

GIVE THE YOUNG A BETTER CHANCE TO SERVE THEIR COUNTRY

BY ROBERT KUTTNER



A bold new plan offers a way to revive the Kennedy spirit of national service. Among the benefits of a 'volunteer corps': A well-educated labor pool, budget savings, a broader-based army, and a big boost in civic pride

ROBERT KUTTNER IS ECONOMICS
CORRESPONDENT FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC AND
AUTHOR OF THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

When the Democratic Leadership Council was founded in 1985, with the goal of moving the Democratic Party back toward the political center, it was attacked as the "conservative white caucus." But the DLC's recent proposal for a national service is far too bold to be called centrist. It puts the DLC in the great Democratic mainstream of Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy, a tradition that offered Americans a set of generous entitlements on the condition that they be earned.

The plan, titled *Citizenship and National Service*, combines farsighted public policy with smart politics. The basic idea: America ought to address its long list of deferred social needs but must reject handouts in favor of John F. Kennedy's famous admonition, "Ask not what your country can do for you..."

National service neatly combines both goals. Under the plan, young people seeking college tuition or vocational aid would have to give something back by volunteering for either two years as soldiers or as civilian workers in human services. For each year of service, they would receive living expenses plus a voucher worth \$10,000. The voucher could be applied to tuition, training, or even as the downpayment on a first house. The student could choose to attend school first or wait until after performing national service.

The plan accomplishes a number of diverse goals: First, as yuppie values fall from grace, this plan revives the citizenship ethic of the Democratic Party. As the DLC report observes: "A strong ethic of civic obligation—of equal sacrifice for the common good—is integral to the success and survival of a free society."

CHEAP LABOR. Secondly, the plan adroitly pairs the social goal of serving the needy with the individualist theme of self-reliance. Most of the social ills that have worsened during the Reagan years require labor-intensive remedies whose principal obstacle is cost. A service corps could provide home care to keep many old people out of nursing homes. It could help staff halfway houses for the mentally ill. Its volunteers might teach adult illiterates to read. They could help staff high-quality day-care centers, neighborhood recreation programs, and an expanded conservation corps.

In the current fiscal climate, a Democrat who proposed servicing these needs with a new laundry list of government programs would be overruled on budgetary grounds. But a national service approach would require less additional outlay, about \$6 billion a year. Existing student-aid funds could do double duty. And some of the activities could produce net savings to the public budget. Day-

care that permitted welfare mothers to take jobs would reduce the relief rolls. Home care that kept people out of nursing homes would cut medicaid costs.

In effect, the volunteer corps would provide a pool of well-educated labor at below-market wages—but in a socially defensible manner. It is unrealistic to expect a breadwinner to take a career job in a mental hospital or a nursing home at \$4 an hour. But there is nothing wrong with asking a 22-year-old single person who has been educated at society's expense to spend two years giving something back at subsistence wages.

SELF-RELIANCE. The approach would also move us closer to the ideal of a citizen army, rather than a professional military composed of careerists plus the children of poor families. It would slightly lower the cost of manpower and broaden the class composition of the armed services.

Professor Charles C. Moskos Jr. of Northwestern University, author of the forthcoming 20th Century Fund study *National Service in America*, helped devise the DLC plan. Moskos says West Germany, which has universal military service, staffs its mental hospitals substantially with its 70,000 conscientious objectors, who are permitted to do alternative service. "The mental hospitals," Moskos quips, "are Germany's strongest lobby for retaining the draft."

DLC Policy Director Will Marshall, who wrote the proposal, likens it to the famous 1944 GI Bill of Rights, which at its postwar peak spent 1% of America's gross national product—equivalent to \$45 billion today—to educate and house a generation of veterans who had served their country in war. Despite its character as an "entitlement" program, there was nothing about the GI Bill that fostered dependency. On the contrary, it gave millions of vets economic self-reliance.

Moskos terms the national service plan "the GI Bill without the GI." Like the GI Bill, it has the virtue of narrowing class differences via a strategy of inclusion rather than redistribution. Lately, economic stresses have reduced the college enrollment of poor and minority youths. Moreover, many college graduates without well-off families begin working life burdened with repaying college loans. And young people without family wealth have a harder time becoming homeowners. A national service corps could give young people better educations, independent of social class—leaving society with a better-trained work force and helping society address other needs along the way. It is hard to imagine a better means of marrying a liberal social conscience with a conservative civic ethic. ■