



**Statement to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
Civil-Military Issues
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The Stennis Center for Public Service is an independent legislative branch agency created by Congress in 1988 to promote and strengthen public service and develop the skills of public servants. This statement on civil-military issues in our nation and their relevance to the commission's deliberations on national service supplements the statement on national service and the Stennis Service Corps submitted by our executive director in November 2019.

The Stennis Center strongly supports both public service and a robust national service program, and we are encouraged by the thoughtful work of your commission on these fronts, as well as your interest in strengthening civic education as a foundation to better prepare our students to be good citizens, whether or not they choose public service as a career. I should note that our Center's terminology may differ from the commission's. To us, public service includes both military service and civil service at the federal, state or local government levels. This is the logic behind our civil-military program which connects our nation's military leaders, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with our elected leaders in Congress, to foster trust and communication between those at the highest level of military and civilian government leadership.

We recognize and commend the remarkable progress that has been made in our lifetimes in pivoting from the limited role and limited capabilities our founders envisioned for a standing army to the professional military that was created in the all-volunteer force era. We also recognize and applaud the progress that has been made since the end of the Vietnam War to, in the words of Vietnam veteran and former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, separate the war from the warrior and support those we send into harm's way.

While the all-volunteer force has been a tremendous success, we believe as our military has gotten more professional but also drawn from a more narrow slice of society, there is now too much cultural distance between our military and civilian societies, and too narrow a sharing of the burden of service to our nation, and that this is a public policy concern the Congress should address. A survey we commissioned validated some of these differences, but also showed that high levels of mutual respect remain between the military and the nation it serves. I very much appreciate the attendance of your staff and one of your commissioners at a seminar the Stennis Center held on this subject in 2018, and the ability to talk with you during your deliberations.

The remarks of then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis in the summer of 2017 are telling on this point. Speaking to our troops about the growing divide inside our civil society, he said "Our country right now, it's got problems we don't have in the military ...you just hold the line until our country gets back to understanding and respecting each other and showing it." While understandable and to some extent laudable, his admonition to our military to model appropriate behavior for the rest of us implicitly endorsed the concept that our military is to some extent separate from and superior to the society it serves, and that should concern us all.

Our civil-military divide is not one of our most serious challenges our nation faces at this time. Secretary Mattis was really speaking to a more serious emerging cultural and political divide which would be bad enough on its own but is dangerous because it is being actively encouraged and exploited by Russia and other adversaries to weaken our unity and indeed our entire democracy. But the trends on both these fronts should concern us as a nation.

A national service program can be an important tool in addressing both of these issues. A major goal of a national service program should be to create opportunities for citizens of diverse backgrounds and experiences to meet, interact and work together in a way that mirrors the “melting pot” of the Greatest Generation of the World War II era who served in the military and in so many civilian roles at home supporting our mobilization.

Obviously we do not wish for and hope we do not need a major conflict to bring us together. But a robust national service program could have that same kind of reach across the nation and across society, where the shared experience of shared service creates a stronger bond of citizenship. A national service program should draw on the various strengths and synergies of our federated system of government. For example, a national service program would likely be easier and less expensive to administer if service is performed largely in the local communities where participants live, but it should not ignore the potential benefits of mixing people of different backgrounds and experiences in a truly national program.

Our national motto presumes that we can and will act as a united people despite our diverse backgrounds. So it should not be necessary that all Americans have exactly the same life experiences – for example, the experience of military service -- in order to respect their fellow citizens or function together as citizens of our democracy. But we live in an era where the downside as well as the benefits of social media technology have become all too apparent. It is now very possible to consume only information that supports your views, with fewer voices trusted by all. This makes civic education and national service more important than ever to the future of our country, because these can serve as new fountains of awareness, cohesion and mutual respect. In addition, not only do well-crafted service projects meet important national needs, they also make the person performing that service a better person and citizen. Finally, a national service program could start to more evenly distribute the responsibilities of citizenship that are arguably born too heavily by the military and too lightly by many others at this time.

We have witnessed the many of the benefits of shared service and shared experiences inside our military. But too few of our citizens serve in uniform for us to rely on the military to propagate these values to all. And as military service becomes more of a family business, the extent to which our military helps promote shared values is likely to diminish not increase. National service offers our country a new avenue to open lines of communication and mutual understanding that are badly needed. The Stennis Center has a thirty-year history of promoting these values and practices, and we are convinced they work. A robust national service program has the potential to extend these benefits widely across our citizenry and we support your efforts to recommend the most effective ways to accomplish those goals.