

SURVIVING THE REAGAN CUTBACKS:  
THE RESURRECTION OF VISTA

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## INTRODUCTION

Ronald Reagan's assumption of the Presidency in 1980 marked the beginning of substantial cutbacks in the delivery of social services by the federal government. For the first two years of his administration the President acted almost without opposition in his move to reduce the role of the government in this area of social policy. However, as Reagan passed the midpoint of his first-term, his momentum appears to have slowed. In many cases, the administration's hitherto successful attempts to eliminate social programs were opposed, if not stymied, by an unwilling Congress.

This is clearly apparent in the legislative journey made by the Domestic Volunteer Service Act amendments of 1984. Among the provisions of that Act none better illustrates the conflict between the Congress and the President than the contest over the reauthorization of VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America). The Administration had begun phasing VISTA out in 1981, yet in the 1984 Domestic Volunteer Service Act, not only was the program maintained, but it was also expanded and assured priority in terms of funding. The purpose of this paper is to trace the amendment process of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, with particular emphasis on VISTA; this will be done with the intent of pinpointing

exactly why VISTA was able to be "reborn" at a time when so many federal services were being eliminated.

One possible reason for Congress' willingness to confront the Reagan administration over VISTA was in the philosophical difference between a very conservative President and his more liberal legislature. However, there are two other important explanations which should be explored. First, the ACTION agency, of which VISTA forms a part, made some administrative and legal blunders which Congress could hardly ignore. Second, Reagan's much articulated commitment to volunteerism left him in the position of being unable to make an exception of VISTA. In retrospect, all three developments combined to make VISTA suitable terrain on which to oppose the presidential will.

#### Political Context

Upon becoming President in 1980, Reagan wasted no time in implementing his view of an appropriate role for the federal government. Bendick and Levinson write:

...One of the central themes of the Reagan administration has been to reduce the role of the federal government in social problems and community affairs and to increase the role of a variety of alternative institutions, including not only state and local governments but also philanthropic and voluntary organizations, the business sector and the charitable activities of individual citizens.<sup>1</sup>

However, as Salamon and Lund point out, Reagan's desire to minimize the role of the federal government in

such areas as social services is balanced by his belief that governmental authority may be used to enforce discipline and regulate "immoral" social behavior.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Reagan philosophy smiles on government involvement in areas such as abortion, birth control and prayer in public schools. The VISTA program fell into both categories. Its emphasis on volunteers made it seem the epitome of all Reagan held sacred. In declaring 1983 the National Year of Voluntarism, Reagan stated:

Voluntarism is a cornerstone of the American way of life and a fundamental characteristic of our American heritage. The generosity and civic-mindedness of the American people has long been a noted aspect of our Nation. Since its inception, this has been a country in which neighbor has lent a hand to neighbor, and families have banded together to help one another in times of adversity.<sup>3</sup>

In the next paragraph of the proclamation, a caveat emerges. "We cannot rely solely on institutions of government to provide remedies for our problems."<sup>4</sup> Since VISTA is a government-run volunteer program it becomes suspect <sup>as</sup> <sub>A</sub> Reagan wants decreased federal involvement in social services. Moreover, VISTA volunteers, while not necessarily "immoral," were thought to be working "to render irrelevant the election results."<sup>5</sup> Thus, in Reagan's eyes, the federal government was justified in getting rid of a politically undesirable activity by eliminating the program.

Reagan's chief means of implementing his views was through the budget; the political tenor of the Congress in the first years of his administration allowed him to do this. 1980 marked the return of Republican control of the Senate, and an increase in Republican representation in the House. Members of both Houses seemed in awe of Reagan's victory and were evidently initially unwilling to oppose what seemed to be the popular will backing the new President's policies. Furthermore, the poor state of the economy and concern over the deficit were problems Congress could not ignore. Thus, there was "an unusual degree of Congressional acquiescence in the new administration's early proposals.<sup>6</sup> Reagan's 1981 Budget drastically cut the funds for numerous social services, including VISTA, yet Congress made little, if any, remonstrance. Even Budget Director David Stockman's statement on April 13, 1981 that VISTA should be completely eliminated elicited no immediate Congressional response.

However, by 1982, there were evidences that Congress was beginning to chafe under Reagan's axe-wielding tactics. Furthermore, there were signs that public support for Presidential policies was not as strong as it had been in 1980. In 1982, the Democrats picked up 26 seats in the House. In the Senate, while there were still 55 Republicans, a number of these Republicans had narrowly avoided defeat, and to do so many had to disavow Reagan policies. "By 1982,

Republican Senators began to see their futures not inextricably linked with Ronald Reagan and many began trying to distance themselves from his policies.<sup>8</sup> By 1983, Presidential popularity was at its lowest point with only 35% of Gallup Poll respondents approving of his handling of the job.<sup>9</sup> It was at this time that VISTA's reauthorization became a subject of discussion in the Congress.

Background of VISTA and the Domestic Volunteer Service

Amendment

VISTA was created under the Johnson administration as a domestic version of the Peace Corps. In 1971, the program was combined with six other existing volunteer programs to form ACTION. ACTION was legislated through the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973. Amendments to the 1973 Act in both 1976 and 1979 allowed ACTION, including VISTA, to continue at approximately the same level of operations until 1981 when authorization for the agency was due to expire. At this point, VISTA's continued existence became a matter of doubt. In the spring of 1981, as has been noted, the new Budget Director called for the elimination of VISTA. On April 27, 1981, in a rescission proposal, the administration sought to reduce the funding for VISTA earlier allocated by the Carter administration. In amendments to the 1981 Budget, the administration proposed phasing down VISTA. Congress accepted this concept in passing the 1981 Omnibus Reconciliation

Act which reduced funding for VISTA from \$43 million to \$16 million.

The administration's reasons for eliminating VISTA centered on two basic tenets. First, VISTA was not cost-effective. Why should the federal government pay \$7,000 per VISTA volunteer when the same program goals could be achieved by unstipended full or part-time volunteers, along the lines of the RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) program? Secondly, VISTA was a hotbed of political activity, and political activity of the wrong type. The Reagan administration considered VISTA, as it had operated during the Carter administration, as "captured by new left radical activists and used to funnel government funds to organize advocating programs and strategies basically antithetical to American political and economic usages."<sup>10</sup>

In Major Themes of the 1985 Budget, the OMB (Office of Management and Budget) indicates its dislike by commenting that in its 1981 budget request, ACTION "blatantly stated: 'VISTA can have the most impact on the conditions of poverty by assisting poor people to come together to influence decisions that affect their lives.'"<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the Reagan administration did not believe VISTA should be in the business of empowerment.

While the new administration hammered away at VISTA's budget, the new head of ACTION, Thomas Pauken, chipped

away at the program from a different angle. Pledging to purge ACTION of "social reformers,"<sup>12</sup> in April, 1981 he published in the Federal Register revised VISTA guidelines, effective immediately, which deleted community organization as a required project activity. Deputy posts nationwide were abolished. Between April 1981 and February 1982, more than 30 VISTA projects were denied refunding. Recruiting information about VISTA was no longer circulated, VISTA's name was dropped from ACTION stationery and the program was no longer mentioned in ACTION's newsletter.

In the summer of 1982, Congress approved a further cut in VISTA funding, allocating \$8 million, and ordered a further reduction in field offices. By this time almost half of VISTA-sponsored projects and volunteer projects nationwide had been eliminated. Between 1980 and 1983 VISTA's budget was slashed from \$34 million to \$8 million. The number of volunteers was dropped from 8,000 to 5,000, and the number of projects from 840 to 450.<sup>13</sup> The administration's request for VISTA for FY 1984 was \$196,000, considered the amount requisite to complete the elimination of the program.

While Congress appears to have been in a state of stupor during this period, there was, in fact, a glimmer of activity. In combination with six colleagues, Representative Austin

Murphy, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Select Education of the House Committee on Education and Labor, (the Committee responsible for oversight of the ACTION agency) had asked the GAO (General Accounting Office) in the spring of 1982 to look into the policies and practices of ACTION, particularly regarding VISTA. The Congressman was concerned over evidence that ACTION was using VISTA resources for other new programs which were not specifically authorized by the Act. The findings of the GAO constituted the basis for an Oversight Hearing held in April of the following year concerning the reauthorization of VISTA. The stage was set for further legislative activity.

Activity in the Senate

While activity concerning the reauthorization of the Act began earlier in the House than in the Senate, progress was considerably smoother in the Senate. S1129 was introduced on the Senate floor on April 21, 1983 during the Reagan-proclaimed "National Volunteer Week." It was introduced by Senators Hatch and Denton, Chairmen respectively of the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources and its Subcommittee on Family and Human Services to which the bill was referred. Hearings on the bill began the following day. Chairman Denton both presided and constituted the only member of the Senate present. Three Congressional staff

members also attended. The presence of only one Senator is not surprising in this case. First, this was a legislative rather than an oversight hearing. The purpose of the hearing was, thus, not to gather information, but to establish a public record, in this case, one supportive of VISTA. Secondly, the Senate is known to accord less importance to subcommittees, preferring to make decisions in full committee. Finally, Senator Denton's singular presence suggests agreement by his fellow subcommittee members over his course of action within the hearing. An examination of written questions by other members of the subcommittee (Senators Metzenbaum, Dodd and Hatch) shows no evident divergence of opinion. They manifest clear support for VISTA. Senator Dodd, for instance, equates a desire to eliminate VISTA ~~with~~ with the belief that there is "no longer need to focus on anti-poverty programs even though we have record employment in this country today."<sup>14</sup> Senator Metzenbaum hammers away at discrepancies in testimony adverse to VISTA, yet has no questions for those witnesses testifying in favor of VISTA.

*Unemployment*

The line-up of witnesses present also gives the impression that the cards were <sup>Stacked</sup> in favor of VISTA. Thomas Pauken, the Director of ACTION, is the only individual present to testify against VISTA. The other five witnesses represent groups which have worked on VISTA projects with VISTA volunteers. They are: an official from the Connecticut Department of

Corrections, a VISTA volunteer from the United Societies of Saint Stanislaus, the President of the National Association of RSVP Program Directors, the President of the National Association of Foster Grandparent Directors and the President of the National Association of Senior Companion Project Directors. All have a serious interest in the continuation of VISTA.

The purpose of the hearing was, therefore, to gain support for the maintenance of the VISTA program. This is interesting in that both Senators Hatch and Denton are Republicans, indicating that there was not complete congruence between the President and his party at that time. Hatch, in particular, illustrates a marked swing toward the center during the period 1980-83, despite having been elected in 1976 on a very conservative ticket. One fellow Senator remarked concerning Hatch, "If I didn't know better, I would have thought I heard the distinct accents of a born-again liberal."<sup>15</sup> However, since both Denton and Hatch were elected in 1980 by a larger share of votes than Reagan in their respective constituencies, both must have felt secure enough to confront the President on the VISTA issue. The Report of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, which was reported to the Senate on July 14, 1983 (Senate Report 980182), manifests the same near unanimity toward maintaining VISTA. 16 Committee members

voted that the Bill be reported out of committee with only two voting nay. The Committee made the following recommendations. First, the target population was expanded to include groups such as the homeless, jobless, and hungry not specifically mentioned in the original act. A stipulation was made that applications from potential VISTA projects must show written evidence of local support. Local VISTA sponsors were given power to replace volunteers who became unavailable for service rather than waiting for ACTION to do so. Finally as a gesture to the administration, the Committee recommended that VISTA programs be encouraged to "stimulate the use of additional resources from the private sector."<sup>16</sup>

The only area in which the Committee Report shows divergence over VISTA is that of appropriations. In the Subcommittee Hearing, Senator Denton queried ACTION Director Pauken closely as to the amount of money necessary to maintain VISTA at current levels. Pauken responded with the figure of \$14 million.<sup>17</sup> Not content with the research done by the executive branch, Senator Hatch, Chairman of the Committee, contacted the CBO (Congressional Budget Office) which gave the slightly higher figure of \$18.78 million to maintain VISTA at current levels. Senator Denton offered an amendment to appropriate \$11.8 million. This was rejected. Senator Kennedy then proposed \$25 million

for VISTA with increases to \$28 million in 1985 and \$30 million in 1986; this was also rejected. A compromise amendment presented by Senator Hatch was then accepted by a vote of 16 to 2, allocating \$15 million for 1984, \$17 million for 1985 and \$20 million for 1986. The two opposing Senators Humphrey and Grassley are both financial conservatives. Senator Grassley has been described as "one of the most ardent budget-cutters in a Senate preoccupied with reducing federal spending,"<sup>18</sup> while Senator Humphrey was said to be the "toughest skinflint in the Senate."<sup>19</sup> Joined by Senator Nickles, characterized as "at the conservative end of a conservative group of newcomers,"<sup>20</sup> they voted against a budget waiver for S1129, another means of keeping the bill from being reported out. (The budget waiver was necessary because the Senate would not be able to act on S1129 before the May 15 deadline established by the Congressional Budget of 1974.) Yet all three Senators supported Senator Denton's proposal to allocate \$11-8 million to VISTA, and Senator Nickles even supported Senator Hatch's compromise. Thus, the final opposition to reporting out the bill indicates not so much a philosophical disagreement with VISTA, but rather, a reluctance to spend much money on it. There is certainly no evidence that there was any concerted effort within the Committee to eliminate VISTA.

S1129 was considered in the Senate by a call of the calendar on September 14, 1983. It was introduced by Senator Hatch, as Chairman of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources. Interestingly, while VISTA is the subject of the first title of the bill, Hatch does not bring it up in his speech until after he has discussed other, more popular programs included in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act. This leads one to believe that Hatch wanted to put his audience in a receptive frame of mind concerning the bill before mentioning a potential fly in the ointment. This suggests that Hatch anticipated some resistance. However, the record of the debate exhibits no controversy. None of the conservative Republicans utters a word. Furthermore, speeches made by Senators Cranston, Kennedy, Hatch and Stafford do not focus merely on the Act; each specifically hails the achievements of VISTA, alluding to case studies, reading letters of support and citing personal experience. Senators Kennedy and Cranston advocate an expansion of the program. Senator Cranston describes the financial figures in the bill as envisaging steady growth and holding out "the promise of one day restoring this program to the strength it once enjoyed."<sup>21</sup> Senator Kennedy calls expansion "essential if we are to meet the needs of these new poor as well as all the other struggling members of our society."<sup>22</sup> Despite a Republican majority in

the Senate, S1129 was passed by voice vote exactly as reported by the Labor and Human Resources Committee on September 14, 1983.

Activity in the House

Progression of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act Amendments through the legislature procedures of the House was not as smooth as in the Senate, but certainly it was more colorful. The administration's request for elimination of VISTA was included in a bill reauthorizing the other programs under the ACTION umbrella and formed part of the President's budget proposals for 1984. This bill, H. 2063, was sponsored by Representatives Bartlett and Erlenborn.

After the Administration Bill was introduced in early 1981, the House Subcommittee on Select Education of the House Committee on Education and Labor held an Oversight Hearing on the operations of the ACTION agency. The purpose of the hearing appears to have been three-fold. First, the hearing was the normal response to the introduction of a bill - the bill was referred to the subcommittee with responsibility for the ACTION agency. Secondly, as has been mentioned, Representative Murphy who was Chairman of the Subcommittee had demanded <sup>a</sup> GAO investigation of the Agency a year earlier, and was eager to air the GAO's findings. Thirdly, Representative Murphy and others supportive of VISTA planned to introduce their own version of a VISTA reauthorization,

"a bill which emphasizes the important role that VISTA can play in meeting the pressing needs of today in areas such as providing food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless."<sup>23</sup> The hearing would serve as the background for this bill.

Including the Chairman, six representatives were present at the hearing, three Democrats and three Republicans, two of whom, Erlenborn and Bartlett, were ardently against reauthorization of VISTA. Five Democratic members of the Subcommittee were absent and one Republican. Thus, there was no consensus regarding VISTA within the Subcommittee.

The opening statement of the Chairman makes it clear that he is in support of reauthorization of VISTA. He states that "abundant testimony before this subcommittee over the past several years, and the firsthand information received from VISTA projects in our own districts, shows how effective VISTA is in generating additional volunteers and private sector resources within a community."<sup>24</sup> As part of input to the hearing, he has solicited information on the effectiveness of VISTA from numerous organizations across the country; the written testimony and comments from these organizations are eloquently supportive of VISTA. The preponderance of the evidence from "the field" is thus wholly in favor of a reauthorization of VISTA.

The choice of an overnight, rather than a legislative hearing, reveals a more complex strategy on the part of the Chairman, however, than a mere marshalling of support. A central focus of the hearing is possible wrong-doing by the ACTION agency. Invited to the hearing were Robert A. Peterson, Senior Associate Director of the Human Resources Division of the GAO, and Thomas Pauken, Director of ACTION. Mr. Peterson presents the findings of the GAO investigation of ACTION to date. (The investigation had not been completed at the time of the hearing.) GAO had found, for instance, that in revising VISTA guidelines concerning community organization, the agency had neglected to provide the required 30 days for public comment. It also discovered that ACTION had planned to obligate less for VISTA than the \$16 million established by the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981. Furthermore, there was evidence of an inordinate number of lay-offs or transfers of civil service staff in the name of budgetary restrictions while at the same time 18.9% of the persons on the ACTION Payroll were political appointees.<sup>25</sup> The questions to Mr. Peterson are probing and phrase in different ways the key question of whether there was intentional wrong-doing at the Agency. Furthermore, while questions to Mr. Peterson could be categorized as evocative or corroborative, many of the questions addressed to Mr. Pauken are more of the attack variety. This is particularly

true of questions asked by Representative Murphy and Miller. Representative Murphy stresses inconsistencies in Mr. Pauken's statements while Representative Miller interrupts Mr. Pauken several times to demand clarification. The emphasis on possible wrong-doing is directed at Mr. Pauken as a "Reagan man."

Circuitously, therefore, Chairman Murphy is using the hearing to suggest that the Reagan administration is using an agency under the House's jurisdiction to operate in ways and towards ends contrary to the intent of the House. The evidence elicited from Mr. Peterson and Mr. Pauken is meant to challenge the House to reclaim its authority. Since Mr. Pauken has already been summoned 12 times before various other subcommittees, Chairman Murphy is not without reason in his belief that ACTION has perhaps strayed from Congressional intent.<sup>25</sup> Thus, armed with evidence of public support for VISTA, the suggestion that the executive branch was going too far, and the knowledge that other members of Congress were also questioning current developments, VISTA backers could hope that the House would see VISTA as an area in which it should stand fast against the Presidential position.

Chairman Murphy's maneuvers did not go uncontested, however. Representatives Erlenborn and Bartlett were active participants in the hearing. Representative Bartlett, in particular, tends to ask leading questions which show exactly

where he stands on VISTA. He asks, for example: "Would you advocate that Congress reauthorize the VISTA Program, or do you believe that there are better ways that can better be used to promote voluntarism...?"<sup>27</sup> Representative Erlenborn is more low-key; he concentrates on getting Mr. Peterson to suggest that VISTA projects can be accomplished without federal support.<sup>28</sup>

These two Congressman continue to fight hard throughout the legislative process. The Subcommittee reported its findings to the Committee on Education and Labor on April 26, 1983. The Committee is obviously no stranger to dissension; Smith and Deering write that the members retain "a strong motivation to support or oppose the federal role in areas of poverty, education and labor."<sup>29</sup> Those opposing a federal role lost the first round in that the bill sponsored by Committee is not that introduced by Bartlett and Erlenborn, but H.R. 2063. This is Murphy's bill, introduced in the House on April 20, 1983. Defeat does not bring silence with it, however. The Committee Report, (H. Dept. 98-161), submitted to the House on May 16, 1983, contains a majority report, an "additional view" from Representative Erlenborn and a "dissenting view" from Representative Bartlett.

Representatives Erlenborn and Bartlett, while on the same team, exhibit a very different style of play. John

Erlenborn was elected to the House in 1976 from a district in Illinois "rarely outdone in its Republicanism."<sup>30</sup> He was unassailable even during the Watergate period; the Democratic candidate still only garnered 33.4% of the vote. He has been consistently conservative throughout his career. In 1980 he was rated an 11 by Americans for Democratic Action and the AFL-CIO, with an 85 from Americans for Constitutional Action and 90 from the Chamber of Commerce of the United States. His security in his position manifests itself in an unaggressive almost courtly treatment of his fellow congressmen. His opposition to VISTA is oblique, rather than frontal. For instance, his argument against VISTA as it appears appended to the Committee Report is an "additional" view, not a dissenting one. It is a short three paragraphs long. In this explication of his view, he argues not against VISTA per se, but against a funding floor for the program. He ends by being "hopeful" the funding floor will be removed.<sup>31</sup>

Steve Bartlett, newly elected to the House in 1982, frames his opinions in a much more militant form. His addition to the Committee Report is a dissent of almost three pages. He rejects not only the funding floor for VISTA but questions the legitimacy of the program. He argues that federal support of this "so-called" volunteer program creates a dependency which "threatens their security and inhibits the development of private sources of funding."<sup>32</sup>

As alluded to in Representatives Erlenborn's and Bartlett's contributions to the Committee Report, the most controversial recommendation made therein was the guarantee of a funding floor for VISTA or \$25 million 1984, \$28 million for 1985 and \$30 million for 1986. Furthermore, no matter how much was eventually allocated to all ACTION programs, these amounts were to be guaranteed to VISTA. Conceivably, if enough funds were not forthcoming, VISTA would be the only program to survive. The figures were based on cost estimates by the CBO, submitted to the Committee on May 4, 1983.

Unlike its Senate counterpart, the House Committee did not request figures from ACTION during the hearing. Like the Senate, however, the House appropriation for VISTA is approximately \$4 million less than recommended by the CBO. Both Houses of Congress are aware that they are acting in a period of scarce resources and are unwilling to appear financially irresponsible. By coming up with figures lower than those suggested by the CBO, Congress is still budget-cutting. For both Houses, the CBO provides a financial foil which not only adds legitimacy to the figures arrived at, but gives those figures the image of being lower than they could be.

The funding floor became the central issue for the debates in the House on October 17 and 28, 1983. (In the meantime, ACTION's authorization had expired on September 30, but

funding at present levels was assured by Continuing Resolution.) While one might argue that, as in the Senate, those who opposed VISTA did so on financial rather than philosophical grounds, an examination of the debates proves this not to be the case. The measure was called up by special rule in the House on October 17, 1983. Debate is opened by the Chairman of the Committee, Carl Perkins. Described as having turned the Committee in the late sixties "into an open spigot of social programs,"<sup>33</sup> Representative Perkins has served in the House since 1948 and has always supported VISTA. His introduction of the Committee's recommendations lends a certain historical and institutional character to VISTA and thereby provides an adequate balance to the august opposition of John Erlenborn. Representative Perkins immediately identifies the funding floor as more than a financial exercise. The funding floor language, he states, is "essential in maintaining the integrity of VISTA..." He continues:

the authorizing committee uses this language to express its concerns for VISTA and to insure that VISTA receives first priority funding as the centerpiece and anchor for the title I programs. This funding floor has been crucial in the preservation of VISTA as the administration has<sup>34</sup> attempted to eliminate VISTA since 1981.

One must also note that under normal congressional procedure, the Appropriations Committee would be responsible for the allocation of funds. However, for more than ten years, the

authorizing committee has designated a funding floor for VISTA without opposition from Appropriations, again emphasizing Congressional belief that VISTA's existence was important enough to bypass traditional procedure and insist on a minimum appropriation for the program.

The arguments expressed in the debates by those supporting VISTA do not discriminate between the program and its funding. During the two days of debate 21 representatives speak in favor of VISTA. All are Democrats except Representative Jeffords from Vermont. A common argument is VISTA's cost-effectiveness. For the price of \$7,000 per volunteer, an average of \$24,000 in financial resources is generated at the local level and 15 part-time and full-time volunteers recruited.<sup>35</sup> VISTA is thus an excellent use of limited resources. Another argument is read. More than one speaker points out that more people in the United States are living in poverty in 1983 than in 1965, and that VISTA is the only federal program attending to the problems of hunger and homelessness.<sup>36</sup> Other speakers point to the praiseworthy ideals embodied in VISTA. For example, Representative Lowry of Washington states:

VISTA manifests many positive American ideals such as voluntarism, citizen participation, local initiative, and a commitment to community self-help and social justice. VISTA enables and encourages the least advantaged Americans to participate in and gain greater control over the decisions that affect their lives.<sup>37</sup>

Many speakers disputed the administration's contention that VISTA activities could be as effectively carried out by the private sector.

Recent studies by business, voluntary, religious and philanthropic organizations all show that the federal government cannot rely on the private sector to fill the gap caused by cutbacks in the broad spectrum of social programs designed to assist the poor.<sup>38</sup>

Almost all those supporting VISTA emphasize VISTA's track record, citing example after example of successful projects. Representatives expound on personal knowledge of effective VISTA work accomplished in their states, and maintain that most programs initiated by VISTA have continued. Representatives read numerous letters of support from organizations, thereby emphasizing the public support behind the bill. Finally, several speakers take note of the inconsistency between President Reagan's declared support of voluntarism and his desire to eliminate VISTA. Representative Mikulski asks how he can be against VISTA when he has stated:

Only when the human spirit is allowed to invent and create, only when individuals are given a personal stake in deciding their destiny, in benefitting from their own risks, only then can society remain alive, prosperous, progressive and free.<sup>39</sup>

Representative Lowry points out, "Volunteerism, cost-effective Government programs, local self-help, neighbor helping neighbor, collaboration with the private sector - the VISTA program sounds like an initiative the Reagan administration would support."<sup>40</sup> The suggestion is that

the President does not care about the homeless, hungry and poor that VISTA is designed to help.

The arguments made by the small opposition of conservative Republicans (only 25 when the final vote is taken on May, 1984) are fewer and more technical in nature. The ideological or philosophical stance given against VISTA is apparent only in the debate of October 17, and is only articulated by Representatives Erlenborn and Bartlett. Even these vocal individuals downplay this. Erlenborn alludes only briefly to "the troubled history of VISTA," "the context of this history of congressional skepticism," and this "prime example of how well-meaning, but ill-conceived Federal programs can take on a life of their own and effectively prevent the development of new more effective programs."<sup>41</sup> Representative Bartlett denies that the issue is whether or not the House supports VISTA. Rather, the question is whether or not programs are allowed to stand on their own merits.

Conservative opposition to VISTA is thus couched as opposition to the funding floor. On October 28, Representative Bartlett introduces an amendment to strike the funding floor. Opposition has now been formalized, perhaps as a dilatory tactic since the <sup>new</sup> amendment must now be considered. Representative Bartlett's reasons for the amendment are several. First, a funding floor for VISTA favors it over

ACTION programs such as RSVP and Foster Grandparents. Secondly, the floor is excessive. In a time of 5% increases for programs, the 112% increase in VISTA funding is not only unjustified but "devastating to the cause of restraining Federal spending in all areas that we consider."<sup>42</sup> Third, such excessive allocation could trigger a Presidential veto of the entire bill, thus jeopardizing the existence of other ACTION programs. Fourthly, the authorization of floor funding is "a challenge to the authority and responsibility of" the Appropriations Committee.<sup>43</sup> Representative Bartlett is supported on these points by Republican Representatives Erlenborn, Petri, Packard and Bereuter. The latter three are primarily concerned with circumvention of the authority of the Appropriations Committee and the favoritism of VISTA over other ACTION programs. (In fact all three eventually vote in support of H.R. 2655). The Erlenborn-Bartlett amendment is defeated by a recorded vote, demanded by Representative Bartlett, (another delaying tactic?) by 215 to 132, with 86 representatives not voting. Voting was generally along party lines, the vote among Republicans being 119 for the amendment and 18 against, while among the Democrats it was 13 for the amendment and 197 against.

After further discussion of the bill, a roll call was taken in which H.R. 2655 was passed by a vote of 312 to 30 with 91 not voting. Immediately following the vote

Representative Murphy requested unanimous consent that Senate bill S1129 be considered. H.R. 2655 was then laid on the table and Senate bill S1129 with amendments by the House was passed in lieu by unanimous consent. A conference with the Senate was requested, and conferees were appointed.

Conference Procedure

Conference was scheduled in the Senate on November 12, 1983. Conferees from the House included all members of the Subcommittee on Select Education and two other members of the Committee on Education and Labor. That the Speaker selected both Erlenborn and Bartlett is a sign of confidence that the preponderance of the Committee was supportive of VISTA and would be able to override any negative or dilatory tactics of those Representatives. The outcome must have been obvious. Conferees from the Senate were three Republicans including Senators Hatch and Denton and two Democrats from the Senate Subcommittee on Family and Human Services. Conferees are not bound to represent the majority of their respective Houses; while it is probably that Senate conferees were fairly unanimous in their position at the conference table, it is doubtful that Representatives Bartlett or Erlenborn acted on behalf of the House majority. In fact, neither signed the Conference Report. Furthermore, while the conference is scheduled in November 1983, it was not reported to the House and Senate until mid-April of 1984, indication that there may have been some debate among the conferees which lengthened the process.

The chief difference between the House and Senate versions of the bill centered on the allocations for VISTA. The Senate had requested \$15 million for 1984, \$14 million for 1985 and \$20 million for 1986. The House called for \$25 million for 1984, \$28 for 1985 and \$30 million for 1986. The agreed upon figures became \$17 million for 1984, \$20 million for 1985 and \$25 million for 1986. The Senate appears to have prevailed in this area. This is not surprising since a lower funding level would no doubt fare better in a Republican-dominated Senate. Most other areas of compromise surrounding VISTA involved provisions of the bill in which one chamber proposed a measure, and the other did not. In these cases, the chamber containing no provision generally receded.

The Conference Report was enrolled in the Senate on April 11, 1984. After a brief presentation by Senator Hatch the Report was agreed to. The Report was not enrolled in the House until May 8, 1984. Even at this final step of the legislative journey, the bill was not allowed to pass uncontested. Representatives Bartlett and Erlenborn once again express their non-support for the bill in terms similar to those expressed in the October debates, that is, as opposed to the funding floor. Meanwhile, other House participants in the conference procedure reiterate their support for VISTA and for the mode of funding. However,

the opposition finally indicates submission to the will of the House when Representative Bartlett concludes that he is certain that he and the Chairman of the Subcommittee are "grateful that we finally do have some legislation that we can get behind us and move on to some other subjects."<sup>44</sup> The House then agreed to the Conference Report by a vote of 369-25. Those voting for the bill have increased from 312 to 369, while those opposing it have dropped from 30 to 25. It seems clear that Congress was solidly behind the reauthorization of VISTA. The Domestic Volunteer Service Act Amendments of 1984 were enrolled in the Senate and the House on May 10, 1984 and presented to the President on the same day. The legislation became Public Law 98-288 on May 21, 1984.

#### Lobbying

While Congress does seem to have done an about-face on VISTA after allowing it to sink close to oblivion, the revival was not due to Congress alone. There was also an extensive lobbying effort. It should be remembered that Congress was not the only entity taken by surprise by the Reagan onslaught; interest groups were also caught unprepared. Like everyone else, interest groups were also operating under conditions of scarcity, and Reagan's efforts to reduce federal support fell most heavily on liberal advocacy groups. VISTA supporters fell into this category, and seemed to be unable to rally during the first two years of the Reagan administration.

However, they were given both focus and energy as the new administrators of ACTION began to take legally questionable action. As one journalist wrote, "unable to alter Pauken's course, critics have recently focused much of their attention on his methods."<sup>45</sup> Interest groups, such as Friends of VISTA and organizations affiliated with VISTA projects began to take note of such "mistakes" as improper notification time before the revision of guidelines, misallocation of VISTA funds, and account juggling. These groups also began to notice the numbers of career civil servants fired as well as the frequent use of a special civil service provision by which people with hard-to-find skills could be brought in outside of the usual civil service process, resulting in an influx of employees "distinguished mainly by their Republican references..."<sup>46</sup> Finally VISTA workers themselves began to resist. Two VISTA workers, John Facenda who had worked in Philadelphia for 17 years, and Joseph Bruch who had served since the Johnson years, refused to accept mandatory reassignments. In speaking to the newspapers they claimed the transfers were for political reasons since the areas to which they were being transferred had little ACTION activity. George Ellis, a former ACTION state director in New Mexico, quit after being reassigned to Nebraska, for what he also claimed were political activities.<sup>47</sup> In February 1983, a former

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VISTA chief of operations filed an affidavit in Congress asserting that decisions to support or cut programs were made after political screening by local Republicans.<sup>48</sup> All these missteps on the part of ACTION served to galvanize VISTA supporters into action.

Fortuitously, this occurred at the very time of re-authorization. Headed up by Friends of VISTA, an extensive letter-writing campaign began. More than 100 letters were sent to the Senate and House subcommittees responsible for VISTA's reauthorization. A letter supporting VISTA signed by 45 major national agencies was sent in October 1983 to all members of the House. Key Congressmen in both Houses were targeted for letters from past VISTA volunteers. In addition, as has been discussed, Representative Murphy sent out a questionnaire to numerous agencies sponsoring VISTA projects and received dozens of replies praising the program and calling for its reauthorization. The letter-writing campaign not only provided useful evidence of public support for VISTA, but also documented its achievements over time. Lobbying clearly played an essential role in VISTA's reauthorization.

#### Summary

It cannot be denied that Congress had a tangible commitment to VISTA, both in terms of its philosophy and as a means of dealing with social problems. By 1982, as

the backlash against Reagan began, the legislature felt secure enough to confront the administration on this point. However, the achievement was undoubtedly facilitated by two other developments. First, the new head of ACTION moved too quickly and too boldly against Congressional authority. The House Committee on Education and Labor, in particular, became incensed at the close-to-illegal actions begin taken by an agency under its jurisdiction. As Wildavsky writes, "A lie, an attempt to blatantly cover up some misdeed, a tricky move of any kind, can lead to an irresistible loss of confidence."<sup>49</sup> This is exactly what happened. ACTION first drew attention to itself by its misdemeanors at a time when it was due for reauthorization; once in the Congressional limelight, the agency could not avoid further attention. This, in turn, led to the Congressional decision that it was Congress who should be calling the shots, not the administration.

Secondly, the reauthorization of VISTA came during the National Year of the Volunteer, so designated by President Reagan. It was the President who challenged Congress "to restore in our time, the American spirit of voluntary service, of cooperation, of private and community initiatives; a spirit that flows like a mighty river through the history of our Nation."<sup>50</sup> This and countless other declarations like this one made it very difficult for the President to persist

in his plan to eliminate VISTA. This author doubts that there was ever any danger of a veto. Regardless of President Reagan's views on VISTA, he could not have denied funding to the other ACTION programs after all his laud and praise of the volunteer. Thus VISTA survived through a happy coincidence of circumstances. Without this coincidence, one wonders if Congress would have been able to save VISTA or if it, too, would have fallen under the Reagan axe.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bendick and Levinson, "Private-Sector Initiatives or Public-Private Partnerships," p. 456.

<sup>2</sup>Salamon and Lund, "Governance in the Reagan Era: An Overview," p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Community Resources Directory, ed. by Harriet Clyde Kipps. Frontpiece.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Wolman and Teitelbaum, "Interest Groups and the Reagan Presidency," p. 303.

<sup>6</sup>Salamon and Lund, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>7</sup>Carnoy, Shearer and Rumberger, A New Social Contract, p. 216.

<sup>8</sup>Ornstein, "Impact of a More Republic Congress," p. 290.

<sup>9</sup>Jones, "A New President, A Different Congress, A Maturing Agenda," p. 279.

<sup>10</sup>Hulbert, "VISTA's Last Horizons," p. 19.

<sup>11</sup>OMB, Major Themes and Additional Budget Details, FY 1984. P. 269.

<sup>12</sup>Dallas Morning News, June 18, 1983, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup>Congressional Record, May 8, 1984. P.H. 3474.

<sup>14</sup>Senate Subcommittee on Family and Human Services, Hearing on S1129, April 22, 1983, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup>Ehrenhalt, ed., Politics in America, p. 1211.

<sup>16</sup>S. Rept. 98-182, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>Senate Subcommittee on Family and Human Services, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ehrenhald, op. cit., p. 420.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 735.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 988.

<sup>21</sup> Congressional Record, Sept. 14, 1983, p. S2200.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. S2199.

<sup>23</sup> House Subcommittee on Select Education, "Oversight Hearing on the Domestic Volunteer Service Act," p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Congressional Record, October 28, 1983, p.H8787.

<sup>26</sup> Keller, "Action's Not Dull with Tom Pauken."

<sup>27</sup> House Subcommittee on Select Education, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Smith and Deering, Committees in Congress, p. 102.

<sup>30</sup> Ehrenhalt, op. cit., p. 358.

<sup>31</sup> H. Rept. 98-161, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Ehrenhalt, op. cit., p. 473.

<sup>34</sup> Congressional Record, October 17, 1983, p.H.8231.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.H.8233.

<sup>36</sup> Congressional Record, October 28, 1983, p.H.8787-8788.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.H.8790.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.H.8794.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.H.8801.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.H.8790.

<sup>41</sup> Congressional Record, October 17, 1983, p. H8232.

<sup>42</sup> Congressional Record, October 28, 1983, p. H8786.

<sup>43</sup> Congressional Record, October 17, 1983, p. H8236.

<sup>44</sup> Congressional Record, May 8, 1984, p. H3475.

<sup>45</sup> Keller, op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Choyke, "Employees Say Pauken Guts Agency," p. 32A.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Wildavsky, The Politics of the Budgetary Process, p. 76.

<sup>50</sup> Congressional Record, May 8, 1984, p. H3472.

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