

“National Service and Duty to Country”

A Statement by the Honorable Leon E. Panetta, former Secretary of Defense, before the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service

September 20, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to be asked to share some personal thoughts with you on the subject of national service. Having spent over 50 years of my life in public service, beginning with my service in the U.S. Army as a 1st Lieutenant, I deeply believe that our democracy was founded on the principle of national service.

As a congressman, I introduced one of the first bills to establish a national service system in this country. I commend the President and the Congress for establishing this Commission with the hope that it will start a national conversation around service and lead to recommendations that will encourage every American to be inspired to serve their country in some capacity. I believe it is their duty.

The patriots who stepped forward to fight in our war of independence, establish a new nation, and frame a constitution made clear that it is “we the people of the United States...” who are responsible for, among other things, establishing justice, a common defense, the general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty. They believed that all citizens had a duty to country.

Indeed, in a letter to James Madison in 1778, George Washington, our first President wrote: "The consciousness of having discharged that duty we owe to our country is superior to all other consideration."

It is time for us as a country to renew that sense of duty. National service is one of the most potent, cost-effective, broadly supported and currently under-utilized tools at our disposal to address the many security, social and economic problems of our time.

Young Americans are increasingly disconnected from their communities and the political process. A recent study by the non-partisan Social Science Research Council's Measure for America estimated there are "5.5 million disconnected youth in America today."

The disconnect is growing in a more general sense as well: fewer Americans volunteer in their communities than in previous decades, and low-income groups suffer an even more dramatic isolation and disconnect.

That's why today, it is more important than ever to make clear that the duty to keep our country free and strong rests with every citizen. As Secretary of Defense, I saw this responsibility embraced by young men and women in uniform who are willing to fight and die if necessary in defense of our nation.

Duty to country is discharged in other ways as well by those who teach our children, preserve our natural resources, help in natural disasters and provide for

the safety and care of our most vulnerable citizens. In short, by serving others, we all share in the national goal of improving and making their lives better.

Alexis de Tocqueville in commenting on his travels through America in the 1880s said: "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." He also concluded that the secret of this nation's genius and power was simple: "America is great because she is good, and if America ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

It is the responsibility of all of us to serve that national good. This is why it makes sense to offer opportunities for national service to all Americans. America is at its best when we all pull together to achieve common goals. Voluntary service, not only in the military, but in other institutions and programs, can help to improve education, public health, disaster relief, veterans services, support for the aged, natural resource conservation and economic opportunity.

Nearly 3,000 mayors and county leaders, both Republican and Democrat, across the country are on record in support of national service and the positive impact it has on their communities. They recognize that it not only serves the public good, it makes good economic sense as well. For example, at full capacity, the disaster relief workers in FEMA Corps can save U.S. taxpayers \$60 million a year. Also, participation in national service programs can help young Americans complete their education and help relieve their student loan debt.

In a recent national survey of college students done by the Panetta Institute, close to 60 percent of U.S. college students expressed interest in a program in which they would give two years of national service in exchange for help with the cost of college. One of the purposes of the GI Bill was to provide education benefits to those who served the nation in uniform.

The fact is that there is a national service structure already in place: The Corporation for National and Community Service, which runs the AmeriCorps programs. It has enjoyed bipartisan support since its inception under President George H. W. Bush and has been supported and expanded by every president since that time. It mobilizes more than 80,000 Americans each year to serve local communities through non-profits, schools, public agencies and faith-based groups. But as the Franklin Project has observed, for each position filled, a dozen eager applicants are turned away. We cannot afford, financially or morally, to lose these idealistic and highly motivated service volunteers to discouragement and disengagement when the national need for their talents remains so great.

These national service programs are strongly supported by the leaders of The Fortune 500 companies and the private sector. Last fiscal year, organizations supported by the national service programs raised \$1.26 billion in private resources from businesses, foundations and other sources – far exceeding the annual federal appropriations and fostering a lasting and impactful public-private collaboration.

At the Panetta Institute, where the promotion of public service is central to our mission, a group of our Research Fellows completed a national service study, looking at the history of both military and non-military service. It concludes with a bipartisan call to action to make expanding national service opportunities a priority in the United States. I have provided several copies of that report for your review and consideration.

Again, I commend you for your dedication to this effort. I believe there is broad public support for national service, but little will change if that support is not reflected in additional private and public sector funding and in the stronger encouragement of our elected leadership.

Like our nation's founders, there must be a deep and sincere belief that voluntary service to country is essential to a successful democracy. National service can strengthen our citizens' love of country and instill in our youth a needed sense of purpose. We as citizens and policymakers have a responsibility to provide those opportunities and reestablish service as a way of life in America. That is our duty to country.