. Segal, John Alden Williams, and Frank R. Wood. Most of all I want to acknowledge Morris Janowitz and Donald J. Eberly, whose professional and personal dedication to national service is an inspiration to all who know them.

All errors in fact or interpretation are, of course, my own sole responsibility.

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ONE

Citizenship and National Service

In the upper reaches of the Rio Grande valley, farmers have faithfully performed a communal task every spring for more than three centuries. The annual cleaning of the *acequias*, or irrigation ditches, is required so that water can flow into the orchards and fields of the small farmers who work the harsh though beautiful land of northern New Mexico. Young men clear the debris that has gathered over the winter, older men supervise them, and women bring food for the men. The significance of the yearly repairs of the *acequias* is not only that it is the oldest continuously performed community task in the country, but that it stands as a kind of parable for the way shared civic duties become the social glue that holds a society together. In the face of urbanization, a changing economy, and social flux, how well the ditch duties are carried out reflects the social cohesion of the community.

There is no more powerful expression of such civic sharing than what is commonly called national service. This entails the full-time undertaking of public duties by young people—whether as citizen soldiers or civilian servers—who are paid subsistence wages. "National" is used here in the broadest sense. It encompasses youth service performed at the state, local, and community levels for both governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations. Common to all such service is the performance of socially needed tasks that the market cannot effectively handle and that would be too expensive for government employees to carry out.

From the beginning, it is important to understand that national service must not be seen as a magical talisman, a mystical means for transforming socially indifferent Americans into paragons of civic virtue. But national service does mean the performance of citizen duties that allow individuals to have a sense of the civic whole—a whole that is more important than any single person or category of persons. It is upon some such norm of fulfillment of a civic obligation, upon some concept of serving societal needs outside the marketplace, upon some sense of participation in a public life with other citizens that the idea of national service builds. We will refer to these notions hereafter, for purposes of shorthand, as *civic content.*

There has been some confusion among national-service supporters about who is supposed to benefit from the work performed—the server or society—which has produced two schools of thought about national service, what might be called the *instrumental* and the *civic.* The instrumental tradition justifies national service by the good done to the server. The civic tradition focuses on the value of the services performed. The first tradition provokes negative stereotypes by inviting speculation on deficiencies in the character of the server. The second tradition offers national service as an end in itself, thereby fostering positive images of servers. Only when national service is cast in terms of its civic content can its positive, but necessarily derivative, benefits for the server be achieved.

One other issue must be gotten out of the way early on. Because civic content is the lodestone of national service, whether the service performed is compulsory or voluntary is not an essential element of any definition of national service, however profound may be the policy implications of that question. This book will propose a form of comprehensive national service that would include a substantial number of youth—as many as one million in either military or civilian service—and would not be mandatory. By promoting a spirit of civic mindedness, national service will accomplish a range of much-needed national tasks, thus reshaping American life in fundamental ways.

WHY YOUTH?

For good reasons national service is almost always presented as a program for youth. Although arrangements can be made

for older people to participate in national-service programs, the primary focus must be on teenagers and young adults. From a practical standpoint, young people are more flexible than adults and have fewer family obligations. Furthermore, since many have not yet entered the work force, young participants would prove less disruptive to the nation's economy; indeed, their value as workers may be enhanced by the service experience itself, thereby making America more competitive in the new realities of global economic interdependence. In addition, young adults can usually perform certain physical tasks—notably military and conservation work—more efficiently than older people. The growing tendency of American youth to postpone the responsibilities of adulthood makes national service potentially an attractive way station between school and work. But there is also an intangible: focusing national service on youth makes it a rite of passage toward adult citizenship, dramatizing its importance.

The preference for youth makes sense from a citizenship standpoint as well. Practically speaking, if one does not serve while young, one is not likely to serve at all. Certainly civic values are more effectively imparted at an earlier rather than a later age. Inasmuch as research indicates that schools are doing a poor job of inculcating civic values, national service offers an alternative vehicle for civic education. Common sense suggests that national service would have its maximum impact at the beginning of adult life. Young men and women who have completed a term of service in the Peace Corps or VISTA, as well as the peacetime military, typically describe their experience in special and positive terms. Those who have not done national service can never fully understand what it is like, and those who have are never quite the same afterward.[1]

The fact remains that national service is less likely to be experienced by the present generation of young Americans than by any other youth cohort in living memory. Yet there are numerous contemporary instances of youths voluntarily serving abroad, although far from the type of national service I envision. Each winter since 1984, for example, some five hundred young Americans, Sandinista sympathizers, have volunteered to pick cotton or help bring in the coffee harvest in Nicaragua. These volunteers pay their own travel expenses and work ten-hour days for subsistence wages. Similar leftist youth volunteers have been cutting sugar in Cuba almost every year since the Castro revolution. And there are other groups who serve voluntarily for very differ-

ent reasons. Religiously motivated youth serve throughout Latin America, Africa, and the Pacific islands. No reliable statistics exist, but the number of young evangelists serving overseas far exceeds the number of Peace Corps volunteers. The Mormon Church alone has about 21,000 men and women serving "missions" abroad—twenty-four months for men, eighteen months for women. Supported by family funds and personal savings, these young missionaries have made the Mormon program one of the most successful youth outreach ventures in history.

To be sure, none of these activities contains civic content; quite the contrary. But the examples cited here—and they represent only a small sampling—refute the general characterization of American youth as irrevocably self-absorbed and apathetic. Clearly, if the proper opportunities were available, many more would serve. What ideology and religion have done to motivate a select group, national service could do for a broad sector of American youth.

EMERGING PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY AND NATIONAL SERVICE

Citizen rights and citizen duties have traditionally been at the center of Western political theory. Originally seen as complementary, the two doctrines have, over time, come to be viewed as conflicting. In modern times, theorists have tended to downplay the duty side of the equation. This is true of figures on both the left and right. Take, for example, the writings of two of our most eminent political philosophers, John Rawls and Robert Nozick.[2] Politically, the radical egalitarianism of Rawls and the conservative libertarianism of Nozick could not be more at odds. Yet both de-emphasize the role of citizen duties in favor of a highly individualist rights-based ethic. Whether political theorists favor an activist state handing out benefits, as liberals do, or a state that needs to be curbed, as conservatives do, the view of citizenship remains the same: individuals exist apart from one another, bound by no meaningful obligations.

But since ideas seem to run in cycles, a reaction against a rights-only concept of citizenship was bound to occur. Political theorists are showing a new appreciation of citizens' obligations

and the importance of shared values. The intellectual origins of the new interest in the duties of citizens are not difficult to locate. They are a result of both the inadequacies of Marxism, with its materialist analysis and collectivist prescriptions, and the inadequacies of libertarianism, which offers a similar materialist analysis but with an insistent stress on the individual. The political center, so to speak, is reasserting itself against the right and left.

The recovery of the civic in public philosophy is apparent in a series of important works that have appeared in the past few years. In *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice,* Michael J. Sandel articulates the emerging disenchantment with the idea of a social world made up of civically unencumbered individuals.[3] Sandel essentially supports the classical idea of the civic republican tradition, in which private interests are subordinated to the public good and in which community life takes precedence over individual pursuits. Similarly, in *Reconstruction of Public Philosophy,* philosopher William M. Sullivan asserts the need to recover a sense of civic life, to develop those qualities of social life that go beyond competitive success and economic well-being.[4] For Sullivan civic responsibilities are necessary not only for the public good but also for individual "self-fulfillment and even the working out of personal identity."[5] Likewise, Sandel holds that to imagine an individual incapable of attachments and allegiances is "to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth."[6] The renewed emphasis on civic participation in Sandel and Sullivan, among others, is often technical and not always in a form accessible to the general reader. Nonetheless, such work in democratic political theory is laying the philosophical foundation for the popularization of national service.[7]

One of the most explicit connections between the emergent civic theory and national service is found in Benjamin R. Barber's *Strong Democracy.*[8] "National service is a vital constituent in the relationship between rights and duties under a strong democratic regime," writes Barber.[9] The current problems in the body politic—cynicism about voting, political alienation, privatism, the growing distrust of public institutions—are symptoms of a malaise that is inseparable from the diminution of civic obligations. Barber believes that a thriving democracy must be rooted in active citizenship, involving direct participation and commu-

nal responsibilities. "Universal citizen service," as Barber calls it, means that young people would choose from among military service and a variety of civilian corps. Such service would answer a number of problems plaguing the all-volunteer military, job-training programs, and deteriorating public facilities.

The contemporary shift toward a reemphasis of citizen duties is nowhere better exemplified than in *Spheres of Justice* by Michael Walzer, one of the country's leading social thinkers.[10] Walzer starts by showing how each of the different "spheres" of community life—economic, political, social—generates its own distributive rules. Justice requires the autonomy of the spheres, preventing any group from dominating across all spheres. Thus, Walzer is less concerned with the distribution of money than with limiting the things money can buy. Injustice lies in money's power to dominate where it does not belong—for example, its use to purchase human beings, to control free expression, to buy political offices, and, especially important from our perspective, to purchase exemptions from national service, that is, from military service or communally imposed work. Certain public needs—military service in the past, perhaps national service in the future—cannot be obtained on a marketplace reckoning. Walzer goes as far as to describe the merits of obligatory and unpaid, but temporary, labor to do the necessary work of society that is dangerous, grueling, or dirty.

In the emerging political philosophy, national service is regarded as a form of civic education. This dimension is discussed most fully in *The Reconstruction of Patriotism* by sociologist Morris Janowitz.[11] He argues that not only have citizen rights become disconnected from citizen duties, but that formal educational institutions no longer seem capable of fostering a sense of civic consciousness. In his view, the national-service experience can itself provide a more effective dose of civics than the customary courses given in our schools. For Janowitz, a shared sense of civic participation creates civic consciousness, not the other way around.

A handful of books does not a movement make. But something is astir. Though the terminology may vary, the emerging public philosophy has certain basic precepts: the interdependence of citizens in a commonwealth, the need for active participation in civic life, and the sharing of a commitment to community values.[12] It would be silly to ascribe all of our social problems

to an imbalance between citizen rights and duties. To refocus on citizenship duties is neither to postpone examination of systematic economic and social ills nor to deny the existence of competing interest groups. But the need for a more balanced and nuanced formulation of citizenship is becoming increasingly apparent. By insisting that citizenship has a moral dimension, the new theorists have helped bring attention to bear on an important question—whether one can be a good citizen without actively performing civic duties.

Discussion of civic obligations inevitably brings us to patriotism, a concept that is too frequently avoided when talking about national service. Patriotism as a social good has been an unfashionable perspective among most serious analysts of American society in recent decades. Certainly the ambiguities and anomalies of patriotism cannot be denied. Chauvinistic and even fascistic sentiments are often seen lurking behind that term. Patriotism without jingoism is no small trick. If this left us in a position of absolute relativism—believing that nothing is special or better about one's country—it would be morally unnerving. But insofar as this and the opposite absolute—that is, blind obedience to one's country—can be avoided, it is possible to think critically while maintaining our patriotic beliefs.

A civic-oriented national-service program must ultimately rest on some kind of enlightened patriotism. The critical step in making the case for such a patriotism is not so much to grasp why those in power deserve to be distrusted (seldom a difficult task), but to see that power can be fashioned so that it deserves trust and loyalty. There is no reason to be ashamed of a patriotism that reminds us of the enduring worth of America's civic institutions, even if many were long excluded from their benefits and still others do not yet have their fair share. Enlightened patriotism involves reason and criticism as well as emotional ties to the nation-state. Such self-critical patriotism is quite different from that which amounts to enthusiastic acceptance of the status quo. Patriotism, like other human virtues, must be tempered by balance and reflection.

National service points to a civic formulation of patriotism. The renaissance of American political culture that national service would bring about would entail a search for a new balance after an indiscriminate weakening of the sense of citizenship duty. It is not a case of my country right or wrong, or of what

amounts to the same for ideologues, my country left or right, but more directly and simply, a case of who shall perform citizen duties.

A POLITICAL CULTURE IN CRISIS?

There is no need to retreat into the mists of a presumed golden age to feel that there is something lacking in the civic consciousness of the present. Political scientists point to the downward slide in voter turnout, despite the easing of such barriers to voting as poll taxes and obstructive registration rules.[13] No society has ever paid its taxes happily, but we Americans have prided ourselves on having one of the highest tax compliance rates in the world. In recent years, however, tax evasions have become widespread.[14] Education surveys show that today's college students are much more likely than earlier students to be preoccupied with making money and less interested and less prepared to exercise civic responsibilities than their predecessors.[15] Our national psyche is described in pathological terms—narcissistic, egoistic, possessive.[16]

The "crisis of legitimacy" has generated its own school of American political commentary. Conservative commentators decry the unsettling growth of popular expectations and the erosion of traditional moral values. Liberal observers rue the retreat into a mean-spirited privatism that has led to a widening gulf between haves and have-nots. And, in the center, there is concern with the unraveling of America's social consensus in which the pursuit of politics is based upon class, race, gender, or sexual preference, a veritable "democratic overload." This all dovetails with the school of the United States in decline, an almost autumnal reading of America's economic and hegemonic power.[17]

To speak of the American political system as being in deep trouble may be hyperbole, but there are disturbing signs nevertheless. Two of America's leading political scientists, Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, have given us the most comprehensive analysis of the public mind in *The Confidence Gap*.[18] Political alienation and cynicism have grown rapidly in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate (not to mention the Iran-contra affair). The disaffection has not yet developed into a Euro-

pean-style *ressentiment*, a negativism toward authority so deeply rooted as to make violent upheaval possible. Nonetheless, Lipset and Schneider believe that the United States has a lower reserve of confidence in its political system than in times past. Our political institutions may not be as resilient as before and thus may not be able to withstand another severe shock on the order of the Great Depression or the Vietnam War.

The need for national service as a vehicle of civic education is especially strong now because of the relative weakness of other forms of community. In the United States, national community can only be grounded in citizenship because Americans really do not have a *patrie*, or fatherland. America does not claim solidarity and unity by virtue of a claimed common ancestry or some divine foundation myth. America is the immigrant society par excellence. Our cohesion depends upon a civic ideal rather than on primordial loyalties. At stake is the preservation in the United States of a shared citizenship that serves to knit this increasingly ethnically diverse society together as a nation.

MILITARY AND CIVILIAN SERVICE AND THE LONG SHADOW OF WILLIAM JAMES

The idea of national service is conventionally traced to William James's 1910 essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War."[19] James coined the concept to contrast the noble human qualities evoked by war with the destructive purposes they served. Is it not possible, he asked, to call forth the same heroism without the shooting and the bloodshed? James held that many values of military life are worth preserving. "Intrepidity, contempt for softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which States are built," he wrote.[20] For James, national service presented a means by which a democratic nation could maintain social cohesion without having to go to war.

James's essay was an important work, setting the tone of discussion for decades to come. In retrospect, though, it is by no means clear whether James's effort was an important breakthrough or an unfortunate detour on the way to making national service a reality. Although he consciously tried to steer a middle road