



perspective

Citizenship means giving something back

By Andrew L. Yarrow and Monica Healy

Forty-six years ago, John Kennedy famously told Americans to ask not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country. Since then, a lot of water has gone under the cultural bridge, with the dawn of "entitlement" as both a budgetary and psychological concept, the "me decade," "the culture of narcissism," and a populace geared toward self-fulfillment.

Public service, if not dead as an ideal, is discredited as a concept. Ronald Reagan didn't help when he declared government to be "the problem." Likewise, Michael Moore-style images of Army recruiters-as-hucksters wooing the naïve in Wal-Mart parking lots mocks the once-proud ideal of military service.

Citizenship today seems to carry endless rights and entitlements and almost no obligations. For many, government employment is simply a secure job, not a higher calling to serve the public good. AmeriCorps has only about 75,000 volunteers a year, including 1,700 in City Year, and the Peace Corps fewer than 8,000. A number of private groups have tried to fill the gap, but they have relatively few people in public service. The successful Teach for America program will have close to 5,000 corps members this fall, but this only scratches the surface in a nation of 3 million K-12 teachers.

With a new Democratic Congress and President Bush having called for increased public service, saying that "America needs citizens to extend the compassion of our country," this seems an opportune moment to raise the issue. Amid the flurry of activity in the 110th Congress, national service has yet to gain the prominence it deserves.

We've all seen the polls about public distrust of government, dissonantly coupled with a professed patriotism, but it's time to get over it if we're not going to drown in a sea of cynicism.

Patriotism and citizenship mean giving something back to your country, not just flying plastic, Chinese-made American flags on your lawn every Fourth of July. While many high schools have initiated public-service requirements, and there was a surge of interest in helping others after Sept. 11 and Hurricane Katrina, there is a much more profound and manifoldly beneficial way to do this.

Let's think of it partly as reconceiving American life in the two years after

high school. Instead of going to college or work, every 18- and 19-year-old - that's more than 8 million Americans in any given year - should be given additional incentives to enter some form of public service. Service should continue to be encouraged for older Americans, and some might defer their service until after college.

While mandated service may be a political nonstarter, AmeriCorps should be expanded to embrace this new cadre of recruits and bills such as the Clinton-Specter measure to establish a civilian service academy should be embraced. Moreover, the business community and the Ad Council could launch public-service announcements for national service; Congress could proclaim a National Service Day; and political leaders themselves could actually lead by serving in schools or soup kitchens on that day. The president should more aggressively use the bully pulpit to advocate national service, as should the nation's governors.

The benefits are varied and could be enormous:

Young Americans, who are too young to decide on college majors and vocations, could be given two years to mature and learn about their country, think about their interests and talents in life, explore the proverbial "real world," and learn that American citizenship is about more than getting a car, an iPod, designer clothes, and a flashy vacation. The very experience of voluntary service is often a transformational experience, leading many to a lifetime of good works, as many Peace Corps, Teach for America, and other volunteers can attest.

Nearly two-thirds of Teach for America alumni remain in education, and tend to become stellar educators. Peace Corps alums have become foundation and nonprofit leaders, as well as members of Congress. And there are countless stories, such as the VISTA volunteer who now devotes her life to educating prisoners.

Franklin Roosevelt's Public Works Administration, Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided socially useful services and produced socially useful goods. This could mean everything from restoration of our parks and natural resources or WPA-style chronicling of our nation's rich heritage to serving in veterans' hospitals or biomedical labs, providing support services to enhance our transportation infrastructure, teaching in schools and, yes, getting more recruits for the Peace Corps and the armed services.

Economically, while this huge corps would require stipends, vouchers for higher education and an administrative infrastructure, the return on investment would be substantial. It would provide low-cost labor for public goods and services. It also would engender work skills to make young people far more productive after they leave college. It would cultivate future leaders; expose young Americans to social and racial diversity (making national service not principally the province of the upper middle class); help acculturate young immigrants; cut youth unemployment; and even reduce crime.

In short, such an initiative would benefit our young people, our cultural values, and our economy. It would counter some of the selfishness that has become endemic in our society, and renew time-honored values of giving of oneself to others. It would redefine public service - including government - as an honorable calling. Narcissism and cynicism need to become relics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

As Martin Luther King said: "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the creative light of altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's persistent and most urgent question is 'What are you doing for others?'"