

Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
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Universal Service Hearing: Should Service be Mandatory?

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Chairman Heck and members of the Commission, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you.

As the Commission has already determined, national service is a very popular concept, yet when asked “should it be mandatory” its popularity understandably declines somewhat. I wrote *Step Forward America!* in 2015 strictly to address a mandatory program, and, with some reservations, I still favor this approach. On the other hand, if I can be convinced that a program like that being promoted by the Serve America Together program of the Service Year Alliance will offer sufficient benefits to participation and penalties for not participating that it truly becomes universal, then I would happily step back from this position.

The opinions that I held when I started writing about national service years before the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service started to educate the public are essentially the same that I now hold, and are based on my own experience with national service, the experiences of those whom I interviewed, and the written experiences and opinions of authors, journalists, elected officials and other influencers. I will tell you what I came up with, then make some comparisons between the elements of my proposed program and the type of program now envisioned by the Commission, the Service Year Alliance and others. I will conclude with brief statements relative to the issues of values, fairness, economic impact and implementation that the Commission considers primary.

My background and motivation: My father was a naval officer in WWII, many other members of my family have served in the military, and, while there was no mandatory service requirement at the time, I enlisted in the Marine Corps right out of college. A college graduate was, shall we say, somewhat atypical at Parris Island. I shortly realized how much better off I would have been had I enlisted in the Marine Corps before rather than after college. It was a very positive maturing experience. (I was never in a combat situation)

Why should national service be mandatory: Mandatory service would imply to some that there is a national emergency akin to Pearl Harbor, for example. I contend that we are indeed in the midst of another national emergency, not an emergency like an attack by a foreign power, but an emergency based on my impression that America no longer warrants the respect that we have always received from both our enemies and our allies. We have lost our belief in America as an international leader and even our commitment to be that leader. We have surely lost our way, and we are in rapid decline.

- We threaten to abandon all of our allies who, with us, have been responsible for maintaining the world order in the decades following WWII.
- We bring “tears to the eyes of the Statue of Liberty” as we threaten to wall ourselves off from needy migrants escaping persecution looking for a better life.
- We, who have generated a major portion of the pollution contributing to climate change, now have backed out of our commitment to do our share of cleaning it up.
- We do nothing about our nuclear non-proliferation commitments.
- We continue to widen the economic and social gap between the upper educated class and the lower poorly educated class
- We allow corporate and special interest money to play an excessive role in guiding legislative outcomes.
- Health care costs threatening to bankrupt many in the working class are far in excess of those of the rest of the developed world with no better outcomes, in fact poorer outcomes in many cases.
- Rising teen suicide rates and opioid addiction plaguing all age groups highlight the growing sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness of our next and current generations.
- Our primary and secondary education system is failing our youth as evidenced by poor test results when compared with those of our peer nations.
- Much of today’s youth, and indeed many of American adults also, are feeling disenfranchised by capitalism and are actually leaning towards socialism as a viable form of government.

I could go on and on...

Is this really an emergency? Yes it is. Let’s look at it from a historical perspective. The disquieting words, generally attributed to 18th-century Scottish history professor Alexander Fraser Tytler, bear repeating here. About the fall of the Athenian Republic in the fourth -century BC, he supposedly declared, “A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government. A democracy will continue to exist up until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse over loose public policy, [which is] always followed by a dictatorship.”

Also attributed to Tytler is a way of seeing history as a repeating pattern of progress and decline. The so-called “Tytler Cycle” holds that “the average age of the world’s greatest civilizations from the beginning of history has been about 200 years.” During those 200 years these nations, when the people can no longer tolerate their condition and start to resist, “always progressed through the following sequence:

From bondage to spiritual faith;

From spiritual faith to great courage;

From courage to liberty;

From liberty to abundance;

From abundance to complacency;
From complacency to apathy;
From apathy to dependence;
From dependence back into bondage.”

Where are we now in this cycle? After escaping from “bondage” to King George and, guided by our Constitution and Bill of Rights, achieving our “liberty”, we have experienced two centuries of “abundance” unprecedented as we rode the waves of the industrial and technological revolutions. Now, however, our economy has not only stalled, but it has been slipping backward, suffering in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2009. Our dysfunctional government has been unable or unwilling to take the hard steps necessary to get us back on track. Too many of us who still have a comfortable standard of living are “complacent.” Too many of those living in poverty, have given up fighting “the system,” constantly struggling to stay afloat or settling in to a life of dependence on subsidies from state and federal governments. It would seem that in this second decade of the 21st century we are as a nation somewhere between Tytler’s “complacency” and “apathy,” or in some cases somewhere between “apathy” and “dependence.” If so, our best days are long past and we are heading, in all probability, back to “bondage.” Rather than stand by passively, let us address this emergency and resolve right now to select a new and more positive path for America.

The impetus for change must come from the bottom up, from the voters. Based on our current experience, our political system seems to prevent our elected officials from offering fresh ideas. Too much of their focus these days is on supporting party positions and on their re-election efforts. However, putting our faith solely in “the bottom” is problematic. Our “bottom” has not so far demonstrated the capacity to effect the changes we need.

I contend that a major root cause of this incapacity is a lack of adequate education. I’m referring not only to a lack of traditional learning according to a core curriculum; I am equally concerned that too many of the electorate have little or no exposure to the principles and values that have made equal opportunity a cornerstone of our way of life. This exposure —call it civics training if you like—is a key element of my program and should be a key element of the training phase of any national service program.

We have become accustomed to addressing our major security problems by turning over the heavy lifting to the very small percentage, 1% plus or minus, who serve as American soldiers, sailors and marines, those who fight our endless wars while the rest of us, contributing nothing, are not even asked to pay an additional tax, supplemental financing over a budgeted spending cap, to support these efforts. Now is the time to stop this and start correcting these national emergencies. In simple terms either restore the draft or implement a similar process involving all of us in universal service. As General McChrystal said, speaking at the annual Aspen Ideas Festival in June 2012 “I think if a nation goes to war, every town, every city needs to be at risk. You make that decision, and everybody has skin in the game.” As I see it, this goes for all national emergencies, not just foreign wars, and everybody means all of our sons and daughters

including those of our decision-making elected officials.

In my book, *Step Forward America!* I list the reasons that I see for a national service program:

- In the most general terms, to end our downward social, economic and political spiral, to meet the challenges ahead and keep America great.
- To provide our most vulnerable youth with an alternate to substance abuse and trafficking, gang membership, gun violence, radicalization by terrorist groups, and other antisocial behaviors.
- To ensure that we all have a voice in, and accept responsibility for, our political and military actions.
- To build a substantial military and civilian service resource that can respond to any threats to our nation's security, as well as to man-made and natural disasters.
- To rebuild our national pride and regain international respect.
- And, most importantly, to create a better-informed electorate that, through training, living and working together, will be exposed to, and learn to tolerate, the opinions of others, and will appreciate the need for compromise at all levels of government, thereby forcing our elected officials to act and to govern accordingly.

This last, **the need for a better-informed electorate** has wide support by liberals, conservatives, and virtually all others who do not fit any particular label. An informed electorate would not permit their elected officials to get away with session after session of inaction. An informed electorate would, for example, if necessary, override the dictates of those who insist on imposing for the 21st century the strictest interpretation of a constitution designed for the 18th century; and an informed electorate would demand of its leaders new amendments capable of ensuring that our government remains functional.

Imagine if you will, a generation or so from now, that we have all had the benefit of pre-K early education and that our secondary education has taught us to use critical thinking and analysis. Imagine as well that our first generation of national service participants have returned to their normal lives, either continuing toward college and university degrees or joining the civilian workforce in some capacity. Having lived with and learned from fellow service people of all ethnic, racial, social and economic backgrounds, this new generation of citizens will have developed greater tolerance for differences of opinion, a keen interest in current affairs, and have their own ideas on what America's social, economic and political priorities should be. They will participate in government not only by going to the ballot box when called upon, but by keeping open communications with our elected officials, reading their newsletters, listening to their speeches, and giving them feedback on issues about which they feel strongly. We must start putting country ahead of party when reviewing the issues and legislating. With practically every major issue now stalled there are in fact some aspects on which most if not all of us agree. This goes for gun control, immigration, climate control, and health care, to name a few.

These goals cannot be achieved by merely hoping that all will get on board. These are universal national goals, and we the people must all participate and take the necessary action to ensure that our neighbors do likewise.

Make America Great Again, of course, is the slogan bantered about by the current administration and its followers, but without specifics, it seems meaningless. If it is indeed a current mission or even a future vision, I would see it as useful guideline for those in elected office and their followers, or detractors. To me we can make America great again by

- Championing freedom at home and abroad
- Welcoming the politically and economically oppressed to make a new home here in America, in the process, adding their own contributions to the nation's rich diversity
- Advancing the war against poverty
- Saving and protecting the planet and its resources for the use and enjoyment of all
- Defeating international terrorist groups who would do us and all freedom loving people harm
- Protecting the rights of all to trade and travel freely on the high seas

Implementation: In *Step Forward America!* the central component of the program is the requirement of virtually everyone coming of age in the United States to serve a mandatory period of time doing some form of service in the national interest giving back something in return for the opportunities and rewards that many of us are so fortunate to enjoy. The outcome I believe will be an enlightened youth more capable of getting our nation back on track and moving forward. Our youth will become a powerful force for positive action. Through national service they will gain a better understanding of the issues facing us, and how to work with the rest of the world to solve them. Those who agree and have gone on record as favoring a national service program include journalists David Brooks and Mark Shields, former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, former Secretary Hillary Clinton, Congressmen John Larson and John Lewis, Senator Chris Coons, noted authors Sebastian Junger, and James Stone, and, of course General Stanley McChrystal, Chairman of the Service Year Alliance, to name just a few.

This program is mandatory rather than voluntary for a variety of reasons not the least of which is that **a voluntary program would likely elude those who would most benefit from it.** I am proposing a traditional military type draft in which everyone, on reaching their 18th birthday, is eligible for, and will eventually be chosen for, the draft. Those in their fourth year of high school (possibly those coming of age in their third year also would be allowed to defer assignment until completion of their fourth year, with or without a high school diploma.

The service period would start out with basic military training, i.e. boot camp, for all. Ideally, the boot camp would be essentially identical to that used for current army inductees, but, from a practical standpoint, due to the physical shortcomings of many of our youngsters, a less stringent boot camp experience might be available for some. Either way, this would ensure the maximum force of available personnel equipped with some basic military training in the event of a long-term major conflict or other national emergency so that we would always have a pool of able youth to fill the military needs. Today, by contrast, it is estimated that 70 percent of our youth are not physically eligible to serve. Unfortunately, a lot has changed in the physical condition of our youth since the days of Pearl Harbor when we were able to rapidly mobilize our military and prepare for war. The nature and reasons for this disparity are variously described as asthma,

obesity, cutbacks in school physical education requirements, and lack of exercise resulting from time spent on iPhones, computers and TV.

Upon completion, the draftee could elect and be assigned to military-type service or civilian service. This latter could serve either national needs or international humanitarian aid. A large variety of assignments under both umbrellas is listed in my book, pretty much along the lines of those being addressed by the Commission, so there is no need for me to repeat them here.

The Pentagon, with Congressional approval, would determine the numerical strength required by the military, including those in the national service program, those who are career military, those who opt for an additional military term(s) after completing their compulsory national service, and those serving in the National Guard/Reserves.

The National Guard/Reserves would undoubtedly be significantly altered based on a variety of redundancies that might exist after creation of the national service program. Quite likely, the national service program would even replace the National Guard/Reserves as it would have sufficient conscripts to assign to the duties currently handled by the Guard and Reserves. If the numerical requirements are not met voluntarily, then the military would have first priority in filling its ranks from among the national service program conscripts. Only after that would the option to choose civilian service be available.

Education in Civics and other lessons in living: A general educational element would follow the basic military training. The advantage of implementing this early in the national service tour instead of at the end is that the remainder of the tour will give ample opportunity to discuss the subjects with colleagues and to take advantage of the written handouts and books on the course reading lists. The curriculum would cover those life skills not taught, or inadequately taught, in either a trade school or academic track in secondary education and would be designed to prepare students to survive and even prosper in the increasingly challenging socio-economic climate of our time. Courses would include:

- Civics
- Introduction to taxes, health insurance, and retirement benefits
- Economic theories
- Personal money matters
- Lessons in international understanding
- Media literacy

and a variety of other life preparation courses

An appropriate additional period of education or skills training specific to the task assigned would follow that, as for example, the same infantry or artillery training that we now have for some of those in the military service, or possibly some computer literacy training for some of those in either the military or civilian service component. Our community colleges could play a role here. After skills training specific to the task, the final assignment, military or civilian service, would commence.

Eighteen-year-olds will still have the opportunity to pre-empt the “draft” by enlisting for a period

longer than two years in a military branch of their choice to become a regular member of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard. Those who are considering the military as a career would probably opt for this. And this brings up a question about the above-mentioned educational element of our program. As all of our conscripts will be taking advantage of this, should it also be part of our regular military training? I would think yes, but a case could be made either way. Perhaps it could be evaluated in the national service program and, if deemed advantageous to do so, added to the regular military program at a later time. There's a lot to pack into our national service program. It must be very structured to ensure the benefits that I espouse.

Mandatory – Diversity: I don't see how a voluntary program relying on the good intentions of academia, corporate America, and the ingrained functioning of existing institutions can ensure the diversity that will accomplish the goal of putting young people from different backgrounds together so that they are exposed to different cultures and ideas and thereby learn to tolerate the opinions of others and the need to compromise with others in order to be productive in their endeavors.

Mandatory – Education: It wouldn't seem possible that a voluntary program can be structured to ensure any type of education and training comparable to that in this proposed two-year mandatory program.

Mandatory -- Military Readiness: I don't see how a voluntary program can improve the readiness of a somewhat trained youth to respond to national or international emergencies, or to step right into a strict military training in the event of a threatened attack on us or an ally by a foreign power or non-state group.

This program offers something for everyone, the 18yr. old drifter, high school grad or dropout, college bound or not, so why not ensure that all participate.

The current alternative for one dropping out of high school, because they feel estranged from conventional learning programs for example, is to foreclose on their future and become largely unemployable in today's job market. For these and other confused and unqualified person with no clear goals, two years of service could transform him or her into a highly motivated academic student, or high-tech trainee or apprentice. This wiser 20-year-old, now freshly released from national service with a collection of positive experiences and ingrained habits of hard useful work, is better able to choose the next right career move. Some will go directly into academia with a hunger for advanced studies; others will go into industrial arts apprenticeship programs; still others will take their first steps on the path leading to entrepreneurship. All will have a far better sense of their strengths and weaknesses and how to harness them to make a living.

Then there is the very large cohort of potentially great young adults going directly from the protective environment of family and high school into the relatively independent environment of college, with no preparation in mature behavior or critical thinking. Many immediately saddle themselves with mountains of college tuition debt and poor career choices and drift into low-skilled jobs with limited futures,

National Service helps prepare or improve the way, not only to successful careers, but to successful citizenship. With a revised sense of responsibility toward society, along with improvements in self-confidence, sense of worth and individual productivity, new generations are likely to return to one of the better practices of our past: community involvement. Those whom I interviewed and quoted in my book all agreed that their service in the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and other service programs confirms this.

Conclusion: Considering the following four primary issues as indicated by the Commission, what I have outlined leads me to conclude that a one to two-year mandatory service program is more likely to achieve the goals that you/we envision.

Values: Everyone coming of age in the United States will serve a mandatory period of time doing some form of service in the national interest giving back something in return for the opportunities and rewards that many of us are so fortunate to enjoy. Those marginalized youth most in need of the experience will participate and benefit. We will not end up with a first class of citizens who have participated and a second class of citizens left behind and thereby further widening the social and economic equality gap.

Fairness: No longer will we expect 1% plus or minus of Americans to be responsible for our safety and security, fighting our endless wars while the rest of us go about our lives seemingly unaware of, or uncaring for, their sacrifices.

Economic Impact: I will leave this to the economists who are working hard for the Commission to come up with meaningful figures. In my book I take a stab at the financial costs of my proposed two year program, and conclude that the gross cost would be manageable. Then look at the returns on the investment, one of which for example would be the redirection of some of our most vulnerable young people away from antisocial behaviors that are very costly to society and the economy. These include petty crimes, drug use and trafficking, and at worst the radicalization of some of our youth to terrorism, white supremacy, urban gangs and other disruptive movements. Can we afford to implement a national service program? My response - "Can we afford not to?"

Implementation: I have proposed one structure outlined in detail above. For more information, refer to *Step Forward America!*

That's my case for mandatory national service.....however...as I have tried to convince you, tolerance for the opinions of others, and the ability to compromise are paramount when legislating and governing. I am an advocate for mandatory national service, but "mandatory" is not my line in the sand. If all we can get is a voluntary program, a mandatory program not being politically feasible, at least at this time, so be it. I'll be satisfied..... (but how about working in my education element)? We can always take another look at making the program mandatory in the future.

Thank you for your attention.
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Attachment: Press Release *Step Forward America!* second edition