

Politics & People / By Albert R. Hunt

Waiting for the Call

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C.—As commencement speaker John McCain shook almost 1,000 hands, there was diversity of attire with the traditional graduation gowns: the usual elegant pumps; sneakers and sunglasses worn by one NBA-bound graduate and even a barefoot young woman.

The Wake Forest University graduates last week, however, paid close attention to the message. The Arizonan senator, and defeated 2000 presidential candidate, said he wouldn't give the conventional exhortation about not being afraid to fail: "Speaking from experience, failure stinks." But it's not a permanent condition, he assured them, and what really counts is "courage" and employing it for "purposes beyond personal advantage."

Life "is a struggle against selfishness," he said in summoning them to serve country and communities. "I don't believe a passive comfortable life is worth foregoing the deep satisfaction, the self-respect," the former war hero proclaimed, that derives from serving others.

Few possess the credentials or commitment to service of John McCain. But in the first college spring commencement ceremonies since Sept. 11, it's not an uncommon refrain at the more than 4,000 institutions of higher education around America. Along with the themes of hope, optimism and pride that always make commencements special occasions, a renewed patriotism is present this year.

For all the nostalgia for the "greatest generation," the firefighters, cops and rescue workers and some passengers on those doomed airlines last September showed that exceptional courage and character are as present today. Even be-

fore crisis, young Americans were more involved and interested in service than their parents' generation.

But the tragedies of last September provided an added catalyst. Preeminent American pollsters, Peter Hart, a Democrat, and Robert Teeter, a Republican, have done several recent surveys testing attitudes of young people. A clear majority of 18-to-30-year-olds finds the appeal of government service more to help people and make a difference while serving their community; five years ago the focus was on decent pay and job security. "John F. Kennedy would have been proud of today's young people," notes Mr. Hart.

In any course on service, Mr. Bush gets about a C+: high marks for embracing expansion of the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps and promoting more volunteer service; poor marks for declaring a war on terrorism yet demanding no sacrifice, and for making service only a sporadic part of his presidency.

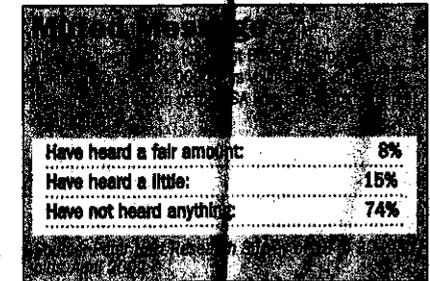
In one Hart survey, three-quarters of 18-to-30 year olds—about half of college men or women—were unaware of President Bush's call for every American to give 4,000 hours of their lifetime to service and the creation of a USA-Freedom Corps.

Service already is deeply ingrained in most college kids—another Peter Hart survey several years ago found that three-quarters engage in one form of volunteer activity. Robert Schmuhi, a professor of American Studies at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Ind., believes this potential would be more realized with sustained national leadership; young people were barely challenged during the 80s, he notes, and during the Clinton years "the

calls were muted by so much clutter," and today the call is too faint.

To be sure, most young people are turned off by politics; fewer than 40% of college kids voted in the past election. But the Hart/Teeter polls show young people are more interested in service generally and public service in particular; two-thirds respond positively to the notion of government bringing a similar determination to tackle domestic problems as to fighting global terrorism.

There is a bipartisan effort in Congress to go beyond Mr. Bush's modest



expansion of national service. In the Senate it's led by Sens. McCain and Evan Bayh (D., Ind.). Under their proposal, AmeriCorps, the domestic Peace Corps where young people provide needed services like tutoring at-risk kids, building low-income housing or assisting infirm seniors, would be expanded five fold over the next decade to 250,000 participants a year. McCain-Bayh also would provide added resources for Senior Corps, a national service program for older volunteers. Federal work-study grants given to many colleges and universities would also be more service-oriented. (In the House a companion bill is sponsored by

Democrat Harold Ford of Tennessee and Republican Tom Osborne, the former Nebraska football coach.

"There was a yearning to do something even before September 11," notes Sen. Bayh, but that tragedy "crystallized these feelings." Last month he and Mr. McCain went to the University of Michigan, where JFK launched the Peace Corps during the 1960 campaign, and 1500 kids showed up to listen to them extol the importance of community and public service.

But Sen. Bayh cautions there has to be a more concerted national effort: "If we really want to go beyond symbolism and have service become part of the fabric of our society, it requires a much larger scale and scope. If we don't seize this moment it'll be a lost opportunity."

Despite a surge in patriotism since Sept. 11, military enlistments (other than the Marines) have remained flat. Sens. Bayh and McCain are proposing a shorter term military active duty, whose enlistees presumably would perform non-combat and constabulary functions.

This yearning that Sen. Bayh cites has to be tapped. On one anniversary of the Peace Corps a former volunteer cited JFK's clarion call: "It was the first time anyone asked me to do something for someone else."

Since Sept. 11 there has been much focus on what the country can do for us: tax cuts for the rich, farm subsidies, a bank check for the energy companies. It's time for the President to start asking instead what everyone, especially young Americans, can do for their communities and their country.