

Dakota L. Wood, LtCol USMC (Ret.)
Senior Research Fellow, Center for National Defense
The Heritage Foundation

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Creating an Expectation of Service Hearing: An Infrastructure to Serve America
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“An Expectation of Service”

I appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts about the concept of “service” and its relation to citizenship, volunteerism, and the role of the government in all of this. My comments reflect my own views and should not be taken as representing the view, or any official position, of the Heritage Foundation.

“Service” is at the heart of an involved citizenry who take pride in their country and want to contribute to it in some way. It is also at the heart of a society that values such participation by its members. Service to country and community can be driven by various factors: love of country, an opportunity to gain experience, a sense of duty or obligation, or from outside pressures or influences such as societal or family expectations. It can also be forced, as is the case in military conscription, or incentivized by some sort of reward, like preferential hiring or priority access to advanced education. Either way, a majority of the society has to agree that service is sufficiently important to warrant some system of carrots and/or sticks.

The questions before the Commission are whether our broader society today is of a sufficiently collective opinion that ‘service’ warrants reward or penalty from the government and the extent to which government has a role to play – whether to simply promote the idea or to provide and manage various tools that enable service. Ultimately this leads to a discussion about the role of government in public life and the extent to which government can or should actively shape societal values and expectations.

Viewing “service” as a single issue. During an earlier session of this Commission, it was noted that the impetus for forming the Commission was a determination by Congress that someone needed to assess the Selective Service System (i.e. the mechanism through which young males register themselves in the event the nation would need to implement a draft for compulsory military service), whether it should be retained and, if so, whether it should be modified, such as mandating that women should register just as men must do upon reaching a prescribed age. The Commission’s mandate was expanded to look at all forms of public voluntary service, such as the Peace Corps or Teach for America. This more expansive view reportedly led to the general idea of universal service as a feature of citizenship and further extended to the idea that ‘service’ was a rather generic idea into which one could roll military, public, and general voluntary service of all sorts. In this light, dividing service into various buckets unnecessarily fractured the concept and limited the idea of service.

I disagree with this latter notion, that all types of service are essentially variations on a theme. Different types of service appeal to different communities for a variety of reasons and the demands of each type of service and their respective environments can differ dramatically. It is also the case that the government’s

role differs: it has a constitutional obligation to provide for the national defense and to raise and maintain military forces to this end whereas supporting other types of service is a matter of choice and has the government involved in public life in ways that prompt spirited debate. The context that accompanies each – military service and public service in other forms – calls for different vetting criteria and different expectations for the nature of one’s involvement and the demands that can be placed on those involved.

For example, military service *must* discriminate because of the nature of war and the demands imposed on servicemembers operating in combat environments. Military affairs and the necessary competence of military units do not lend to short periods of service or to disruptions in service. Discipline and firmly established hierarchical authority are critical features of military service and do not accommodate group decision making, individual choice on one’s level of involvement, or seeking broad consensus on a course of action. Other forms of voluntary participation, even if accompanied by contracted terms of service, are quite different and attract different types of people. They are typically short in duration, the role the government plays in placing demands on people is quite different, as are the expectations for levels of performance. I believe the two worlds of military and ‘other’ service are so different as to necessitate treating them separately.

The notion of service as an obligation of citizenship. The Commission has explored voluntary service vs. obligatory service and society’s valuation of, or expectations for, service in some capacity. Per the theme of this hearing, the government may have a role to play in promoting the principle of “service” to the point where it is inculcated into society’s expectations of its citizenry. Those who do not serve would be viewed as individuals out of step with the larger community.

This implies a need to characterize the obligation of a citizen. A citizen might be enticed to fulfill an obligation through incentives – access to low interest student loans, for example – but if there is not a penalty painful enough to compel action, then the ‘obligation’ really isn’t one. If the Commission intends to recommend such a role for the government, what would be the penalty for non-compliance by a citizen? Simply that one does not get access to a benefit? I think it more likely that for many youth the cost will not be sufficiently high to prompt action. Witness the incentive structure to adopt Affordable Care Act healthcare coverage; many people prefer paying the fine than signing up for a costly plan.

The U.S. imposes no other universal requirement on its citizens. Fully half of the U.S. population pays no federal income tax; individuals are not required to show proof of citizenship or even local residency when casting a ballot in many localities; there is no requirement to understand how our system of government works or how our economic model differs from others, nor why these things matter, i.e. why should anyone think the U.S. is better than any other country or that what it represents merits “service” that supports sustaining it? The current debate over immigration shows that the country is quite divided over the very notion of citizenship, the presumption of observing law as a prerequisite to live in the country or to benefit from residency in the U.S., or to so clearly identify with the country as to warrant serving it in some capacity.

Contradictions in societal values and expectations. The Commission should also consider the implications of conflicting social/cultural values as they relate to service, especially obligatory service, and whether it is appropriate for the federal government to insert itself into this debate. One aspect of America is the promotion of individualism but the idea of “community” often comes up in discussions about service. But “community” can be characterized in many ways and may be thought of in one way by one group and a completely different way by another. There is little evidence, that I am aware of, that supports the idea that American society writ large has a commonly held concept of “community.” How does the Commission plan to reconcile individual liberty and the freedom a person has to chart their own

course with the notion that all citizens should somehow feel obligated to submit to social pressures to conform, to adhere to some common perspective of community and related ways to serve it? Some advocates of obligatory service or cultivating the sense that society expects service have raised the idea that some type of stigma could be attached to non-service such that individuals who choose not to volunteer or to participate in a service program would reap scorn or some status as a social outcast. And yet our culture has consistently moved in the opposite direction, to remove stigma and social exclusion from a great many things that in the past were seen as socially unacceptable: unwed motherhood, pre-marital co-habitation, sexual identity, the erosion of ‘manners’/social protocol, etc. Communities have even taken the step of eliminating recognition of individuals for personal achievement (e.g. school valedictorian) or changing the criteria for participation in some group or activity – anyone can now be homecoming queen. In this context, how are we to make a national case for affiliation with an American identity or social custom such that it incentivizes service?

On the one hand, our culture has gone to great lengths to promote the idea that each individual should be free to choose their own identity and how that identity is expressed, with no social or economic repercussions. On the other hand, the Commission seeks to promote social pressure to conform in the area of service and, potentially, to stigmatize those who are inclined not to serve. The Commission will need to address this and take a position on one or the other side of the argument. Why must a person conform to some arbitrary standard? Who should set such standards? What would be the penalties for non-compliance? What is the rationale for the federal government to be involved?

Cultivating a sense of civic identity/loyalty. There are obviously occasions where people lend their support to projects or join organizations that engage in group activities and promote civic virtues. The Commission should explore the “why” behind the decision to affiliate. I think there are two primary reasons underlying a person’s decision to join a group or some collective effort. There is either an existing link between what the group does and the individual’s own context or the person relates to the overall objective or purpose of the project. Future Farmers of America (FFA) has a natural link to families and communities where farming or ranching is a way of life; it is an extension of something the individual already knows and the families involved organically approve of the group’s purpose and activities. The organization reflects some cultural aspect already resident in the community. Picking up trash, feeding the homeless, or delivering meals are activities that appeal to an individual’s values or personal philosophy. There is an alignment between what the person values and what the organization or project is trying to do.

There is a hazard, however, when the natural inclination to affiliate is affected by some requirement or mandate that changes key aspects of the effort being supported.

For example, the Boy Scouts once focused on bringing boys together to engage in activities that appealed to boys and created an environment in which lessons on civics, community service, individual accomplishment, and group/team activities were promoted. Intentionally or not, the Boy Scouts were culturally viewed as aligned with the Christian faith (not exclusively but many troops were hosted by local Christian churches) and incorporated traditional patriotic themes – the pledge of allegiance, flag ceremonies, uniforms, pseudo-military protocols, etc. which some people felt were divisive and exclusionary. Over the last several years, the organization has undergone dramatic change. It has dropped its male-centric identity, allowed for the admission of girls and transgender boys, and has allowed homosexuals to serve as troop leaders. Such changes have led to significant friction with traditional supporters with the commensurate loss of some members even while the Scouts have gained others.

If the federal government were to be involved in vetting public/national service efforts and the groups that undertake them, wouldn’t it be obliged to impose standards or criteria that determine acceptability? What

might be the public's reaction to such criteria given the diversity of views and values across America's public space?

The point here is that identity and natural affiliation are important factors to volunteerism and to service but they are also fragile and do not seem to be universal across a population. If the federal government means to get involved in promoting service efforts, or to manage a centralized site where service organizations are able to promote their cause or access a centralized database of potential volunteers, it will be incumbent upon the government to exercise some sort of judgement in deciding which organizations can participate and which cannot.

With regard to government service as an aspect of civic duty, government employees have long served as targets of derision, lampooned by candidates for office as examples of feckless inefficiency and uncaring bureaucrats who subsist on the public dole while providing little of value in return. The news media and policy pundits routinely castigate "the government," demanding peak efficiency and effectiveness at fixed—and presumably low—government wages. Worse, administrations seem to weaponize government agencies to serve parochial political agendas, further damaging the government's overall credibility and reputation in the public eye. The IRS, EPA, DOJ and even the federal courts have been leveraged to exploit the coercive power of government to intimidate or frustrate political opponents while forcing through the implementation of preferred policy agendas. No wonder the average citizen holds the government in such low regard. Who would want to volunteer their time and talent to serve an entity most everyone holds in contempt? With this as the starting point in any effort to entice young people to serve their country, the government and advocates of public/national service will have to address how to make a voluntary affiliation with the government an attractive option. It will demand better behavior by elected officials and those running for office so that the public's perception of its government, and perhaps of the country, will improve. In short, it will call upon everyone involved to decide that America, its people, and its form of government are worthy of serving.

Realism in the cost to implement such programs. When it comes to making the case for increased participation in volunteer or service programs, I rarely hear discussion about the actual costs associated with such initiatives; not necessarily the monetary costs associated with stipends or program materials, but rather the behind-the-scenes costs of organizational structure, management overhead, and recruiting and training the permanent staff needed to run the programs. Then there are the prescribed work or tasks to be performed, what these volunteers or contracted service personnel are supposed to do. If service is universal, meaning all youth of a certain age, some system has to be established that provides for billeting, transportation, identification of work projects, management/leadership of all the people put to work, and evaluation/supervision of the work performed.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there are approximately 4 million youth aged 19 years old. If service is mandatory for such a group, what does the Commission expect them to do? What size organization will be necessary to manage such a large group of people? Are there implications of their being employed in various national service programs instead of working in the private sector?

There is a similar problem in expecting more widespread military service to bridge the often cited civil-military divide. Does the Commission believe that the size of the military should expand and contract relative to the size of the U.S. population? If not, then it will continue to be difficult for a large percentage of the population to have direct exposure to military affairs. As the population grows, unless the military expands in lock-step, it can only be the case that there will be fewer opportunities for American youth to gain military experience (and this holds true for veteran representation in elected office).

The government's role. This is the key question. Individuals will decide to serve themselves, groups of like-minded individuals (representing some shared objective, purpose, or value), their communities, and their country in various ways as they have been motivated to do since the founding of the country. The role of government in encouraging and enabling such service is a different matter. Typically, when the federal government gets involved, a large bureaucracy follows, total government spending increases, national debt rises, and the efficiencies, effectiveness, and outcomes originally hoped for end up disappointing everyone involved. Government involvement necessarily imposes specific standards that appeal to some, but anger others. True creativity is stifled because the government is less agile and less innovative than the private sector which is more diverse and less bounded by formal policies. Conversely, private volunteer/service efforts need only appeal to whatever subset of the population naturally aligns with the group and what it is trying to accomplish. The viability of private efforts is determined by its continued appeal to supporters whereas government-run programs take on a life of their own since they are unaccountable, in practical terms, to the taxpayers funding them and are able to sustain their operation at taxpayer expense nearly indefinitely. The private sector allows for a natural culling and replacement process; government run programs tend to continue regardless of their utility.

Volunteerism and service to one's community are natural outgrowths of the beliefs and values held by the person and the society with which they identify but they are generally not universally held because American society is a collection of many subsets that differ in their views, values, and expectations. Federal programs necessarily must be applied generically across the whole of society, with little ability to account for differences across society. The magic of effective service programs comes from their organic nature. Government programs attempt to homogenize and formalize issues, to create one-size-fits-all solutions that invariably do not.

Importantly, there is an aspect of service that is common to nearly all volunteer or service-oriented programs and that is the idea that the participant is part of something larger than themselves, that they are contributing their time and effort to a project of value and that what they derive from such service may very well be intangible. I think this feature is a critical element of service, perhaps the most important aspect, and that it transcends consideration of material gain or as an obligation that a young person simply has to do before they can get along to other things they think are more important. Of course, having a young person fulfill some form of obligatory service even when they don't want to can lead to an appreciation for such that they would otherwise not have gained. Perhaps this aspect leads back to society's 'demands' for service that reflect this sort of understanding, but I don't think this is where American society is at, at the moment.

The government can serve as a 'bully pulpit' from which officials at the federal, state, and local levels can champion the idea of service to community and country. Presidents and governors, federal and state legislators, mayors and town council members, can all extol the virtues of service. So, too, can education and religious leaders, coaches, teachers, prominent business figures, and, most importantly, mothers and fathers in the home. But there is a substantial difference between promoting an idea or value and running a program to implement it in practice. Government officials are well-placed to champion ideas; the private sector is best-placed to implement them.

Creating an 'expectation of service' is a messaging issue, not a database or federal program issue.

Having said this, I must emphasize that there is a notable exception to a restricted federal role in recruiting for and managing service programs and that has to do with military service. As mentioned at the outset, the federal government is obligated to defend our country, our people, and our national interests. It does this using several tools which include diplomacy, trade, and the promotion of our values

and principles. But it must also field competent and effective military power that amplifies the impact of these other tools and stands ready to physically defeat an enemy when these other tools fail to prevent conflict. Americans have consistently volunteered their service during times of crisis but sometimes more manpower has been needed to maintain the military than was readily available through voluntary service, such as during a lengthy, high-intensity war. The government has utilized a draft at such times but has typically preferred to recruit Americans to serve our country. Since switching to an all-volunteer military force following the Vietnam conflict, America has relied exclusively on a recruited military. Each of the military services commit substantial efforts to engaging young Americans to convince them to join the military, of the importance and value of serving their country in uniform. To compete with the commercial sector, the federal government has had to improve pay, benefits, and quality-of-life matters over the years to the point where more than half of a military service's annual budget goes toward the cost of manpower.

The federal government has a clear role to play in promoting "service to country" and in funding and managing efforts to this end. Related efforts in the civilian sector to promote patriotism, service to country, and especially service in the military are critically important contributors to federal efforts as they represent a public sense that this is noble, important, and valued by society. But they are not a substitute for the government's role in recruiting Americans to serve in the military. The government would be derelict in its constitutional responsibilities if it did not cultivate an "expectation of service" in this regard. But this does not mean it has a similar role to play in other service efforts, especially when the private or social sector is better positioned to promote and manage service opportunities that more closely reflect and relate to the subsets of our national community.

Conclusion. The Commission has undertaken important work. The idea of service to one's community and country is both noble and necessary to the health and resiliency of our country. I believe that the Commission's final recommendations will be most relevant, executable, and effective if they address the root factors affecting volunteerism and national service and the part the federal government plays in championing service.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to join in this discussion. I look forward to seeing the results of the Commission's work.