

**OBER
LAND
CREATING
BRANDS
WITH
HIGHER
PURPOSE**

National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

Testimony of:
Drew Train

Date
06.20.19

Hello.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony with the Commission. And, thank you for the incredible work that has been done to date. Moving more Americans to active participation and contribution to our great national experiment is essential to its long-term viability and success.

The mission is critical.
The moment is urgent.
And the opportunity is limitless.
But the challenges are significant.

First, for nearly 40 years, a significant portion of our culture's perception of the government has been framed by the echoes of Ronald Reagan's famous quotes: "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem," and "The most terrifying words in the English language: I'm from the government and I'm here to help." These quotes have served as the foundation for decades of political campaigns and pop-culture depictions that routinely position the public sector as a villain.

The government is portrayed as a burden to be minimized, or even drowned in a bathtub. It's shown as rife with waste, fraud, abuse and inefficiency. And it is never given, nor does it take, credit for what it has achieved.

Public employees are cast as uninspired, uncaring, and untalented bureaucrats (or worse) who are just filling space and punching clocks until it's time to collect their pensions.

Our veterans and military families are also "othered" in culture. And, while they are sometimes revered and publicly lauded, they are often not included because most civilians simply can't relate to the kind of selflessness and purpose inherent in military service. And, when it comes time to pay for the support these families have deserved, nobody is willing to pick up the check.

Why would anyone want to be part of something with such a sullied reputation? Who would volunteer for that?

For almost the entire history of civilization, civil service has been one of the most coveted roles in a society. The dignity and social cache of public service must be restored, and it won't happen by itself.

I am aware the government is not a single agency or entity. I am also aware that the nation and the government aren't the same thing, practically or in culture. But, in order to create a culture of participation in the nation and its government, both brands must be strong. I am also aware some pieces of the government can't or won't market themselves based on current policy or

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tradition. These administrative roadblocks cannot become permanent impediments to reshaping our public sentiments.

I am of the opinion that this commission and its work should create the conditions, funding and operational capacity for multiple, ongoing, sophisticated mass communications campaigns and initiatives to demonstrate the constructive value of public goods and services and the effort expended to maintain them. These efforts should create a culture where participation in the public sector is cool.

In marketing terms, there are four distinct communications objectives, each to be addressed with their own campaigns or programs.

1. Promoting public goods and services
2. Driving increased military service
3. Attract the best-and-brightest talent into public employment
4. Make national service a universal volunteer experience

1. Promoting Public Goods and Services

The U.S. Government, along with its counterparts at the state and municipal levels, creates and provides public value at an unprecedented scale. This value needs to be explained and presented to the public repeatedly and loudly in order to divert the narrative that the only worthwhile innovation comes from the private sector.

This effort should include content in all its forms, distributed through all of its channels from major motion pictures (like *Hidden Figures*), television, music, events, social media, traditional advertising, feature stories, documentaries, digital-media partnerships, immersive exhibits, educational curricula and channels not yet invented. From telling the human stories of exceptional public servants on TV to traveling, pop-up exhibits of items from the Smithsonian to “*Upworthy*-style” online videos explaining the cutting-edge research and science being conducted, America needs to be reminded constantly of what we have done and continue to do together. In addition to telling the story well, the importance of creating and naming a first-class digital product to support this endeavor is essential. Words like “system” and “registration” are simply turn-offs for most of the American consumer market. This should be positioned as joining a community and becoming a member of something meaningful – from the name of the “system” all the way down to the labels on the buttons on the website. Americans join the community by providing your data in exchange for the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves. That sensation needs to be paid off by maintaining a high-functioning digital experience, an active social media presence, and other community-building efforts in perpetuity.

2. Driving an Increase in Military Service

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All divisions of the military actively recruit and use many of the marketing world's best practices. In general, these efforts are effective from a communications standpoint, but are often hampered by the realities of our world and our nation's foreign policy. Recruiting people to volunteer to defend the nation is one thing, but most Americans aren't afraid of being attacked or invaded by another country. Further, the violence Americans do fear — terrorism and mass shootings — are perceived as law enforcement issues more than things the military is solving. So, joining the military to defend the nation from historical threats like the Soviet Union is no longer meaningful. The biggest threats most people perceive from foreign governments are cyber or social, like hacking our energy grid or meddling in an election, not an invasion of ground troops. Putting the military at a further disadvantage is the fact that the transactional benefits of service like a free education or career preparation are an attractive value proposition during peacetime like the 90's. But, it's hard to convince someone that four years of free-college is a fair trade for serving two tours in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Truth be told, that's all just window dressing. Nothing will change with active-duty recruiting until something is done to address one of our nation's biggest shames: the fact that 22 veterans a day die by suicide.

"The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." – George Washington

The essential issue to fix is the experience of veterans upon their return to civilian life and the unprecedented epidemic of suicide. A veteran commits suicide in this country almost every hour. By the time you're done questioning us, another brave, defender of American ideals will have died by suicide. Our government, our society and our nation are simply not addressing this problem with anywhere near the urgency required to stop these senseless and unnecessary deaths. Young people see this rash of suicide, see the lack of adequate efforts to fix it, and simply make a very rational choice to not enter the military for fear of being treated like an obsolete piece of hardware upon their return. All branches of the service do an excellent job marketing a life-changing experience while on duty. But, when you're out, you're out. The U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs don't collaborate effectively enough to transition veterans at home. And, and failure creates more American funerals than the actual wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Nothing will change until veterans are cared for as they should be.

3. Attract the Best-and-Brightest Talent into Public Employment

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As mentioned earlier, public sector employment should be positioned as a noble job that contributes positively in our society. And, it's incumbent on our elected officials at all levels, in both parties, to change the narrative around government workers. It's easy to campaign by promising to lower taxes and cut faceless bureaucracy, but it's also a corrosive message that undercuts the very people we rely on to keep us safe and functioning. Right now, from the FBI to the DMV to the Postal Service, public sector workers are being bashed continuously in the media, and in pop culture. And, again, while marketing may be able to help, nothing will be effective until the leaders of our government stop degrading and demoralizing the people who work for them. In no other organization is it acceptable for the leaders to denigrate their teams. It should not be acceptable in the public sector either. The communications campaigns described in section 1 above, if done correctly and at sufficient scale, will provide enough cover to restore desire and social credibility to public employment if the drumbeat of negativity is removed from the equation.

4. Make National Service a Universal Volunteer Experience

National volunteer service through AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps., or other leading organizations should be positioned as the way all citizens can make a contribution to their country while improving their chances for a better future. To do this effectively, there needs to be a social currency attached with participating in a program that combines with practical skills and experience.

The practical skills and experiences are inherent in the service experience but should be enhanced and actively promoted whenever possible. For example, volunteer experiences could serve as time to teach or gain practical experience in various trades like construction, education, and human services. On top of the development of essential skills, the networking, friendships, and connections made during these experiences last a lifetime and can be valuable personal and professional assets as one grows in life.

As far as creating social currency, this should be done with two critical and powerful entities for most young people – colleges and corporations. If higher-education institutions and employers gave preference to people who had completed a year of national service, people would begin to see it as a credible option to pursue without the risk of military service or negative public perception. Higher ed could offer student loan forgiveness, scholarships, or extra credits. Corporations can provide fast-tracked interviews, signing bonuses, and internship access. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The other obvious place to create social currency is social media. These volunteer experiences are ready made to be posted, blogged, vlogged, shared, and turned into a reality show. Finding and highlighting narratives

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worthy of promoting in real time will be essential to creating the buzz necessary to stir scaled participation.

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The inherent structural problems in the value propositions of public participation must be addressed. Military recruiting will be a difficult undertaking until the veterans who come out of the military are successfully reintegrated into civilian life. Attracting top talent to public employment will continue to be an uphill battle while the leaders of our country demonize these jobs from their positions of power. And, national service must be a seamless, valuable experience with easy-to-understand practical benefits for people when they are done – like good jobs or better educations.

Deploying the best practices of marketing and mass communications will also be critical to success. Re-establishing a positive narrative about the government and public service in general will bring resounding benefits to our nation. As the symbolic representation of America, the government must market itself and reclaim its rightful place in culture.

It was government employees and volunteers who won two world wars, landed on the moon, invented the Internet, integrated society, and built the Interstates. It's government employees and volunteers who continue to teach our children, respond to emergencies, preserve our environment, pick up our trash, and keep our nation functioning better than any other on Earth.

This argument must be made. These stories must be told. The American people need to understand the tangible value of government if we are going to ask them to volunteer, work, or sacrifice their life for it.

Thank you for your time today and your service on this important commission.

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