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Universal Service Hearing: Should Service be Mandatory?

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Chairman Heck, Vice Chairs Gearan and Wada, members of the Commission:

Thank you for this opportunity to offer my thoughts on the appropriate scope of national service. The modern national service movement is more than three decades old. It has scored many remarkable successes. But those of us who were present at the creation of AmeriCorps must acknowledge that it has fallen short of our aspirations. We hoped that as it grew, it would come to transform the prevailing understanding and practice of American citizenship. We hoped that active citizenship would become the norm and that all Americans would see that citizenship consists not only in rights to be claimed but also in responsibilities to be met. We hoped, above all, that national service could help close the widening gap among Americans of different backgrounds, partisan affiliations, and ideological orientations.

Little of this has come to pass. We now face a choice between scaling back our hopes to fit the reality of national service as it now exists and expanding service to fit the scale of our hopes. I favor the latter because I refuse to accept the civic status quo, which I regard as dangerously inadequate. I doubt that I am alone.

What should we do?

The first step, which is not trivial, is to come as close as we can to what the Commission calls “universal access” to service for all who desire to participate. In my judgment, the best course would be to quadruple the opportunities AmeriCorps offers each year. A program that engaged 300 thousand people each year would be much more visible than today’s version. Most Americans would know—or at least know of—someone who is performing service. The odds that the program could reshape civic norms would rise significantly.

There’s a caveat: the venue matters. I believe that service is most likely to achieve its civic mission when it is performed in diverse groups—that is, in teams. Learning through concrete experience that people whose backgrounds and beliefs are very different can work together to accomplish shared goals is the heart of the lesson that today’s service must convey. It has hard to see what else can even begin to reweave our frayed civic fabric.

When I was younger, I backed service as a universal obligation. I still do—in principle—but I no longer regard it as practical. We simply do not have the resources, human and material, to administration such a system in circumstances other than the kinds of emergencies that call for national mobilizations. So I now support something less far-reaching, which might be called universal exposure.

Here's how it would work. Upon graduating from high school or reaching the age of 18, everyone would receive a randomly generated lottery number based on their date of birth. Out of each annual cohort, a certain portion of the number holders would be selected for service, civilian or military. Those choosing civilian service would receive modest living stipends and would earn funds that could be used to defray the costs of post-secondary education and training or for other approved purposes. (Of course, individuals whose lottery numbers were not selected would still be able to volunteer for AmeriCorps and other civilian opportunities as well as military service.)

By the time young people entered high school, they would know that they might be called upon to serve. They would begin to talk to older siblings, relatives, or counselors about their options. And they would begin to understand that there's more to citizenship than just asserting their rights as individuals.

I know that some will raise philosophical or constitutional objections to any mandatory service requirements. I do not share them. Citizens are required to serve on juries, and in a national emergency the Selective Service System continues to provide the basis for resuming military conscription. Universal exposure to national service is a policy issue, and the arguments for and against it are practical, not philosophical or constitutional.