

**Statement the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service**

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**Summary:**

I want to commend the Commission for their careful consideration of the many issues the nation faces in the area of national service, broadly defined. I especially applaud the Commission’s work on how to expand service to include more nonmilitary options and strongly agree with its emphasis on civic education. I did not have time to address it in this statement but combining more civic education with service learning should, in my view, be a high priority.

I believe a culture and expectation of service could help to reduce our current divisions by encouraging young people from different backgrounds and parts of the country to work together on a common set of tasks, rebuild pride in country, and provide formative experiences to young people themselves while helping with a variety of public needs.

My understanding is that there are currently more people who would like to serve in some capacity than there are the resources to enable them to serve. While some modernization of the information platforms and better coordination among existing groups may be highly desirable, I hope the Commission will call for adequate funding and staffing of whatever system emerges.

I also recommend that the Commission consider the merits of what I call an “American Exchange Program” that would encourage families across the country to host a young person from another community during their period of service, on a voluntary basis. I believe this would enhance the rebuilding of a sense of national identity and collective purpose while creating the kind of personal relationships that would enhance mutual understanding across diverse groups and geographies.

In my conversations with ordinary Americans in three cities last year (Syracuse, Greensboro, and St.Louis), I found strong support for the idea of national service and an American Exchange Program.

*[Please Note: These are my personal views and should not be attributed to the Brookings Institution or others who may be affiliated with it.]*

**The case for national service:**

The country is deeply divided. It is divided economically, but also politically and culturally. As these divisions widen, I’m convinced it’s time to revive a commitment to national service—and to make that commitment universal. To make national service “universal”, we should create a strong expectation that every U.S. resident give one year of service—either military or civilian—and be provided with a structured opportunity to do so.

National service has multiple objectives. The diversity of objectives is evident even among explicit plans for national service released by presidential candidates for the 2020 election. Some of the goals include: to unify the country, to give Americans a path to the Middle Class, and to provide college tuition assistance in exchange for a service commitment. (We have done a summary of all of the proposals which we would be happy to share with your staff, if useful.)

Opportunities provided through national service can also be a partial solution to challenges faced by young people today. The fact is that many of them are uncertain about what they want to do with their lives. They stand to benefit from a structured opportunity that will allow them to feel needed and capable. The popularity of “a gap year” between high school and college is evidence of that fact.

Many nonprofit and local community groups that depend on volunteers would also benefit from a universal national service program. Volunteers often work to solve environmental and social problems that government has sometimes neglected for lack of resources and which may be better delivered by community-based organizations in any case. A vibrant nongovernmental sector is a uniquely American attribute, but it could be strengthened.

We hear a lot about individual rights in America – and preserving or extending those rights is important. However, with rights come responsibilities. Universal national service would make those responsibilities real and tangible. As participants join others from different backgrounds to work together on tangible and socially useful projects, they would hopefully gain a sense of collective civic responsibility.

In addition to universal national service, in my book, *The Forgotten Americans*, I also recommended an American exchange program under which families would volunteer to host a person from a different community in their own home during the year of service. Much like foreign exchange programs, this would enable both the host family and the young person to gain a broader perspective and, in many cases, form enduring personal ties. It would also bring new and younger talent to areas that have been losing population and jobs, spread ideas, and potentially help communities network more effectively with regional centers of economic and cultural activity. The exchange program should also save on the costs of any program since housing and food would be provided by willing host families, which makes it even more attractive.

Polls suggest that [American voters are united in support of national service](#). When I conducted focus groups with middle- and working-class citizens in 2018, their enthusiasm for the idea of national service and an American Exchange program was palpable. I suggested that every high school graduate be expected to give a year of national service (military or civilian) in return for some help paying for college. I was surprised by the almost unreserved enthusiasm for this idea. Some were familiar with the underlying concepts—a few spoke favorably of their experience with AmeriCorps. Those from Syracuse connected the idea with the “fresh air fund,” a program that allows inner city kids to spend the summer with an upstate family. They quickly understood that an important benefit of the American exchange program would be people getting to know

those from communities or backgrounds unlike their own. They appreciated the educational benefits as well.

Those I spoke to wanted this program to be voluntary but thought it would help to build a sense of civic pride in the country, teach some basic skills and discipline to the younger generation, provide some needed services, and create a sense of community. As one person noted, TV and social media are creating stereotypes but “then you get somebody in your home and it’s like, ‘Oh, whoa! They weren’t like that at all.’” A clerical worker in St. Louis said, “it would give people, who maybe haven’t seen the other side of the fence, that eye-opening experience. Not everybody lives the way you live. And a lot of young people today don’t get that.” She ended by calling it a “win, win, win.” A participant from Greensboro said, “It’d give the kid a perspective on a family or a different community they may not have had contact with before, you know? And maybe, through that perspective, although it might be uncomfortable, it might ... start to ease some of the tension, the stuff that’s going on.”

Of all the policy ideas I talked to people about, this one was the most popular. There was a clear sense that the country is coming apart—socially and culturally—and that this idea had the potential to address these divisions.

Thank you for your work and for your willingness to solicit the views of people like me.