

## **Put Us to Work**

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Nearly forty-eight years ago, John F. Kennedy defined the essence of citizenship when, in an anxious time, he implored Americans to put the country's collective interests ahead of our individual preoccupations. He viewed an engaged citizenry as the greatest way to meet the immense challenges facing the country. This dream birthed the Peace Corps, the U.S. space program, and ultimately, much of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. However, after the 1960s numerous indicators of civic participation either stagnated or declined. The country's shared commitment to a common purpose eroded as the "Greatest Generation" gave way to the "Me Generation."

Today, our problems are perhaps even more grave and numerous. The economic crisis is squeezing the middle class. Our wars in the Middle East persist and the threat of terrorism still looms. The earth is warming at a disturbing rate. An Oct. 22 CBS News/New York Times Poll found that eighty-five percent think the country is "on the wrong track." Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, at least fifteen presidential candidates have proposed ideas to solve these problems and this crisis of confidence. Indeed, the next administration has a unique opportunity to heal these wounds by paving a new path for the country. However, despite all of their political promises, the most effective solutions likely will not come from government; it will come from us. When Barack Obama or John McCain takes office on January 20, their best course of action will be to lead the nation away from the ethos of individualism and towards values of shared sacrifice and unity. We must reverse the trend towards civic apathy and capitalize on the collective sacrifice of millions of Americans to overcome our many challenges.

Many are already doing their part. In 2007, over 1.4 million American men and women served in our nation's armed forces. 500,000 seniors participated in Senior Corps. 70,000 completed a year in AmeriCorps. 8,000 Peace Corps volunteers brought the best of the U.S. to the world's developing nations. And over 60.8 million Americans completed some form of community service during the year. Clearly, these people deserve to be commended. Yet, their efforts are not enough. There still exist social needs unmet by the market, divided social groups, and a striking amount of apathy among the general public.

Much like President Kennedy, the next president can set a tone promoting service from the moment he is sworn in. He also has the responsibility to evaluate how government can further civic engagement among Americans. Both candidates have outlined plans to expand national service programs. Senator Obama aims to increase the size of AmeriCorps to 250,000 members by creating numerous specialized corps to focus on issues like health, clean energy, and education. He also proposed a \$4,000 tax credit for college tuition payments, provided students devote 100 hours of community service in one year. John McCain's plan is less specific, but he has in the past co-sponsored legislation that would have increased the size of AmeriCorps to 250,000 and increased educational incentives to military recruits. Both candidates favor increasing military enlistment as well.

Unfortunately, it appears that widespread federally sponsored service programs are unlikely to develop during the next president's first term. A ballooning deficit, Congress' \$700 billion bailout package, and numerous other spending priorities will

render these ideas impractical. Thus, the next president should turn to state and local initiatives to engage more citizens in service.

There are several vehicles through which to promote service on the community level. Both candidates have publicly stated their support for faith-based community initiatives, which provide federal funds to religious institutions to complete community projects. Granted, this blurs the line separating Church and State, but numerous studies indicate that citizens who attend church are also more likely to be involved in a secular community organization. If safeguards are in place to protect churches from proselytizing to the recipients of their service, faith-based organizations can be a valuable medium for engaging millions of Americans. Habitat for Humanity, an ecumenical Christian organization devoted to building affordable homes for low-income families, provides a feasible model for this type of service.

A President Obama or President McCain can also create long-term participatory habits among young Americans by motivating local school districts to engage students in community service. Service-learning initiatives in middle and high schools around the United States engage students in both classroom work and community service on a particular subject. For example, a science class studying soil erosion can volunteer with an organization by trail building. A civics class can sponsor a voter registration drive. Education philosopher Jordy Rocheleau explains how service-learning can engage students with a community:

*Progressive educational thought suggests that students should be involved in the process of defining the problem to be solved, thinking through solutions, and working with others to achieve a commonly acceptable result. In short, it suggests that service-learning should take the form of education in community organizing and community building.*

If the next president resolves to reform No Child Left Behind, he can also strive to improve civic engagement among the next generation of Americans by compelling students to become involved in community service. The earlier in life that they feel that they own a share in this democracy, the more likely they will be to participate in community associations and the political process later in life.

Not since President Kennedy have we had a leader who so forcefully demanded active citizenship from all Americans. That can change in the next administration. Ronald Reagan took the exact opposite approach in the 1980s, constructing a narrative that equated government with society's evils. His antipathy towards government resulted in an obsession with individualism and helped speed the decline of social capital. Social capital is the oil that makes our interconnected society work. Like soon-to-be Senator Obama said at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, "It is that fundamental belief -- I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper -- that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family: 'E pluribus unum,' out of many, one." Government may have its inefficiencies, but in a market economy where firms are focused entirely on the bottom line, presidential leadership and government can connect fellow countrymen and build social capital to fulfill needs unmet by the private businesses.

On November 5<sup>th</sup>, the president-elect must begin healing the wounds created by the divisiveness of the last two decades of American politics. He must ask the country to set aside our individual needs to collectively solve the country's challenges. He must do what George W. Bush never did after September 11<sup>th</sup>. During World War II, for example,

even the smallest and weakest American felt like a soldier. Most of us want to be part of something bigger than ourselves. The next president must stop coddling our topical fears and challenge us to work together to achieve economic prosperity, energy independence, universal healthcare, peaceful solutions to our global conflicts, and the cessation of global warming. President Kennedy ended his inaugural address with a passage that should inspire our society today. “Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.” Our challenges are no less significant than they were in 1961. Together, America’s next generation can achieve things that none of us can alone.

**Further Reading:**

- John McCain’s website:  
<http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/7085eb12-f5f2-4019-a55e-daec115c9590.htm>
- Barack Obama’s website:  
<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2008/images/07/02/national.service.fact.sheet.final.pdf>
- Dionne, Jr., E.J., Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, and Robert Litan, editors. *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*. Washington, DC.: The Brookings Institution, 2003.
- Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Rocheleau, Jordy. “Theoretical Roots of Service-Learning: Progressive Education and the Development of Citizenship.” *Service-Learning: History, Theory, and Issues*. Bruce W. Speck and Sherry L. Hoppe, Eds. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004, p. 3.
- Waldman, Steven. *The Bill: How the Adventures of Clinton’s National Service Bill Reveal What Is Corrupt, Comic, Cynical – and Noble – About Washington*. New York: Viking, 1995.