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Op-Ed on National Service by Leslie Lenkowsky

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Op-ed
by Leslie Lenkowsky

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But more than anything, Americans today fear for our nation's cultural future. Citizens are divided and dispirited, increasingly cut off from the civic institutions that sustained us in the past, and less inclined than ever to take responsibility for families and children. In our hearts, we know that the country was built by citizens of shared values and commitments, but today we focus on differences, retreat too far into private lives, and silence talk of responsibility.

All is not lost. While we cannot turn back the clock, we can promote the ethic that our country will require to flourish into the 21st century. It is an ethic of responsibility not only to self but to each other and country. Without this spirit, many in the inner cities are destroying themselves. Equally, without it our whole culture is slowly losing its moral strength.

Government cannot change values by itself, but it can be a partner in efforts to change them. By joining with the community institutions and businesses that so need revitalization already, government can play a positive though limited role in bringing the cultural change that America needs.

President Clinton has proposed a program along precisely these lines. It is national service, the initiative to enlist young

people to tackle America's problems here at home. National service can contribute to the social unity and individual and community values that America needs in three distinct ways:

. Teaching young people the value of helping others. Learning responsibility comes from real experience and the more extensive the experience, the more that's learned. Americans who learn to take responsibility for themselves and their communities as youths will do so again and again as adults.

. Uniting communities to tackle their problems. National service not only stimulates individual commitment; properly designed, it builds institutional involvement in communities among nonprofit organizations, local governments, and religious organizations. When such groups unite to tackle community problems, they do more than provide immunizations or reduce crime rates. They inspire whole neighborhoods with faith that their problems are not irresolvable. And neighborhoods then come together to take up the burden.

. Making government a partner but not a lonely actor. National service can point the way toward the proper role of government -- not to solve our problems or even to try, but to make a limited investment in the people who will make the real difference.

Because it's new and ambitious, the President's initiative is not perfect and it's easy to raise questions about it. Some, for example, fear that national service will create a "gigantic bureaucracy." But that's not inevitable. Indeed, the spirit of the President's initiative is to do precisely the opposite; it calls for investing in programs instead of operating them, and

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This program must allow all Americans the opportunity to serve others, not just employ those who feel compelled to serve already. For service is about our commitments as Americans and to one another. These commitments transcend race and income, and so service -- especially if it is to be voluntary -- must be available to everyone.

In his first hundred days in office, President Clinton has been criticized -- and often rightly so -- for having campaigned as

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Op-ed
by Leslie Ienkowsky

Americans are profoundly unsettled about our nation's future. Partly it is economic fear -- about jobs, wages and health care. Partly it is social fear -- fear of crime and drugs, of declining schools and an expanding welfare state.

But more than anything, Americans today fear for our nation's cultural future. Citizens are divided and dispirited, increasingly cut off from the civic institutions that sustained us in the past, and less inclined than ever to take responsibility for families and children. In our hearts, we know that the country was built by citizens of shared values and commitments, but today we focus on differences, retreat too far into private lives, and silence talk of responsibility.

All is not lost. While we cannot turn back the clock, we can promote the ethic that our country will require to flourish into the 21st century. It is an ethic of responsibility not only to self but to each other and country. Without this spirit, many in the inner cities are destroying themselves. Equally, without it our whole culture is slowly losing its moral strength.

Government cannot change values by itself, but it can be a partner in efforts to change them. By joining with the community institutions and businesses that so need revitalization already, government can play a positive though limited role in bringing the cultural change that America needs.

President Clinton has proposed a program along precisely these lines. It is national service, the initiative to enlist young

people to tackle America's problems here at home. National service can contribute to the social unity and individual and community values that America needs in three distinct ways:

- . Teaching young people the value of helping others. Learning responsibility comes from real experience and the more extensive the experience, the more that's learned. Americans who learn to take responsibility for themselves and their communities as youths will do so again and again as adults.

- . Uniting communities to tackle their problems. National service not only stimulates individual commitment; properly designed, it builds institutional involvement in communities among nonprofit organizations, local governments, and religious organizations. When such groups unite to tackle community problems, they do more than provide immunizations or reduce crime rates. They inspire whole neighborhoods with faith that their problems are not irresolvable. And neighborhoods then come together to take up the burden.

- . Making government a partner but not a lonely actor. National service can point the way toward the proper role of government -- not to solve our problems or even to try, but to make a limited investment in the people who will make the real difference.

Because it's new and ambitious, the President's initiative is not perfect and it's easy to raise questions about it. Some, for example, fear that national service will create a "gigantic bureaucracy." But that's not inevitable. Indeed, the spirit of the President's initiative is to do precisely the opposite; it calls for investing in programs instead of operating them, and

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