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Americans for National Service

NATIONAL SERVICE

By Terrel Bell

During the 1992 election campaign, one of Bill Clinton's most reliable applause lines was his promise to create a new national service program. As a former Republican Education Secretary who has long espoused national service, it was difficult to watch a Democrat use this issue so effectively. But now I am troubled watching naysayers assault President Clinton's national service plan -- a sound proposal being put in jeopardy by these critics, many of whom are taking pot shots without looking at the big picture.

A nation in need of education reform, neighborhood revitalization, and a more skilled workforce as badly as ours, has an obligation to consider national service in a fair, open way.

America has a long, proud tradition of community service. From Teddy Roosevelt's civic-mindedness, to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, to the post-World War II GI Bill, to John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps, to George Bush's Points of Light, Americans have embraced the concept of national and community service.

The results speak for themselves. For decades, service programs have strengthened our communities, provided badly needed assistance to Americans, given young people new skills, access to higher education and a sense of their own potential.

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In fact, our nation's track record of service is the envy of the world -- with good reason. The benefits of America's traditional support for volunteer service are most evident at times of crisis, such as when Hurricane Andrew struck Florida last year or the earthquake hit San Francisco in 1989.

But America's service workers perform heroically every day. They help run school drop-out programs, provide health care services on Indian Reservations, and assist with public safety.

Today, when we must face the reality of long term government cutbacks, the challenges facing our communities are greater than ever. Nowhere is that more evident than in our schools, where teachers who are given ever-fewer resources often are overwhelmed by the challenge of educating ever-larger classes of students with ever-greater social problems and language barriers.

A new national service program can help our communities meet these and other emerging challenges, and it can help young people meet the escalating costs of college or vocational education. Participants would earn a \$5,000 award toward education or training for each year of service performed. In addition to the stipend, participants would earn a salary roughly equivalent to minimum wage -- an amount I think is too low and should be increased. Child care and health insurance would be provided.

While by no means a replacement for the Pell Grants and other aid that assists students from low income families who want to attend college, a new national service program can help all participants pay for a portion of post secondary education while

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they strengthen America's communities.

Quite simply, a national service program will build citizenship and strengthen towns and neighborhoods by giving a boost to the young people who are willing to give something back.

It is a mistake to judge national service solely by whether it is the most efficient way to provide college scholarships to low income students. It is not. Nor is national service the most direct way to increase the skills of tomorrow's workforce. And national service alone cannot provide communities with all the aid they need.

But national service can connect young people to their communities, give Americans access to education, meet some of our most pressing human needs, and reinforce a proud American tradition that goes back to the days of barn-raising and settlement houses. In a fundamental sense, it is not a new experiment but the tried-and-true American spirit of citizenship in action.

Like the GI Bill after World War II, a new national service program has the potential to open horizons for the people who are willing to give something to their nation. National service is not a handout. It is a way to help Americans who want to make our schools stronger, our environment cleaner, our health care system more effective, and our streets safer.

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Let's give the national service proposal due consideration,
and adopt a plan that will work for America today.

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