

Time to view America's youth as a national resource to tap

By HARRIS WOFFORD

The political success of the Clinton administration will be determined primarily by how well the President finds the ways and means to rebuild our economy, cut the budget deficit and turn the right to affordable health care into a reality. But yesterday at Rutgers University I heard Bill Clinton give a different definition of success that went beyond conventional politics or any one president's initiative.

In asking all citizens to serve their communities and in proposing new ways and means enabling young people to engage in a year or more of full-time service, Bill Clinton revived John Kennedy's challenge as the proper measure of our success: not what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country.

President Clinton chose yesterday for his national service address because it was the 32d anniversary of Kennedy's executive order creating the Peace Corps — an order I helped Sargent Shriver draft in those first days of the New Frontier. From the beginning of that venture in international service, Kennedy and all of us present at the creation looked forward to the day when the idea of the Peace Corps would be brought

Community service? One state's already been where President Clinton wants to take the entire nation. Indeed, Pennsylvania's youth corps and summer jobs programs could be models for the President.

home to America on a large scale. Bill Clinton now says that time has come.

This isn't a new idea for Pennsylvania or for the President. His convictions about this became clear to me when I started working with him five years ago on a National Governors' Association task force on youth service. I was representing Governor Casey's Office of Citizen Service — PENNSERVE — which then as now was pioneering new forms of part-time and full-time community service.

Through PENNSERVE, Pennsylvania has become a national leader in providing a diversity of service opportunities, including demanding youth corps which provide discipline and training for young people who have been written off. We were the first state to launch a "summer of service" like the one Bill Clinton proposed yesterday. We turned summer job experience for disadvantaged youth from what is too often make-work into well-organized teamwork on valuable community projects.

For some, the idea of service may simply be an appeal to "the better angels of our nature." But experience with past successes like FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps should teach us that service does more than make us "feel good." It can rebuild communities. It can change lives. It can develop in young people the initiative and job skills that are essential to being productive workers, as well as responsible citizens.

The young men of the CCC transformed our parks and forests and then graduated into the national service of World War II. In doing so, they transformed themselves. And just as the government investment in the CCC paid off in creating

camping sites and facilities still in use today, so America's investment in G.I. Bill tuitions created a generation of college graduates that paid off in inventions, jobs and productivity.

The decentralized system of national service envisioned by President Clinton and those of us working with him to shape the necessary legislation combines the best of both ideas: making a college education accessible to all young Americans willing to work for it and building a generation of young people who value not only their civil rights, but also their civic responsibilities.

The plan outlined by the President yesterday, with its minimal living expense stipends and income-based college loan repayment system, represents the kind of quantum leap we need from today's very limited number of full-time service opportunities. But it's modest enough in scale to be affordable and to get going quickly. It provides a sound build-up to a first goal of 100,000 in service. (Remember, in 1933 it took FDR less than five months to get 300,000 young men off the streets and into 1,300 CCC camps.)

The key to this new approach is to see young people — and help them see themselves — not as problems, but as resources. Not as a danger to be defended against, but as talent to be tapped. The case for this was put to me in unforgettable words a few years ago by a young high school dropout here in Philadelphia. He had gone from a street gang into the Philadelphia Youth Service Corps.

When I asked him why he had enlisted in the Corps, he said: "Look, all my life people have been coming to do good against me. I got tired of people trying to help me all the time. For the first time this Corps asked me to do some helping."

His words were startlingly reminiscent of those by a college graduate of the 1950s "silent generation" who was among the first Peace Corps volunteers who gathered on the White House lawn before going off to Asia, Africa and Latin America: "Nobody ever asked me to do anything unselfish, patriotic, or for the common good before. Kennedy asked."

It is time for us to ask again. For personal responsibility and self-esteem can't simply be taught, they have to be earned.

It's a scandal that we know this while another generation of inner-city young people drops out of school, or graduates into the streets, joblessness, drugs, welfare or prison. A society with children who need tutoring, older people who need care, roads that need repair and neighborhoods which need more policing cannot afford to allow able men and women to sit idle. It's a scandal, too, that we have not been challenging the college-bound to move beyond a self-centered life of civic indifference.

Today we are not looking to one big, federal program like the CCC of old. Instead, we can build on the existing models which have grown from the grass roots: urban and rural youth corps, police corps, service opportunities generated by high schools and colleges, businesses, churches, civic associations and individual young people themselves. But now the pilot programs which we have worked so hard to nurture here in Pennsylvania and elsewhere under the existing Commission on National and Community Service can ignite



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the whole furnace of citizen power.

Whether this new diverse and decentralized system grows in future years toward a million young people in service to America — the dream of the Kennedy years — will depend on its demonstrated success. It will have to pass the kind of strict test that taxpayers rightly demand of government programs: Does it work?

I believe it will work. But given the realities of our federal budget deficit, the threshold question many ask is: "Can we afford to do it?" Last year's riots in Los Angeles — and the frustrations of thousands of other communities it represented — should make us ask instead: "Can we afford not to?"

Democrat Harris Wofford, now U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, helped found the Peace Corps when he served as an aide to President Kennedy. In the Senate he has sponsored two bills expanding national service opportunities that have already been enacted into law.