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"Volunteer"

## Government, Politicians, and the Use of the Word "Volunteer"

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

February  
2004

All sorts of news items have recently surfaced in the US that have gotten me thinking about the nature of volunteering, particularly as the government relates to it. I'm not sure exactly what it all means, but let me share the information and ruminate about it and then ask you to join the discussion.

First, I just learned from colleague Reenie Marshall that there has been a bill sitting in a Congressional Committee since early last year to reinstate the military draft: H.R. # 163, Universal National Service Act of 2003. The Act calls for drafting both men and women, with very few exemptions, into either military service or community service (if a conscientious objector to war). Amazingly, there has been very little press about this. Reenie learned of it through a newsgroup to which she subscribes (see the provocative article at <http://www.collegian.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/01/20/400cb6a2c7dec>) and I did more research. The Common Cause Action Center gives more details (<http://causet.net/commoncause.org/afr/issues/bills/?billnum=H.R.163&congress=108&size=full>) and I also checked with the staff of the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Total Force, where the bill still lies after almost a year.

Since the end of the Vietnam war, the United States military has proudly called itself The All-Volunteer Army meaning, of course, that soldiers are not forced into service, not that they don't receive pay. They have not yet changed their marketing approach despite the obvious fact that the many National Guard volunteers now serving in Iraq were required to go overseas. The term volunteer soldier has a long history in the military, and is often used to legitimize uprisings such as the American War of Independence. But if a draft is indeed reinstated, we'll see the disappearance of the volunteer label.

Second, with little fanfare, new California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger declined to accept the \$175,000 salary that goes with the job (see

<http://www.sacbee.com/content/politics/story/7830085p-8770783c.html>). With this he joins an impressive list of government officials who have done the same thing, including John F. Kennedy and Nelson Rockefeller. Surprised? Most people have no idea that one label they could use for these well-known people is volunteer. *The Sacramento Bee* article just referenced also notes that California's new Secretary of Education, Richard Riordan, is a multimillionaire who didn't accept a salary as mayor of Los Angeles (though apparently he will take money for the new job).

Funny, isn't it, how no one questions the legitimacy or competence of such unpaid public servants? But note that, in some cases, individuals choosing to forgo their salary must legally go on the books as employees and accept a token \$1 per year. Maybe this is another manifestation of resistance to volunteers by the civil service and its unions. What is the implication of *not* allowing someone to volunteer his/her time? I don't know, but it seems worth pondering.

Colleagues in the former Soviet Union talk about how the Communist government misused the concept of volunteering by linking it to mandatory and unpaid days of labor on behalf of the state. The same concern is raised in many countries now by those who strongly oppose any mandated service, especially student graduation requirements or court-ordered alternative sentences coercion without financial remuneration.

The opposite argument -- freely chosen, but paid -- is used to question whether Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, UN Volunteers, and similar sorts of programs should be considered part of volunteering. Some want to stress that the payment involved is mainly a stipend or living allowance, not a true salary. But where is the line between enabling funds for a volunteer and a really low wage? The combined value of all remuneration and benefits brings some Corps members to minimum wage level. If the government considers minimum wage to be a living wage clearly open to debate why do we insist on extolling programs such as AmeriCorps as voluntary sacrifice? What does this mean both to volunteering and to the poverty line?

Embracing volunteers is politically easy. Public officials (everywhere in the world) make speeches about how valuable citizen involvement is, although ironically, much of what volunteers really get worked up about is what government is *not* doing for the public good! Governments often embrace citizen volunteer projects to make up for the deficits of poor economies and failing public safety nets. Linda Graff articulated this extremely well in her essay, *Genetic Engineering of the Volunteer Movement*, which she wrote for our *Rants and Raves Anthology* last summer (still available for free at [http://www.energizeinc.com/xmlEi/solo.php?fzg\\_navGrpBtn=5-211-E-1](http://www.energizeinc.com/xmlEi/solo.php?fzg_navGrpBtn=5-211-E-1)). While we can applaud efforts such as the USA Freedom Corps or the UK's Millennium Volunteers, and the emerging national volunteer centers in places such as the countries of the former Soviet Union, is such government interest in volunteering a wolf in sheep's clothing? You decide.

Here's what I'm wondering about:

- What effect, if any, does the use or neglect of the word volunteer in these situations have on those of us in field of volunteerism?
- Which concerns us more: forced but unpaid or paid but freely chosen? Why?
- I take it as a given that some participants in these sorts of programs will eventually make their way into regular volunteer opportunities. Clearly many students contribute more hours than their minimum school requirement; a percentage of offenders end up staying with agencies after their official hours are served; AmeriCorps and Peace Corps members develop a lifelong commitment to service, etc. So how do we make sure this happens as much as possible?
- Should we be trying to illuminate invisible examples of volunteering such as Schwarzenegger's unpaid service? Would this raise the bar for expectations about who volunteers and why?

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***Submitted on 5Mar2004 by Femida Handy, Assoc. Prof, York University, Ontario, Canada***

Why not consider the forgone salaries as -monetary donations- to the government- and not call them volunteers? After all they ran for positions as elected officials to paid positions!!

***Submitted on 19Feb2004 by Rob Kantenwein, Director of Operations, Hands On Helpers, Princeton/New Jersey, USA***

In 1995, I became a member of a local AmeriCorps program working through the USDA on environmental issues. From day one, we were instructed that we were not AmeriCorps volunteers but were AmeriCorps members or participants. Our program managers were very thorough in explaining the parameters of our participation and the expectations and benefits that came with it. We were responsible for working a certain number of hours to qualify for our education award. We were also paid our stipend based on the hours that we worked each pay period.

The parameters as they were explained to me prior to and after accepting the position did not make me feel like I was a volunteer. I realized that I voluntarily accepted the position, but I never believed that I was a volunteer. My supervisors did a great job of treating us as valuable members of the team.

***Submitted on 19Feb2004 by Marty Martin, M & M Consulting, White Lake, MI***

Thanks for giving us topics and ideas to reflect on. In the busy rush of doing all that needs to be done, we seldom take time to consider all sides of something as simple as the word, volunteer. When I notice the word in media, I often find that the meaning is different than mine. You have given me much to ponder as I drive or sit in gridlock. Perhaps I will have something to share. Right now, I have lots of questions. Thanks for the brain food.

***Submitted on 18Feb2004 by Dee Wadsworth, Gerontology graduate student, UNT, Denton, TX***

Forced but unpaid OR paid but freely chosen: The issue at the forefront concerns the definition of

volunteering. Let's reduce it to: one freely deciding to donate time or talent without a fair market wage or other full monetary reward. Certainly military service does not fall within this viewpoint of volunteering, since remuneration includes future educational benefits, full medical care, retirement benefits, etc. But, AmeriCorps and Peace Corps clearly demonstrate the role of volunteering.

The trend of a "community service" sentence instead of jail time for crimes committed comes up also. Would these people otherwise decide to donate their time? I think not. Yet, for some organizations, such forced volunteering becomes a vital part of fulfilling their mission.

As for the "Governator" and others who have donated their salaries back to the government coffers, I applaud their decision. It sets an example showing their choice is not based on direct economic reward. The other side of this applies to those who truly wish to serve the people but are not independently wealthy. Do we think less of their motives if they accept the salary and benefits? The level of salary at \$175,000 appears to be a large income, but if the state of California was a publically traded corporation, the CEO would probably command a much higher salary and benefit package.

***Submitted on 13Feb2004 by Juli Smith, Student, University of North Texas, Texas***

Arnold has volunteered in several arenas involved with physical fitness and children's after school care and whether he is wealthy or not, he should be commended for refusing his governor's salary.

I don't believe the National Honor Society's policy for community hours is altruistic though. College applications look better when there are volunteer hours included and more NHS members are admitted; which makes the school look good. They are, generally speaking, sending a false message to the students.

Minimum wage is not a "living wage" in many areas of the country and if the Peace Corps extends a stipend for all the good they do; so be it. The volunteers are giving of themselves for others, which is the ultimate volunteering. In church situations, people also give of themselves, and are volunteers. As someone who is just entering the "volunteer world", after 30 years in the self-serving advertising profession, I am wondering if this is a question of semantics.

***Submitted anonymously on 10Feb2004***

It is inaccurate at best to use Arnold Schwarzenegger, John F. Kennedy or Roosevelt as models for not accepting salary to other volunteers. These people are independently wealthy. (Perhaps it is advisable tax-wise for them to NOT take the salary) Consider other comparisons, please.

***Submitted on 10Feb2004 by Johanna Shrou, Coordinator, District Volunteer Services, Beaverton School District, Oregon***

As a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer I have to defend my service as voluntary. My living allowance was roughly equivalent to \$50 a month and supported food and basic necessities. I and many other PCVs could not have given the time we did without that minimal support. I had skills and training that were desperately needed in my village. Like my neighbors, I lived in a small wooden house with a

thatched roof, no running water or electricity. Taking two years out of my life to live and work in Africa was not the same commitment as when I worked a couple of hours a week for the Red Cross. Yes, I chose this experience and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. I am very proud to say that I was a Peace Corps VOLUNTEER.

As a Volunteer Coordinator, I do understand the concern over the use and misuse of the term volunteer. I feel that people receive something in return for volunteering, whether that is social networking, career exploration, skill building or some type of tangible acknowledgement of their time. I think we lose something in program development if we forget that.

***Submitted on 8Feb2003 by Suellen Carlson, Director of Volunteer Services, Lutheran Social Services, New York State USA***

I have a difficult time seeing Schwarzenegger as a "volunteer". My guess is that the \$175,000 spread over a year's time might just complicate his taxes. I haven't seen him over the years giving of his time, talent and money. At those salary levels, only the very rich can afford to forego a salary, which, in turn, can make others who actually need the salary look like they don't "volunteer". Schwarzenegger's position is a salaried position. He can choose to take the money and blow it or not take the money. I'm not so sure that we want to go there when we talk about "volunteering". The "all-volunteer" army only speaks of the draft. I guess I volunteered for my job too - no one made me apply. Volunteers truly see their time as the commodity. They believe that they are making a difference by spending their time. If the exchange is anything other than something you perceive as the common good and time, it is not volunteering.

***Submitted on 7Feb2003 by Penny Aulston, Volunteer Resources Manager, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago IL USA***

In my experience as a volunteer and with volunteers is that we all fill a need for ourselves when we volunteer. It may be a need to learn, make new friendships, to fill lonely days or to give something back to a group or institution that has provided something good for us. For some volunteers to be given a free meal, or carfare may make volunteering possible. I had to give up a volunteer job at one point because I could not afford to pay a baby sitter while I volunteered. It is wonderful that Arnold can afford to serve as Governor without pay, but we should not consider the perks often given to volunteers as pay. Most volunteers are not wealthy. Americorp and Peace Corp enable people without great wealth to serve as full time volunteers.

***Submitted on 5Feb2004 by Caroline Buchanan, Volunteer Coordinator, Dallas Retirement Village, Oregon***

I also agree with sharing this encouraging news about Arnold with the world. I have often pondered the use of the word volunteer and agree with others here that our military are not volunteers (even the National Guard.) I think when the stipends get even close to minimum wage, policies need to be reviewed. I have seen even a meal in exchange for service greatly effect the quality of that volunteer experience. I think it somehow distorts the motivation and something like entitlement enters in...I believe that community service, be it required for schools, scouts or criminal justice systems, has its benefit for the 'volunteer' in many cases, but the word "requirement" is not analogous with

volunteering. Quality suffers, motivation suffers and the true spirit of willingly giving, with no expectation of getting anything back in return is lost.

Splitting hairs even farther, I have often heard the term volunteers in church of late. People volunteer for a host of different reasons, but it's of my opinion that service to God is servanthood, with significant spiritual aspects (and rewards,) rather than volunteering for basically only the good of an organization or a person apart from the calling to do so. Great subject! Keep at it!

***Submitted anonymously on 4Feb2004***

Highlight, illuminate and expose those people in prominent positions who forego a salary. It is a beacon of light to others. Start with Mother Teresa--was there ever a more dedicated, caring volunteer in our times? Give Arnold more recognition for his volunteerism. He is the American Dream. He came here with nothing and achieved the dream of every American--to build a better life for himself and in return--give back to the country that gave him this opportunity.

***Submitted on 4Feb2004 by Sandra Lyle, Volunteer/Red Cross, Indiana/USA***

I have been a full time volunteer (without pay) for 20 years. While my job was very rewarding and I would do it under any circumstances, I do believe if the government truly wanted to encourage volunteers they would recognize their gift of time by allowing more of a tax write off. At the moment they allow 12 cents (I am not sure but approx.) a mile from home to place of volunteer activity as a tax item. Volunteers often spend dollars to have the opportunity to do good works.

***Submitted on 4Feb03 by Marjorie Moore, Volunteer Development Coordinator, Radio Information Service, Illinois, USA***

Through our organization, we have found that in most but certainly not all cases, those who are forced to be volunteers by community service judgments or service learning requirements are not motivated by anything other than getting the hours required in. Currently, I have three girls working for their National Honor Society hours. One was a volunteer with us long before she needed her hours and she has already exceeded her hours. The other two still need ten hours (at least) with less than a month to go. People are often shocked to hear that as a volunteer manager I am not in favor of mandatory community service for high school graduation. My concerns go back to the concept that we shouldn't take every warm body that walks through the door. Volunteers have to be WILLING and ABLE to perform the tasks that we ask of them. I feel that required service is not in keeping with the true meaning of volunteering. We've all read it, "*The broadest, and maybe the most meaningful definition of volunteering: Doing more than you have to because you want to, in a cause you consider good*" --Ivan Scheier

***Submitted on 4Feb2003 by Deb Anderson, Coordinator, Volunteer Resources - St. Catharine's General Hospital, Niagara-on-the-Lake Hospital, Niagara Health System, Ontario, Canada***

I too have had difficulty accepting the misuse of the term volunteer. As a Volunteer Manager in a large health system of 8 hospitals, I often hear administrators/managers asking staff to volunteer for a project or event. The recent crisis with SARS was a prime example of staff volunteering. I challenge

this issue in my hospitals because of the negative implications on those who are truly volunteering without remuneration. I think that volunteers should be recognized for their good deeds and to encourage others to follow the lead. Why not inform the country that Arnold is not accepting his salary? As for military - the term volunteer is a marketing strategy and nothing else. It was a political move to gain support for government acts of war and the military personal that serve them. Yes, they are serving but they are not volunteers.

Along with the many other hats we wear, it is our responsibility as leaders in the voluntary sector to protect the term volunteer and inform others of its significance.

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on November 24th, 2018*

*Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.*

Politicians who give up their pay should not be counted as volunteers, but you can if you want a broadly inclusive definition of volunteer, and, either way, they'd still be donors. I think they generally donate their pay to charities (in Trump's case, to a government agency, and maybe add Jimmy Carter for a post-Presidential paid project). By donating, they control where the money goes, exactly as if they bought necessary groceries or unnecessary art collections for themselves, and it's still taxable income. They're generally forbidden by law from refusing the pay because the employer can't refuse to pay them for work in which there's an expectation of compensation, and a paycheck announced in advance by law creates that expectation as strongly as can be. The main difference is that while a business could tell an employee who refuses pay to go away (fire the person), to do that to an elected officeholder or to someone appointed for a fixed term of time or who can't be fired except for limited cause may reveal an unclear legal issue for litigation, but that doesn't change whether the person is a volunteer and/or a donor.

One night, I got an increase in agreements to volunteer by not using the word. I expressed the concept in equivalent terms. Also, a museum developed a whole volunteer program by not using the word.

At a house of worship, giving your time and skill, whatever its theology may say (@Caroline Buchanan's comment), is, in secular terms, volunteering.

A tax benefit for volunteering is proposed by a commentator (@Sandra Lyle). I disagree unless someone can create a volunteer-value accounting system that would persuade the IRS (the US's main tax collection agency) that most fraud would be squelched. With few narrow exceptions, I don't think someone can. And widespread fraud would mean the rest of us, including volunteers, would pay more.

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