
Ideological animus triumphs over the voluntarism vogue.

VISTA'S LOST HORIZONS

BY ANN HULBERT

LAST SPRING, at Congressional reauthorization hearings for the Volunteers in Service to America program, one of its founding fathers, Hyman Bookbinder, speculated that "if there was not a VISTA on the books today, I think this Reagan Administration would have probably joyfully invented it. It is so consistent with the basic philosophy of the current Administration." The uplifting acronym does indeed sound like vintage Ronald Reagan rhetoric, and the theme of voluntarism has been one of his favorites ever since his nomination, when he intoned: "Let us pledge to restore, in our time, the American spirit of voluntary service, of cooperation, of private and community initiative, a spirit that flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation."

But as it happens, there is a VISTA program on the books, and the Reagan Administration is joyfully set on dismantling it. Dedication to the spirit of partisan politics apparently flows more deeply and mightily than devotion to the spirit of voluntary service in the Republican regime. VISTA, an antipoverty volunteer program begun under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, has had a peripatetic, politicized existence: popular when the Democrats are in power, downplayed when the Republicans have their turn. Originally conceived as a "domestic Peace Corps" of full-time, stipended volunteers enlisted in LBJ's War on Poverty, VISTA was tucked safely out of sight in Nixon's ACTION agency and neglected under President Ford. But VISTA flourished under President Carter and his ACTION director, Sam Brown, sending more volunteers than ever before (over four thousand) to spend a year working on hundreds of different projects in neighborhoods across the country—helping a tenant's group insulate apartments in New England, for example, or giving out food to the needy in New York. With Reagan's election, VISTA's fortunes have declined more dramatically than ever, at the same time that voluntarism has been touted as the up-and-coming trend.

James Burnley, Reagan's first director of VISTA, emphasized the partisan shift in an article, "Take My Agency—Please!" in the April 1982 *Conservative Digest*:

There may not be another agency in the federal government where, on last Election Day, the political pendulum swung more broadly. One example: I am a conservative Republican from North Carolina. My predecessor as di-

rector, Marge Tabankin, won her political spurs on the radical fringes of the antiwar movement. In May 1972, at the height of the Vietnam War, she traveled to Hanoi, where she participated in a press conference denouncing supposed war crimes by the United States.

Haunted by this vivid vision of his predecessor, Burnley announced, "I'm working as hard as I can to be the last director of VISTA"—though he switched over to the Justice Department in March of this year, before the deed was done. But his replacement, Constance Horner, and the current director of ACTION, Thomas Pauken, share Burnley's determination to phase out VISTA. They are undaunted by resistance from Congress. Although last spring's VISTA reauthorization bill specified funding floors designed to thwart attempts to eliminate the program—\$16 million for fiscal year 1982 (down from \$30 million appropriated in 1981) and \$8 million for 1983—ACTION itself came up with a reprogramming request for only \$8.7 million this year and \$231,000 for 1983, just enough to close VISTA down. Ideally, the Administration and the agency's leadership would like VISTA to vanish even sooner—by September 30, 1982, a year before the reauthorization legislation expires. Already the program has been cut to roughly half its former size, and the terms of the remaining 2,500 or so volunteers have been conveniently timed to expire en masse, rather than at staggered times throughout the year as usual.

The crusade to do away with VISTA clearly is not inspired by economic and policy rationales, but by simple ideological animus. Even the conservative Heritage Foundation advised a less drastic course in its blueprint for the new regime, *Mandate for Leadership* (1981). Pointing out that "VISTA is an established program with much support in Congress and the media," the report realistically concluded that "it would be far easier to change the character of VISTA than to eliminate it." However, the Reagan Administration, fired up for a fight, is more committed to destroying what it conceives to be a leftist bastion than to salvaging a federal volunteer program—though even Jim Burnley has admitted that "not all VISTA projects are confrontational in nature and based on the leftist community organizing theory. Quite a few are unobjectionable."

Certainly the standard economic profile of the pro-

gram recited at every Congressional hearing suggests that VISTA strikes the right style for the new voluntarism vogue, which celebrates self-help and localism. Modest by almost any standard—at its height in 1980, it had a budget of \$30 million, a volunteer force of 4,800—VISTA is directed by its legislation to “secure and exploit opportunities for self-advancement” among the poor. The annual cost of a VISTA volunteer, according to the program’s figures, is a mere \$7,800 (stipend plus training costs plus administrative expenses), and each volunteer generates an average of \$24,000 in other private and public resources and recruits an average of fifteen non-VISTA volunteers. In recent years, roughly two-thirds of all VISTA volunteers have been recruited from the neighborhoods they served, half have been low-income people themselves, nearly 15 percent have been over 55 years old; they aren’t the corps of white, middle-class college kids they once were. They have been assigned to local projects—some public, but many private, nonprofit organizations as well—where they work for a year, on call day and night, supported at a subsistence level. Almost three-quarters of all VISTA projects have been continued after the volunteers departed. Some ex-VISTA ventures have even been known to reap a profit, thanks to starry-eyed VISTA volunteers turned sharp-eyed entrepreneurs. In 1970, for example, a University of Iowa student named George Whyte dropped out and joined VISTA. Impressed by the handicraft skills of the women in the South Dakota region where he was sent, and “too dumb to know it couldn’t be done,” he set out to establish a craft business. By 1981 the employee-owned Dakotah Inc. projected \$12 million in sales of quilts, bedspreads, and draperies, and had helped revive the declining rural area. The U.S. Jaycee Foundation gave Dakotah its “Uplift” award.

BUT VISTA’S opponents ignore these anecdotes and figures presented by the program’s champions, and instead reflexively claim that VISTA is too expensive. ACTION’s new administrators also ignore the policy guidance offered from a friendlier quarter, the Heritage Foundation’s *Mandate for Leadership*. Instead of calling for an end to VISTA, the report lists ways to direct the program’s policy away from its past “leftist” emphasis on organizing poor people as a group against local government and business. To set VISTA on a proper conservative course of quietly “providing services which might help individuals escape from the cycle of poverty,” a Republican VISTA director should, among other things, make sure the regulations “effectively restrict VISTA volunteers from union organizing and from lobbying state and local governments and legislatures” and weigh specialized skills more than idealistic impulses in recruiting volunteers. However, even such a revised, straitlaced version of VISTA—which would, say, send volunteers out to tutor kids rather than to help organize tenant associations—is

more than the current Administration wants left on its books.

So, shoving *Mandate for Leadership* to the back of their shelves, ACTION’s leaders have turned to a far more hysterical Heritage Foundation feuilleton, “The New Left in Government, Part II: The VISTA Program as ‘Institution-Building,’” for inspiration in their ideological campaign to end VISTA. According to the report, which dwells on conspiracy theories about Sam Brown’s controversial tenure, there is “a widely held perception of VISTA as a program which, from 1977 through 1980, was captured by New Left radical activists and used to funnel government funds to organizations advocating programs and strategies basically antithetical to American political and economic usages.” Sam Brown’s National Grant program, designed to encourage networks among community organizing groups, is the main target of conservatives’ wrath—not surprisingly: conservatives have every right, as well as respectable reasons, to think that it’s inappropriate to spend federal money on such activist, adversarial efforts. Nonetheless, as Congress concluded in 1979, the National Grant program hardly amounted to a radical conspiracy, nor were the grantees guilty of misusing funds for agitprop, as their critics implied. Rather, Brown was exercising—provocatively perhaps—the prerogative of a new party in power. His aim was to liberalize Ford’s comparatively conservative VISTA, and he accordingly gave grants to groups too activist for conservative tastes. The VISTA projects sponsored by various National Grant recipients were not outlandish socialist experiments—volunteers helped brown-lung victims, for example, and old people whose utilities had been turned off—but they did make a point of emphasizing the liberal goal of “empowering,” rather than simply serving, the poor.

Beneath the polemics that have clouded VISTA’s career, there is a discernible disagreement about the nature of voluntarism—a tension that has existed in the movement since its flowering in the Progressive era. The more conservative view has been that volunteers should provide direct social services to those in need; the liberal inclination has been to argue that volunteers should encourage social action by and for those in need. This “case” versus “cause” debate reflects broader differences in social outlook. Conservatives commonly envision voluntarism as a cultural undertaking, affiliated with local churches and other established civic groups, and devoted to changing attitudes, not economic or political arrangements. Liberals are more likely to see voluntarism as a fundamentally political enterprise, dedicated to promoting democratic participation among the poorest citizens and to enlightening policymakers about the role of the welfare state.

But in practice the difference usually amounts to one of emphasis. And what is perhaps most striking about views of voluntarism is the commitment shared by

right and left to the ideas of self-help and self-reliance—and an accompanying reservation about governmental assistance. "Voluntarism is an essential part of our plan to give government back to the people," President Reagan proclaimed. "Let us go forth and say to the people: join us in helping Americans help each other." Mark Blitz of ACTION's policy planning staff elaborated this familiar Republican line: "The task now is to begin to reinforce those activities by which people in a community deal with their own problems and learn once again not to be dependent on government. . . . We're really reaching back to the America Tocqueville described, in which volunteer activity was not merely a kind of disinterested charity but a form of self-reliance." More surprising, though, is that none other than Sam Brown sounded the same note in an article he wrote on VISTA's fifteenth anniversary:

Instead of encouraging the poor to help themselves we have told them to wait for the federal grant or the expert solution that is sure to come. Too few governmental programs reward the self-reliance of the poor. . . . We have, in short, created a system of helping that encourages the poor to be passive rather than active, dependent rather than self-reliant, recipients rather than producers, clients instead of people proud of their own work.

What's more, many conservatives and liberals alike are ready to recognize that the federal government, which has contributed to the current problem of dependency, necessarily has a part to play in the voluntaristic solution.

HOWEVER, the Reagan Administration's approach toward VISTA betrays a greater eagerness to announce what kind of government involvement in voluntarism it opposes than to outline a credible, creative approach it supports. The President claims to want to replenish that "deep and mighty river" of voluntary spirit in American communities and souls, but he and his appointees don't acknowledge that such rivers are rarely calm, quiet, or easily controlled. As Constance Horner of VISTA explains, conservatives aim to discourage an activist "form of community organizing which is designed to elicit a confrontation between poor people as a group and government or nongovernment institutions in their communities." The reason: "Such confrontations are usually designed to encourage expansion of programs, entitlements, rights which only serve to enhance dependency, not self-reliance." Some VISTA projects no doubt were "designed" to elicit such confrontations, but many more simply happened to cause some stir in the course of more straightforward service—because, as the history of American voluntarism has shown, the poor in our democratic society are likely to have to turn to their government and local institutions as well as to their selfless neighbors for help. What the Administration

does support, says Horner, is "community organizing that arises as a very natural response by members of a certain community group to address a specific problem through self-help, through sharing information." Naturally VISTA, along with every sociable American, values such natural and harmonious neighborliness, and has tried to encourage such trickles of volunteer spirit where they surface.

BUT ACTION's other proposals for government sponsorship of voluntarism don't promise to deepen the river. Starting with the aggressive campaign to abolish VISTA, the agency's plans seem to be designed to avoid that "confrontational" form of organizing, not to find alternative ways to promote self-reliance among the poor. In fact, the two aims appear incompatible: avoiding confrontation seems to require downplaying the poverty focus, soft-pedaling the self-help theme, and coming up with just the sort of ineffective volunteer initiatives that deserve to be the first to get cut in hard budgetary times. ACTION touts its Vietnam Veterans Leadership program (dedicated to boosting veterans' self-images) and its Young Volunteers in ACTION program (designed to get 14 to 22-year-olds to volunteer eight hours of their time a month); but both amount to little more than superficial displays of conservative style.

Everyone, even President Reagan in a rehearsed moment, likes to quote Tocqueville when invoking the voluntarism vogue that will inspire America anew. Conservatives no doubt think fondly of the passage in *Democracy in America* about citizens gathering to build a church and found a temperance society. But perhaps they overlook Tocqueville's vision of the political agitation that such voluntaristic, civic spirit inevitably gives rise to in a democracy. "No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult; a confused clamor rises on every side, and a thousand voices are heard at once, each expressing some social requirements," Tocqueville marveled. "The great political movement which keeps American legislatures in a state of continual agitation . . . is only an episode and a sort of extension of the universal movement which begins in the lowest ranks of the people and thence spreads successively through all classes of citizens." The call to voluntarism, after all, is supposed to rouse the nation from its apathy and to inspire willful activity, especially among the lowest ranks. Not that anyone thinks undue agitation is a remedy for what ails us. It might surprise some of Marge Tabankin's enemies that she herself has acknowledged that "an overly idealistic vision is not useful. It builds expectations that can't be delivered." But a democratic vision of voluntarism is essential—and it is what has guided VISTA in its efforts to help the poor help themselves. Despite all the inspiring words, the Reagan Administration gives scant evidence of having that vision.