

ABSTRACT

During his presidential administration, George Bush used the phrase "points of light" to connote and promote voluntary service. His program to honor those with exemplary service with a Daily Point of Light (DPOL) Award attracted great publicity—but no systematic analysis. Accordingly, this article presents the first comprehensive examination of the DPOL recipients, and the possible effects the Award had for strengthening and publicizing their voluntary activities. The analysis is based on a review of the press releases describing each recipient of the Award and a mail survey of this group administered by the authors.

The Daily Point of Light Awards: An Analysis of Recipients and Effects

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INTRODUCTION

It all started innocuously enough at the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans, LA, with a phrase uttered by then-candidate George Bush, accepting the nomination of his party for President of the United States. Adopting a rhetorical flourish penned by able speechwriter Peggy Noonan, Bush intoned, "This is America . . . a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky." Although Bush did not define the evocative phrase with precision either then or thereafter, it was apparently meant to refer to individuals, groups and organizations, that, through dedicated volunteer service make a difference in ameliorating problems in their community, an interpretation shared by Noonan (1990). She adds: "No one knew what an impact 'a thousand points of light' would have." Indeed, the phrase caught on, and the metaphor of a "thousand points of light" to meet social and community problems became a sustaining theme of the Bush

campaign and presidency, surviving his administration in a foundation that bears this name in Washington, D.C.

Points of Light have attracted tremendous popular interest and commentary. A report released by the White House in January, 1993, entitled *The Points of Light Movement* claims that at least 8,000 stories have appeared on television, radio, or in print. Despite the voluminous attention, no systematic inquiry has been undertaken of the many individuals, groups, and organizations that received a Daily Point of Light Award (DPOL) during the Bush Administration. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to provide the first comprehensive account of the recipients of the Award, and to begin to identify the effects that the DPOL may have had on their voluntary activities. To do so, the article presents a thorough analysis of the press releases issued for all recipients of the Award and, more importantly, the results of a survey administered to them by the authors.

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THE DAILY POINT OF LIGHT AWARDS

Encouraging national and community service as an approach to help the country address some of its most pressing social problems is not the exclusive province of one political party or the other (Brudney, 1990). Voluntary service has been a priority of the last several presidential administrations. For example, on September 21, 1993, President Clinton signed the National Service Act which included funding for several service programs, including AmeriCorps. President Bush, too, maintained a strong interest in national and community service.

The Bush administration founded several organizations with a commitment to voluntary service. Among them was the White House Office of National Service, created shortly after the President's inauguration in 1989. The first office ever established in the White House devoted to fostering voluntary service, its avowed mission was to use presidential leadership to make community service national policy (The White House, 1993). The Office advised the President on community service policy, communicated his policy to the nation, assisted him in calling leaders to this movement and, where appropriate, proposed legislation to encourage community service. Bush appointed C. Gregg Petersmeyer director of the Office; he was eventually promoted to Assistant to the President, a high rank held by only 17 others during the Bush Administration and comparable to that of the National Security Adviser. Petersmeyer considered the promotion evidence of the President's strong support for voluntary service (Goss, 1991).

As one highly visible means to confirm and publicize the importance of community service, in 1989 the Office of National Service began an initiative to select and name a "Daily Point of Light" on each of six days of the week. An article in the *New York Times* credits Petersmeyer with the idea for the DPOL program to honor and advertise voluntary service, the President lending his approval (DeParle, 1991).

According to The White House, each DPOL recipient was chosen as an individual or a group "engaged in direct and consequential voluntary service focused on solving serious social problems in their community." The first DPOL was awarded on November 22, 1989, to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* newspaper for its series of stories honoring citizens for their involvement in the community. The last DPOL was awarded on President Bush's final day in office, January 20, 1993; it went to the Maricci Inner City Hockey Starter Association of St. Paul, Minnesota, for its program to teach winter sports to inner-city children.

Selection for the Daily Point of Light Award was rigorous. The Office of National Service reviewed approximately 15,000 nominations for the Award (The White House). The most outstanding were forwarded to a selection committee within the Office of National Service for final consideration. To avoid outside political pressure and lobbying, members of the committee maintained anonymity. Five criteria were applied to the DPOL nominations:

- Volunteers must be engaged in hands-on, direct, consequential service.
- The work must be focused on solving a serious social problem in the community.
- The initiative must have been in place for at least one year.
- The initiative must be replicable by others with similar resources.
- The initiative must demonstrate "systemic work. In other words, an effort that actually solves a problem, rather than merely alleviates it." (*The Points of Light Movement*).

In all, the White House Office of National Service gave 1,020 Daily Point of Light Awards to 1,076 individuals, groups, and organizations in the name of the President of the United States. (As explained more fully, a single Award could designate multiple recipients.) Despite this extremely high profile and endorsement of

volunteerism, no study has been undertaken on the DPOL program, or of the results that may have been attained through it. The analysis below presents a portrait of the recipients of the DPOL, and some of the effects of the Award.

WHO ARE THE DAILY POINT OF LIGHT HONOREES?

Based on press releases describing the honorees and their accomplishments as well as related materials, the authors have analyzed all recipients of the DPOL Award. The analysis reveals that recipients are a very diverse group. They represent every state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. As Table I shows, most of the DPOL Awards, 59%, went to a group or organization. The other 41% went to individuals. The individual recipients were divided approximately evenly between women (45.6%) and men (38.5%), with family members claiming the remaining 15.9% of the individual DPOL Awards. About one in seven of the individual DPOL recipients (15%) were age 20 or younger when they received the award.

Some of the individuals awarded a Daily

Point of Light overcame significant personal challenges to serve their communities in meaningful ways. In the press releases accompanying the awards, 12% of those honored were described as having a physical or mental impairment, such as AIDS, blindness, developmental disabilities, and multiple sclerosis. Approximately six % of the individual recipients had received voluntary assistance previously.

The Daily Point of Light Awards were intended to focus attention on community service efforts successful by alleviating the nation's social ills. The authors' analysis in Table II of the substantive areas addressed by Award winners shows that over one-quarter of the DPOL recipients were actively involved in programs to help youth, through education, literacy, mentoring, child care, and parenting skills. Another quarter of the DPOL Awards went to individuals or groups and organizations addressing health concerns, such as assisting the physically and mentally disabled, caring for those with AIDS, and helping people overcome drug or alcohol abuse. As shown in Table II, the remaining DPOL recipients were active in a variety of

Table I
DPOL Award Recipients

<i>Type of Recipient</i>	<i>Number and Percentage of the Awards</i>	
Groups or Organizations	635	(59.0)
Individual	441	(41.0)
Women	201	
Men	170	
Family Members	70	
TOTAL	1,076	(100.0%)

Table II
Substantive Areas Addressed by DPOL Recipients

<i>Areas</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Youth	26.6%
Health	24.1
Assistance to the Needy	8.4
General Volunteerism	7.7
Women's Issues	7.1
Care for the Elderly	6.1
Adult Education/Training	5.3
Neighborhood Development	4.0
Environment	3.7
Other	7.0
TOTAL	100.0%

important causes: women's issues; assistance to the needy; neighborhood development; adult education and job training; care for the elderly; the environment; and other volunteer initiatives, such as services for immigrants and prisoners.

Most of the individuals, as well as the groups and organizations that received a DPOL Award, began the volunteer activity for which they were honored fairly recently. Over 60% of the individuals and nearly two-thirds of the groups and organizations began in the 1980s. Eight percent and seven %, respectively, started as recently as the 1990s. About 20% of each group began in the 1970s. Although a few individuals had life-long service dating back to the 1910s or 1920s, they were part of the only 12% that had started volunteering prior to 1970. Four of the organizations were founded before the turn of the century.

This overview derives from systematic analysis of the press releases describing the DPOLs. In order to learn more about the recipients of the Daily Point of Light Award, and the possible effects of receiving the Award, the authors undertook a mail survey of this important group in 1994. The methodology of the survey is described in the following section.

METHODOLOGY OF THE DPOL SURVEY

The first task in designing the DPOL survey was to determine the number of awards actually given. President Bush conferred 1,020 DPOLs, but since a single Award could go to multiple individuals, a larger number received recognition as a DPOL. For example, five DPOL Awards named a total of twelve people as recipients, and 30 DPOL Awards went to families, each of whom had several members and, hence, recipients. In all, the 1,020 DPOL Awards honored a total of 1,076 people, groups, and organizations. The Points of Light Foundation supplied the official listing with addresses; for group and organization recipients, the listing included a representative whom the White

House Office of National Service had contacted in making the award. This listing formed the basis for the mail survey.

The survey was intended to include every recipient of the DPOL Award. The second task in the survey process, however, was to eliminate those recipients who could not participate in order to establish the effective sample. For this purpose, 43 recipients had to be eliminated because: some individuals had died since receiving the Award; some of the organizations honored were no longer in operation at the time of the survey; and a small number of recipients declined to participate. Another 16 surveys were returned by the U.S. Postal Service with the notation "addressee unknown." Attempts to follow up by telephone confirmed that these recipients had neither a listed address nor telephone number, and were very likely deceased (individual recipients) or defunct (organizations). Almost certainly, this figure underestimates the actual number in this category. In all, 59 DPOL Award winners had to be eliminated from the sample for these reasons. Thus, the effective sample for the mail survey consisted of 961 DPOL Awards (1,020 minus 59) and 1,017 Award recipients (1,076 minus 59).

Of this total, 606 Award winners completed the DPOL questionnaire and returned it in the postage-paid envelope provided. (One follow-up mailing was conducted, again with postage-paid return envelope.) This response corresponds to 63% of the DPOL Awards given and 60% of all honorees. The remainder of this article presents findings from the survey of the Daily Points of Light.

A PROFILE OF DPOL RECIPIENTS

The DPOL survey collected background information on the recipients of the Award. Table III reveals that nearly 60 percent of the DPOLs responding to the survey are women. Of all the respondents 86% are white, and 9% are African-American. Other ethnic groups, including Native American, Asian, Eskimo, and Hispanic, account for about 5% of the total.

According to the survey, the DPOLs have generally attained a high level of formal education. Table III shows that a quarter of the respondents have completed at least some college, and another 17% have graduated. Thirty percent have completed some coursework in graduate school or received a Master's degree, and almost 12% have completed some doctoral work or received a doctoral degree. Only 16% have not attended college.

The DPOL recipients appear to be active in religious activities. Half of the respondents said that they attend religious services every week or nearly every week, and another approximately 20% attend at least a few times a year. Only 11% said that they do not attend religious services.

The Point of Light Awards recognized the contribution to community service of a huge span of age groups. The youngest DPOL was nine years old, and the oldest was over 90. On the average, recipients have lived within their present communi-

ties for 26 years, with some residing there for more than 80 years. Over two-thirds of the DPOL recipients were employed either full-time or part-time; 18% were retired. Fully 94% reported that they had voted in the 1992 presidential election.

CONFIDENCE OF DPOL RECIPIENTS IN INSTITUTIONS

The survey asked the DPOL recipients to evaluate their confidence in various institutions in American society. Not surprisingly, respondents placed greatest confidence in community and other non-profit organizations: approximately two-thirds professed great confidence in these organizations. As might be expected given the earlier responses concerning attendance at religious services, 57% of the DPOLs expressed great confidence in religious organizations. Over half place great trust in small business, but only one-fourth have similar trust in large corporations. With respect to levels of confidence, DPOL recipients had the greatest confi-

Table III
Background Characteristics of DPOL Recipients

<i>Gender of DPOL Survey Respondents</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Female	59.8
Male	40.2
TOTAL	100.0%
<i>Race of DPOL Survey Respondents</i>	
White/Non-Hispanic	86.1
African-American	9.2
Hispanic	2.3
American Indian	1.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.1
Eskimo or Aleut	0.2
TOTAL	100.0%
<i>Education of DPOL Survey Respondents</i>	
<i>Percent of respondents indicating that their highest level of formal education was:</i>	
Elementary school (Grades 1-8)	3.3
Some high school or technical training	2.5
Graduated from high school or GED	6.3
High school degree and tech. training	3.9
Some college	25.0
Graduated from college	17.2
Some graduate school	12.3
Master's degree	17.6
Some doctoral degree course-work	4.0
Doctoral degree	7.9
TOTAL	100.0%

dence in the Supreme Court (43%), followed by the Presidency (34%), and Congress (16%). Of the three levels of U.S. government, they had the most confidence in the local level (30%), followed by state government (21.5%) and the federal government (19.2%). Respondents expressed considerably less confidence in other institutions in American society, including the media, labor unions, and political parties.

BACKGROUND OF DPOL RECIPIENTS IN VOLUNTEERING

Over two-thirds of the respondents to the Daily Points of Light survey grew up in a home in which at least one parent did some kind of volunteer work. Although most have parents who had volunteered, the average age at which DPOL recipients first began this activity was twenty. Once they began volunteering, however, the DPOLs continued their involvement in service over a lengthy period: on average, respondents reported that they had volunteered for 26 years; several indicated that volunteering was a life-long habit of more than 70 years duration. Not only have DPOL recipients volunteered over many years, they also average nearly fifteen hours of volunteer work per week, far higher than the national average (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1994). Several claim that they volunteer for an admirable 100 hours on a weekly basis.

MOTIVATIONS FOR VOLUNTEERING

The survey asked DPOL recipients to consider a number of possible reasons for why they volunteer. The reasons cited most often by the DPOLs are: (I feel it is important to help others [mentioned by 99%]); (I feel compassion toward people in need [96%]); (I thought I would enjoy doing the work [89%]); and (volunteering allows me to gain new perspectives on things [84%]). Other reasons especially important to the DPOLs are that (volunteering makes me feel needed [72%]), and (volunteering is an important activity to people I respect [59%]). Based on these

survey results, recipients of the Daily Point of Light Award appear to volunteer for community-minded reasons, such as feeling compassion for those in need, rather than to advance their paid work or career. Few recipients of the DPOL indicate career interests, such as enhancing their resumes or making new contacts as motivations for volunteering. Surveys based on large, national samples usually show a broader range of motivations important to volunteers, as published for Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1994.

HOW DPOL RECIPIENTS LEARNED ABOUT VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Respondents to the Daily Point of Light survey first learned about the volunteer activities for which they received the award in a variety of ways. Almost half took the initiative by identifying a need that was not being filled in the community, and began volunteering to meet it. About one-quarter sought out the volunteer activity on their own. Over 20% responded that they had learned about the activity when they were asked by someone to volunteer. Approximately 20% learned about the activity through participation in an organization or group, and 17% through the workplace. Some DPOLs learned about the volunteer activity from a friend or relative who had benefited from it (11%), or they had seen or heard a request in the media (11%). An additional 19% responded they had become aware of the activity through other means, such as through founding an organization or relocating to another part of the country.

FORMAL RECOGNITION OF THE DPOL AWARD

As discussed above, one goal of the Daily Point of Light Awards was to focus attention on voluntary service by recognizing individuals and groups who had made a substantial difference in their communities. The Bush Administration used ceremonies and press conferences as a primary vehicles for acknowledging and publicizing the accomplishments of the DPOLs.

The extent of presidential attention given to volunteerism in this manner was high, and probably unprecedented. According to the survey respondents, almost half of the DPOLs were recognized at a ceremony or press conference held in their communities: more than one-quarter said that President Bush attended the event. Another 16% were formally recognized at a ceremony or press conference attended by the President in Washington, DC. Vice President Dan Quayle was sometimes present at ceremonies for DPOL recipients in their communities (9%) or in Washington, DC (3%).

MEDIA COVERAGE RESULTING FROM THE DPOL AWARD

As might be expected, one goal of the Daily Point of Light Awards occurred at the local level. DPOL survey respondents reported that, on average, between one and two stories about their award had been broadcast on local television stations (average = 1.5) and on local radio (average = 1.34); nearly three stories had appeared in local newspapers (average = 2.8). Thirty-three DPOLs said that at least one story emanating from the award had been broadcast on national television, and 34 reported at least one story on national radio programs. Major newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, printed at least one story about 69 DPOL recipients, and news and information magazines carried at least one story about 32 of them.

THE DPOL AWARD AND ASSISTANCE TO OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

The White House Office of National Service had hoped that the Daily Point of Light Awards would act as a catalyst for individuals, groups, and organizations to contact the DPOLs for information, or to invite them to speak, visit, or otherwise assist in voluntary activity. This hope appears to have been largely realized.

Table IV enumerates some effects of the DPOL Award as perceived by recipients. As the table shows, seven out of ten of the

DPOL survey respondents reported that they or their organization had been contacted for information about their volunteer activities. Nearly two-thirds said that they or members of their organization had been invited to give talks or speeches about these activities. In addition, over half had been invited to assist or visit other voluntary groups or organizations. The majority of all contacts and invitations (70%) came from people and groups in the same communities as the DPOL recipient.

THE DPOL AWARD AND THE COMMUNITY

Several items on the survey asked the DPOL recipients to evaluate the extent to which the award had assisted them in furthering their volunteer work in the community. As illustrated in Table IV, nearly half of the respondents felt that the DPOL Award had enhanced the image and reputation of their voluntary activities in the communities. Approximately 40% believed that the award had increased awareness and knowledge of their voluntary activities. A third of the respondents said that the DPOL had been very helpful in furthering their own voluntary activities and/or those of their group or organizations.

EFFECT OF THE DPOL AWARD ON ATTRACTING RESOURCES

The DPOL Award appeared to have relatively little perceived impact on the ability of recipients to attract resources to support or enhance their voluntary activities. The last portion of Table IV shows that just over one in five of the DPOLs (22%) felt that the Award had been very helpful in attracting volunteers. Approximately one in six (17%) said that the DPOL Award had greatly assisted in attracting monetary donations. About 13% said that donations of equipment and supplies were more easily obtained, and a like percentage responded that donations of all kinds were acquired more readily. Fewer than one in ten reported that their

Table IV
Perceived Effects of the DPOL Award

<i>Effects of DPOL on Contacts, Invitations, and Visits</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Percent of respondents indicating that DPOL had led to:	
Contacts from individuals, groups, or organizations	70.7%
Invitations to give speeches	62.6
Requests for visits/assistance	50.3
 <i>Effects of DPOL in the Community</i>	
Percent of respondents indicating that to a great extent DPOL had:	
Enhanced image of voluntary activities in community	48.4%
Increased awareness in community	38.9
Been helpful in furthering volunteer activities	33.2
 <i>Effects of DPOL on Attracting Resources</i>	
Percent of respondents indicating that DPOL had been helpful to a great extent in attracting:	
Volunteers	22.2%
Monetary donations	16.7
Donations of all kinds	13.1
Donations of equipment or supplies	12.9
Donations of facilities	9.5
Volunteers with special skills	8.7
Donations of services	7.5

ability to attract sources of other kinds, such as volunteers with special skills, donations of facilities, and donations of services, had improved to a great extent due to the DPOL Award.

CONCLUSION

During the presidency of George Bush, the Points of Light initiative raised volunteerism to very high prominence. Bush left office in January 1993, but the theme survives in a foundation in Washington, DC, and in popular accounts that continue to invoke the metaphor (Morrow, 1994). National service is also a major priority for President Clinton. Although the media has devoted considerable anecdotal coverage to individual Points of Light, no systematic analysis had been undertaken of recipients of the award or of the effects it may have had on their voluntary activities.

Based on a comprehensive study of the press releases issued for all recipients of the award and a mail survey that attained over a 60% response rate, this article has presented such an examination. The analysis demonstrates that the DPOLs are a very diverse group, coming from all states and a broad gamut of ages as well as sub-

stantive areas of voluntary activity. In general, they have attained a high level of formal education and participate regularly in religious services. The DPOLs express greatest confidence in community and other non-profit organizations. As expected, they devote great time and attention to volunteering; almost all claim to be motivated by a concern to help other people. Many of them took the initiative: they became involved in volunteer activity when they observed needs that were not met in their communities.

With President Bush present at many ceremonies to announce the recipients, the Points of Light stimulated media coverage, especially at the local level. With respect to further effects of the award, the DPOL Award appeared to generate numerous requests for the recipients to visit or assist other voluntary groups and organizations. As perceived by the DPOLs, the Award seemed to have less effect on enhancing the knowledge, image, or reputation of their voluntary activities in their communities, and still less on attracting resources to these efforts. Nevertheless, the cause of volunteerism almost certainly benefited from this exposure at the highest reaches of government in the nation.

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