



Written by [Patrick Krey](#) on January 21, 2009

## Any Volunteers for National Service?

In 2007, Richard Stengel, former speechwriter for liberal senator/presidential candidate Bill Bradley and managing editor for *Time* magazine, wrote an article entitled "A Time to Serve," promoting "Universal National Service" for all Americans. Constitutionlists would find themselves irritated. Stengel book-ended his piece with quotes from the Founders and disingenuously implied that such national service would have been warmly received by the promoters of laissez faire who fought for our independence. Stengel wrote, "The courageous souls who signed the Declaration of Independence pledged 'our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.' The least we can do to keep the Republic is to pledge a little time." Stengel apparently missed the point that the Declaration of Independence was considered a treasonous act against the British Empire ruling the colonies at the time. Stengel's proposals sound more along the lines of what the loyalists of the day believed, not the patriotic individuals who revolted against a tyrannical government.



In his effort to promote universal national service, Stengel bemoaned the fact that "today the two central acts of democratic citizenship are voting and paying taxes. That's basically it. The last time we demanded anything else from people was when the draft ended in 1973." According to Stengel, that's apparently a bad thing. While he tiptoes around the use of the word "draft," his article is filled with adulation for the notion that Americans owe more to the government than what has been asked since the end of the mandatory draft. Stengel feels that it is for this reason that today's communities have grown disjointed, and the way to unify the people is through "universal national service" to government. "It is the simple but compelling idea that devoting a year or more to national service, *whether military or civilian*, should become a countrywide rite of passage, the common expectation and widespread experience of virtually every young American." (Emphasis added.)

Stengel's plan involves a huge growth of government, including making a new cabinet-level department to manage national service and drastically expanding AmeriCorps and the National Senior Volunteer Corps. Stengel also proposes creating new "corps" with distinct "brands" for education (to work in troubled school districts), healthcare (which would mostly assist people in obtaining welfare benefits), a "Green Corps" (to somehow combat "climate change" and most likely stifle any contrary debate on the subject), a "Rapid-Response Reserve Corps" (for call-up in times of national emergencies), and a



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"National-Service Academy" ("to provide a focused education for people who will serve in the public sector — either the federal, state or local government" — in order to create a new generation of bureaucrats).

### **Establishment Consensus**

Stengel was not content to only push national service in the pages of *Time* magazine. He had his magazine host the "Service Nation Summit" at Columbia University last September 11. Both John McCain and Barack Obama attended the summit and joined the chorus of establishment leaders supporting national service. McCain said the following of Americans and their desire for national service: "They understand the challenges that we have in this world. They see the Russian invasion of the little country called Georgia. They see the problems in Afghanistan growing larger. They see a whole lot of things happening in the world that's going to require us to serve, and that opportunity has to be provided to them." It's no wonder this man performed terribly at the polls. McCain actually believed that Americans watched the violence in Georgia and Afghanistan unfolding and thought, "How can I get my kids involved in this?"

Obama acknowledged the fact that both he and McCain have very similar views on national service. He also invoked the tragedy of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to gain support for his policy proposals. "On 9/11, Americans across our great country came together to stand with the families of the victims, to donate blood, to give to charity, and to say a prayer for our country. Let us renew that spirit of service and that sense of common purpose." Obama made the repeated mistake of most progressives by failing to distinguish between voluntary charity of individuals, which occurs in a free society, and government-directed actions of collectives, which have more in common with Marxist governments.

Barack Obama, like most politicians, does not invent the ideas for his initiatives but rather adopts others' proposals and then promotes them as if they were his own. A brief review of Obama's "Blueprint for Change" on his website would appear as if he simply cut and pasted Stengel's article. Stengel himself freely admitted that he was not the originator of these ideas, but rather that they came from a variety of sources. Isn't it odd that so many different politicians and journalists seem to be converging on a similar framework for national service? With a few minor differences in wording, the plans are virtually identical. Obama advocates expanding AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000, and establishing a "Classroom Corps," a "Health Corps," a "Clean Energy Corps," and a "Homeland Security Corps." Obama also wants to expand national service beyond our nation's border by doubling the Peace Corps, and creating "America's Voice Initiative" to send Americans fluent in other languages overseas as part of a new public diplomacy outreach.

Obama has set the goal of 50 hours per year for high-school students and 100 hours per year for college students. He claims he is not going to directly compel young people in high school to serve 50 hours per year, but instead would simply withhold educational funding from schools if they fail to comply with his programs. This means that for public schools to continue to receive federal funds, they will have to implement Obama's plans; otherwise, the funds will be denied. In order for the high-school students to graduate from these federally funded schools, they will have to participate. This is how the federal government works. There is no such thing as a free lunch, and federal funding always comes with strings attached and centralized control for D.C.

At the college level, Obama says he will "require 100 hours of service" per year by creating a new "American Opportunity Tax Credit" that will reduce education costs by \$4,000. So instead of it being mandatory, one could opt out by simply paying \$4,000 more than the person who doesn't opt out. That



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is a high price to pay for something that is allegedly optional.

## Voluntary Service or Compulsory Draft?

Obama, like almost all other promoters of national service, assures us that this will not be mandatory or compulsory, but as they say, the devil is in the details. James Lindgren, professor of law at Northwestern University, explains that Obama's plan is anything but voluntary. "Because Obama calls his plan voluntary, it's important to understand exactly what he says and doesn't say.... One hurdle that Obama's plan must vault is the U.S. Constitution, which limits the federal government to enumerated powers. Lacking the power to mandate universal community service directly, Obama candidly discloses his strategy: making federal funds contingent on schools having service programs that meet federal standards."



Lindgren continues: "Thus, it would be the public schools that would impose federal standards of coerced service on each child as part of their requirements for graduation. For students, service would be involuntary. Even for the public schools, their participation would be only nominally voluntary — for how many public schools can survive without federal assistance?" It would appear that Obama's plan is voluntary in name only.

Most of the talk regarding Obama's national-service program brings to mind people planting trees in town parks or helping old ladies with their groceries. But what about military service? Is that going to be a part of this national-service initiative? One has to wonder considering Obama's military ambitions. President Obama is going to need troops to support missions ranging from an escalation in Afghanistan to intervening in the Sudan. The Center for National Policy (CNP), a bipartisan think tank, produced a policy report entitled *Agility Across the Spectrum: A Future Force Blueprint* for the military, recommending that the United States "embark upon a program of mandatory national service for high school graduates to include a spectrum of activities from community to *military service*." (Emphasis added.) The report praised Obama's plan but encouraged him to officially make it mandatory in order to help fill the ranks required to meet the many U.S. military commitments around the world. Will Obama heed this advice?

Some information about the true nature of Obama's plans can be gleaned from his choice for chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, a neoconservative who supports U.S. military interventionism.

Emanuel volunteered to work for the Israeli military in 1991 during the first Gulf War. He must have admired the Israeli program of mandatory military service: he himself has been a vocal supporter of something similar for Americans. Emanuel coauthored a book entitled *The Plan: Big Ideas for America*, in which he called for "a real Patriot Act that brings out the patriot in all of us. We propose universal



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civilian service for every young American. Under this plan, all Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five will be asked to serve their country by going through three months of basic training, civil defense preparation and community service."

So Obama's chief of staff is on record advocating universal boot camp for all Americans. While constantly stressing that this is not a draft, Emanuel's words reveal otherwise. In 2006, Emanuel spoke with the *New York Daily News* about his ideas for national service. In the interview, Emanuel stated: "Somewhere between the ages of 18 to 25, you will do three months of training.... There can be nothing wrong with all Americans having a joint similar experience of ... civil defense training or civil service ... some sense of service to country in preparation, which will give people a sense of what it means to be an American." Apparently, according to Emanuel, knowing what it means to be an American involves serving the federal government, which is ironic considering that Rahm only served the Israeli government. Perhaps this service is truly universal? He continued and said, "If you're worried about going to have to do 50 jumping jacks, the answer is 'yes.' "

Emanuel also stated that this training can be accomplished "through your State-National guard." Of course, the National Guard was supposed to be a home guard comprised of citizen-soldiers. The numerous National Guard troops serving overseas shows how quickly the government expands roles beyond their initial purpose. It would be naïve to think the same cannot happen to these "civil defense" positions.

While giving a July 2008 speech about his plans to expand national-service programs, Obama himself stated: "We cannot continue to rely on our military in order to achieve the *national security objectives* we've set. We've got to have a *civilian national security force* that's just as powerful, just as strong, just as well-funded." (Emphasis added.) That comment caused an online fervor among conservative and libertarian bloggers. Obama's defenders claimed that there is nothing to worry about because Obama was simply talking about his AmeriCorps and Peace Corps expansion. Therein lies the problem. The disturbing point of all this national-service talk is how easily Obama makes the transition from talking about volunteering within one's own community (under federal direction) to the loaded term of "national security." The constant word-twisting employed by government officials tends to blur the lines between what they are saying and what they actually intend. Much like how the U.S. government changed the name of the War Department to the Defense Department after WWII, despite the fact that the role of the military has been expanded beyond "defense." Obama and his wild-eyed supporters seem to be clamoring for national service that may, or may not, be employed to achieve "national security" objectives. According to the *Army Times*, Obama even "said last summer that he thought national service could end up leading some people to serve in the military."

Civil liberties lawyer J.D. Tuccille claims that Obama's national-service campaign is just a clever way to reintroduce the draft to the American people:

Under Barack Obama's plan, a refusal to participate in a national-service program touted at the federal level will be punished by the withholding of high school diplomas by the school district in your town. And without that diploma, few colleges or employers will even bother to look at your application. It's a softer sort of authoritarianism which requires no draft boards, muddles the identity of the 'bad guy' and produces no martyrs in handcuffs for the evening news. You just can't get a job if you don't do as you're told.... But make no mistake: Barack Obama wants your kids. And he's willing to draft them, in a plausibly deniable way.

Establishment leaders have long desired a universal national-service program, but the enthusiasm that



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Obama brings to the debate makes it a real option now. How would the Democrats and the liberal press have reacted had a President McCain or Bush tried to promote a similar national-service program? Justin Raimondo, of Antiwar.com, concludes: "If George W. Bush and/or John McCain had called for the creation of a domestic paramilitary force, the liberals and certainly the Left would have seen it as an ominous development, with the more excitable types raising the specter of fascism." President Obama doesn't have to worry about any such opposition coming from the left, at least for the foreseeable future. The establishment may get their wish if enough Americans are not made aware of the real danger posed by Obama's plan.

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See also "[At Uncle Sam's Service](#)."

*Photo of soldiers: Defense Link*





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