

## *Presidents' Summit for America's Future*

### **Personal Reactions to the Presidents' Summit on The Future of America**

Susan J. Ellis

As I watched summit volunteers roll paint over a wall covered with graffiti, I couldn't stop myself from thinking: "Is this a symbolic fresh start or a whitewash job?" And that feeling of conflict best represents my reactions to the Presidents' Summit for America's Future.

In many ways, the Sunday clean-up of Germantown Avenue was a microcosm of the summit's split personality. More than 4,000 volunteers—mainly from the Philadelphia area as most of the national delegates were still travelling that day—answered the call to participate. Germantown Avenue, an historic street winding through many different neighborhoods, deserved some clean-up attention. I was at a spot selected for graffiti paint-over and street sweeping. Summit volunteers did not hit the streets until 11:30 a.m., while neighborhood organizing teams were in place by 9:00 a.m. The buses unloaded volunteers wearing brightly colored t-shirts and hats, carrying brand new paint rollers, brooms, and other paraphernalia. They stood around for about 30 minutes, then sat on the curb and ate lunch (as neighborhood children watched). Finally they received instructions to begin work.

About an hour later, the volunteers returned to the pick-up point. Are you done so fast? Well, we ran out of paint. Did anyone teach you how to cover the graffiti? No. Do you feel you've done as much work as you expected? No, we were

prepared to do at least three hours, but I guess they have too many volunteers. One teacher accompanying his high school class emphasized, "This was mainly symbolic, you know."

So here was an object lesson. The summit organizers did a great job of recruiting volunteers, transporting them, provisioning them, and maintaining morale (the Colin Powell military model). But volunteer time was wasted—and Germantown Avenue was not fully cleaned—because no one properly analyzed the job to be done and no one on-site felt able to improvise when volunteers were standing around or when supplies ran low. As we in AVA know, it is not enough to ask people to help. To do a good job, you also need an effective mechanism to match volunteers to the work to be done. That's what volunteer managers do. That's what the summit forgot.

Attending the summit under a press pass from *The NonProfit Times*, I saw contradictions at every turn:

- In my 25 years in the volunteer field, I never in my wildest dreams could have imagined the attention being paid—at the highest levels—to increasing volunteering. The presidents, dignitaries and celebrities did indeed generate a palpable sense of excitement and were often truly inspiring. The word "volunteer" was used more often than "community service"! Media attention was constant and

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the quality of the reporting impressive. Balancing optimism and skepticism, commentator after commentator asked probing questions without descending into cynicism. Yet the hypocrisy of the summit was evident as well. These were the same government leaders who had systematically cut funding to programs that help children. The emphasis on children conveniently allowed the summit to sidestep harder questions about jobs, health insurance, and other support structures that would allow parents to build stronger families.

- Real power brokers were brought to Philadelphia and major commitments of resources were promised. But the summit was structured into three tracks kept completely separate from one another: the local delegates (the heart of the affair) worked in the convention center without access to either the national invitees or to the corporations, each of whom met in a completely different place, also without the opportunity to interact with each other. There was no list of registrants, not even to identify which national organizations or corporations had representatives in attendance. No attempt was made to “report out” any of the discussions from one track to another.

- As always, the emphasis during the Summit was on the need to recruit more volunteers. Most of us with experience in volunteer management feel that is the wrong side of the equation. We need to make sure that organizations are willing and able to involve volunteers effectively *before* generating even more applicants. This perspective was mentioned by only a minority of the speakers.

- A smashing technology area highlighting Internet capabilities was open throughout the three days of the summit, and an extensive exhibit area materialized on Tuesday morning. But many delegates were completely unaware of these learning opportunities. The corporate and national representatives never saw the exhibit area because, of course, they were not in the same building.

- The technological resources were staggering. Not only was there continuous Internet access in the Technology Showcase area, but also in the hallways throughout the convention center. Television monitors were everywhere. Each and every table in the delegate rooms had a laptop computer (at least 150 were needed) and records were posted overnight onto the summit’s Website. But it seemed an exercise in being “au courant.” Few delegates were seen using the available Internet access, table “scribes” were not asked to confirm their notes with the delegates at their tables, and too often speakers had the “C-Span mentality”: talk to the television camera no matter who—or if—anyone is listening to you in the room.

- The commitments obtained in advance of the summit were widespread and exciting. If only 10 percent of them are kept, the lives of some children will be improved—and that is worth the effort. But the commitments were made *before* getting together to talk strategy. Several national leaders to whom I spoke felt they might have developed different goals had they first had the benefit of the summit’s synergy. Also, rather arrogantly, almost none of the corporations spoke to practitioners of volunteerism or to delegates of children’s services to learn what the needs might really be. So the commitments are all over the map—uncoordinated, scatter-shot, and possibly of minimal impact. There is no evidence that The Points of Light Foundation or Colin Powell’s new organization, America’s Promise—The Alliance for Youth, attempted to advise corporations or national organizations about gaps or duplications in the commitments received.

- More than \$2.5 million in cash was spent on the summit and countless in-kind services were donated. The publicity undoubtedly was worth that much, but think what any *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* reader could do with even a small portion of that much money!

- The summit was highly structured,

with little time for informal (or formal) discussions among participants except in the ways dictated by the organizers. The local delegations—truly the center of the event—only met with each other and then with the other delegates in their own states. These people did not hear any of the panels that spoke to the national invitees. They also did not get to speak with corporate or national organization representatives—either to ask or give feedback. Happily, some delegates rose above the level of the vision of the organizers. The youth leaders stayed up all Monday night to produce their own call to action, criticizing what they saw as their marginal role in the sessions. National invitees skipped out on panels to form their own caucuses.

- Volunteerism was celebrated and all the rhetoric was right. But absent from the podium were those who understand how to coordinate volunteers on a day-to-day basis. In addition, there was an appalling lack of women speakers. Except for Oprah Winfrey, wives of presidents, and federal cabinet officials, almost no community women were presented as leaders or visionaries. Given that the focus was volunteering and the care of children, this omission was indefensible.

- Colin Powell generated lots of attention and excitement. By being the chairman, he undoubtedly brought to the table individuals and groups who had never before considered themselves part of the “troops” attacking children’s problems. But Colin Powell’s selection was also an insult to everyone who has spent years gaining credibility in youth services or volunteerism. Just imagine if this summit had been on the future of health care. Would doctors and hospital administrators have welcomed the lack of experience of Colin Powell in *their* arena? The lack of clout of the non-profit field was amply demonstrated by politicians who believed they were risk-free to use us as a domestic policy-builder for a presidential hopeful.

- Finally, the entire summit was about increasing volunteering, but there was

absolutely no scheduled opportunity to discuss volunteerism as a subject: how to do it right, the need for resources, overcoming obstacles such as union resistance and legal liability. For example, given the focus on service to children, it would have been helpful to issue a call for faster, less expensive, national child abuse reference checks.

- There were no skills-building workshops, even though more than half the delegates I interviewed said their main hope for the summit was to learn as much new as possible.

The whole affair was a strange mixture of contradictory assumptions. On the one hand, the implication was very strong that previous efforts to help children had failed or were, at best, inadequate. But, on the other hand, the summit assumed that delegates already brought all the required expertise with them and only needed this chance to meet with one another. Can both these perspectives be true? Or neither?

In the last analysis, what happened in Philadelphia was important only if it truly kicks off a renewed dedication to helping children and to mobilizing volunteers. So now the attention shifts to the local level. Some states and cities are already planning local summits—and each of these will be unique to its region. AVA members should become involved in the planning of these events as well as attend them. Here is the opportunity to incorporate information about volunteer program development.

We can also use the publicity to our advantage. The public is intrigued with what it saw. If we can reach out and connect this spark of interest with a specific volunteer assignment that needs to be done, wider recruitment is indeed possible. Also, since the media spent so much time covering the summit, they will feel obligated to follow up. Contact your local television, radio, and newspaper reporters with the pitch: “Want to see how we put the summit’s rhetoric to work right here?” Let’s grab the chance while we can.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTES:**

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