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To: Eli Segal
From: Will Marshall
Re: National Service
Date: March 4, 1993

Congratulations on the successful launching of the President's national service initiative. Perhaps more than any other of his innovations, national service has the potential to change the nation's ethos -- to replace a politics of one-way entitlement with a new politics of reciprocal responsibility. It could become the most distinctive and enduring legacy of the Clinton presidency.

Having thought and written a lot about national service over the last seven years, I'd like to raise two issues for your consideration as you refine the initial proposal. The first concerns the question of who should serve; the second has to do with the relationship between how the system is structured and how it is perceived by the public.

The question of who should serve has powerful implications for the scope, cost and civic character of the enterprise. Those of us involved in crafting the DLC/Nunn-McCurdy approach are convinced that national service would be of particular benefit to high school graduates. We're concerned that the program as described creates a bias in favor of post-college service by making the rewards greater than for pre-college service.

There are some compelling arguments for pre-college service:

- * Much of the work that national servers could do is labor-intensive and does not require a college degree. A Ford Foundation study identified 3.5 million potential national service slots in schools, hospitals, clinics, shelters, day care centers and conservation work. Most of the jobs are low-skill or menial and could easily be performed by high school graduates.

- * The "opportunity costs" to our economy are lower. If a college graduate delays entry into private labor markets in order to perform national service, society loses the (private) value of his or her labor for a year. Opportunity costs for high school graduates are lower as their productivity is lower.

- * High school-age youths may need national service the most. Many need the experience and maturity of serving before they venture into college or the job market. American University President Joe Duffy estimates that about 40 percent of the freshmen he sees are emotionally unprepared to take advantage of college. (I dropped

out after the first year and went to work in a boat factory). National service is more than a college-funding scheme; as William James argued, it should also be a rite of civic passage for young people taking their first step toward adulthood and independent citizenship. Moreover, the experience of City Year and other service programs shows that service often motivates kids who otherwise lacked the self-confidence to go to college. This is especially true when disadvantaged kids are thrown together with middle class kids.

* Living expenses are cheaper. Because they can live at home while serving, high school age volunteers don't need a big living stipend and are less likely to need ancillary benefits like child care. The overall compensation package is greater for college graduates, who have to support themselves as well as pay off their student loans.

* Job displacement is less likely. Labor worries that a large-scale national service system inevitably will displace public and private workers. The key, again, is to target labor-intensive tasks that don't require college training and that otherwise would not be done by either government or the private sector.

* The stress on post-college work suggests that national service is really for college students. There is a striking disparity between the various benefits and subsidies governments offer to the college bound and the meager help -- vocational education programs of dubious worth -- given to the "forgotten half" that don't go to college. That's why we've always insisted that non-college kids could use their national service reward for job training and other purposes. (The best idea is probably to use the reward to subsidize wages, thus giving employers an incentive to hire national service veterans.)

If national service is to grow and eventually become a common civic experience for large numbers of citizens, it must welcome college and non-college youth. Moreover, tilting the system toward college graduates will make it harder to achieve racial, ethnic and class diversity in national service.

Lastly, encouraging young people to do service before they get the reward underscores the idea that national service is about earned benefits, not entitlements. I think this idea of earning your way and contributing to your own education is key to the tremendous public appeal of national service. Many families would rather not borrow at all for college if they don't have to. And the prospect of heavy borrowing for college is daunting to families struggling on the economic margins.

For all these reasons, I'd recommend that the educational benefit be equal for pre-college and post-college servers. The argument that post-college servers should get more because they do more valuable work misses the point. That differential should be reflected in the stipend or hourly wage, not in the educational benefit. After all, national service is not just a jobs program; the educational benefit should reflect the real costs of post-secondary schooling, not the actual market value of the

work performed by servers.

Incidentally, a 1973 community service experiment in Seattle that involved people aged 18-25 showed that the 18-20 year olds were more likely to volunteer than the older participants. Don Eberle of the National Service Secretariat, who has been at this longer than anyone, can tell you more about this. I know he would like to talk to you. His number is (202) 244-5828.

The second point concerns the program architecture. I agree that the federal government should be seen as an investor in national service, not as the organizer of the enterprise. The states obviously will have to play a key role if they are going to pick up part of the costs. The question, however, is this: can national service be viable over the long haul without local leadership and a strong sense of community ownership? I'm not sure you get those without some mechanism for engaging the larger community in the enterprise.

The great danger is that national service could become stigmatized as a federal make-work jobs program like CETA. CETA started as a training program, but became a jobs program when President Carter pumped \$7 billion into it. By building up gradually, President Clinton has wisely avoided generating a bow wave of federal funding that will set off scrambling to create lots of public service jobs quickly. But unless there is broad community leadership in identifying what kinds of tasks really need to be performed, and in getting public institutions and non-profits together to create service opportunities that everyone agrees are worthwhile -- in short, unless communities feel they own the enterprise rather than having it imposed on them from above -- then national service could lose local support.

I'm not sure what form community leadership should take. One possibility is to look for existing structures or networks that can be adapted to this purpose. For example, most cities have a Leadership (name the city) organization, which each year recruits a "class" of civic leaders, competitively chosen, to grapple with the city's needs. It has a kind of trade association: the National Association of Community Leadership Organizations. Alumni of these groups often form the Volunteer Centers that are overseen by the Points of Lights Foundation. I'm not an expert on these groups; the point is simply to underscore the need for a sense of community ownership and pride in the local national service efforts.

I hope these thoughts are useful. Again, national service is off to a terrific start and if I can be of help in settling some of these critical design issues, please let me know.

cc: Bill Galston

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