

Rediscovering a Sense of Community Through National Service

In his famous work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville describes what it means to lose one's country: “[a man] is close to [his fellow citizens], but he sees them not – he touches them, but he feels them not; he exists but in himself and for himself alone.” For citizens to become disconnected is, in Tocqueville’s mind, a death sentence for democracy. Looking around the United States today, Tocqueville’s words feel eerily familiar; America has increasingly become a nation whose people envision themselves as disparate individuals rather than interconnected community members. To fully embody our democratic principles, we *must* rekindle our empathy and sense of responsibility to each other; compulsory national service offers a path by which to regain this lost sense of community.

Today, Americans exist largely separately from one another. Social media allows people to slip into the cycle of confirmation bias, growing economic disparities pull people of different classes farther and farther apart, and the 2020 election cycle felt to many like a climactic moment in political partisanship. It is now entirely possible for Americans to avoid talking to people who hold different viewpoints than their own. This ability to isolate not only fosters animosity for different perspectives, it also insulates Americans from the need to discuss and empathize with the struggles of others. With no exposure to or understanding of the hardships that other people face, the tendency to mischaracterize, generalize, and look down upon the lives of our peers becomes all too easy. The implementation of a year-long national service requirement offers Americans the chance to reverse these harmful trends by recognizing our interconnectedness and fostering a sense of national unity.

In historical American discourse, military service is envisioned as the most salient form of service to one’s nation. Conversations about the draft shape both past and present service narratives, and the national anthem portrays military victory as the key to American freedom. While national security remains important, the fact that America’s defense spending outpaces that of the next ten largest militaries combined¹ suggests that Americans place too great an emphasis on military prowess—often at the expense of addressing internal struggles. Current inward-facing issues of social, economic, and environmental inequity demand our attention, and

¹ “The United States Spends More on Defense than the Next 10 Countries Combined.” *Peter G. Peterson Foundation*, 15 May 2020, www.pgpf.org/blog/2020/05/the-united-states-spends-more-on-defense-than-the-next-10-countries-combined.

conceptualizing national service as military and out-facing fails to address these problems. Rather than describing national service primarily as the act of protecting America from the outside, national service must be redefined as the act of providing for a shared American community. By requiring a year of national service within our own borders, we have the potential to dramatically and directly improve the state of American lives.

So, if not tied to the military, what should national service look like? Compulsory national service can be imagined as a year-long commitment made by Americans ages eighteen to twenty-five. For those twelve months, America's young adults would serve their country through work with nonprofits, state and local governments, or federal agencies. Embodying a position similar to that of a paid intern, young people would have the opportunity to select where to spend their year of service based on their interests and career goals. This could include aspiring lawyers helping with daily operations at the public defender's office, future businesspeople working with their local governments to foster economic growth on Main Street, potential teachers tutoring kids in underfunded school systems while learning first hand the importance of equitable education, or tomorrow's scientists partnering directly with the EPA to implement green energy initiatives around the country. For those attending four-year or technical college, this year might become part of a re-imagined undergraduate experience. Those entering directly into the workforce from high school could instead be connected with a government agency to plan out their service. Regardless of their chosen paths, all of these young people would walk away from a year of national service with both valuable job experience and a new sense of their place in a larger community.

A system like this one offers immeasurable benefits to American society. First and foremost, it exposes young people to fellow Americans with lives and perspectives different from their own. The nonprofit or government organizations that would host a year of service are the same entities whose constituencies span across groups and whose projects demand diverse viewpoints. Exposure to others' stories goes a long way toward combating prejudice and animosity while simultaneously strengthening empathy. Further, this conception of national service offers young people jobs skills and experience that will serve them for the rest of their working lives. Not only does this ultimately benefit America's economic interests, it also addresses issues of inequality—while career-focused internships and jobs are often difficult for

systematically disadvantaged groups to access, a year of paid national service grants an equal opportunity to all young adults to gain resume-applicable experience.

Most importantly, compulsory national service offers young Americans a year spent serving the interests of something bigger than themselves. Their experiences would teach them both their individual capacity to enact change and the skills to tackle problems as a member of a team—both invaluable forms of empowerment. By the end of twelve months working with their organizations to solve community-wide issues, these young adults would walk away with an understanding of themselves as interconnected components of a larger whole. This realization of unity is the ultimate goal of national service; working both with and for one's fellow Americans fosters a sense of collective American identity based on the potential to grow as a community.

Compulsory national service offers America a crucial chance to lean into the interconnectedness that makes democracies strong. If we believe our time is not fit for service to our national community, what are we saying about the state of American citizenship? We all bear a responsibility to invest in the collective wellbeing of our nation, and for the sake of fulfilling our country's promise of liberty and equality for all, we cannot exist as disparate individuals any longer. Tocqueville insists that a strong democracy relies on our existence both by and for each other; through national service we can heed his lesson and recommit to our American community.