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Eberly, Donald J., "National Service: An Issue For the Eighties" (1984). *Service Learning, General*. 291.
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National Service: An Issue For the Eighties

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BY DONALD J. EBERLY

AS SURELY AS Social Security is an issue in 1984, national youth service will be a major issue before the end of this decade. A combination of powerful forces is certain to place the debate about universal service on the nation's agenda.

The 1970s left a residue of problem areas that were addressed but not answered. Youth unemployment is a bigger problem now than it was in 1977, when the Congress forced President Carter to accelerate his timetable for submitting what was to become the Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act of 1977. The transitions from school to work and from youth to adulthood were the topics of blue-ribbon panels whose recommendations were commendable but whose impact was negligible.

Increasingly, economists are describing much of youth unemployment as structural rather than cyclical, which means that improved economic conditions alone will do little to reduce youth unemployment.

In addition to these inherited problems, the 1980s bring with them several new factors. The youth population has entered a period of decline, falling from 30 million 18 to 24-year-olds in 1980, to 25 million in 1990. The Reagan administration is planning to increase the size of the armed forces without resort to conscription. Increasingly, economists are describing much of youth unemployment as structural rather than cyclical, which means that improved economic conditions alone will do little to reduce youth unemployment.

The dilemmas are apparent. While a falling population may decrease youth unemployment rates by a few points, it will not change the structural nature of youth unemployment. The problem of recruiting an enlarged military force in the face of a declining reservoir from which to draw and without conscription is obvious. If an improved economy does reduce the rate of youth unemployment, Congress will have to raise the ante for joining the

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all-volunteer force. As the financial incentives for joining the armed forces rise, they will be referred to increasingly as mercenary forces.

National youth service, in which all young people would be asked to contribute a year or two to meeting important national needs, would go a long way in answering the dilemmas of both the 1970s and the early 1980s. Youth unemployment would fall dramatically as one million young people, more than half of whom were unemployed, entered civilian youth service. The transition from school to work would be eased as the government became the employer of first resort. Every young person willing to serve would be able to do so. The transition from youth to adulthood would be facilitated as young people engaged in responsible, constructive jobs and gained valuable work experience and career exploration.

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If the problem with youth unemployment is structural, it must be answered structurally. Youth service would constitute a fundamental change in the nation's largely unwritten youth policy. Every elementary and high school student would know that he or she could look forward to at least a year of constructive work upon completion of high school. Conversely, no young person would be able to say that society has denied him a chance, that he can't find a job.

With national service, the problem of raising an army can be answered in one of two ways. The existence of a large-scale civilian service option may generate among young people a sense of volunteer service that leads enough of them to enlist in the armed forces to avoid a return to the draft. If, on the other hand, the required size of the military is greater than the number of volunteers, it is likely that the public will demand a return to the draft at about the time it perceives the volunteer army turning into a mercenary army.

The problems were less complex when William James proposed a form of youth service in 1906. In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James (1926), while opposing militarism, said that young men are inherently energetic and have militant tendencies. He observed that these tendencies all too often find expression in war and street corner gang fights.

As a constructive alternative, James recommended, instead of a military draft, "a conscription of the whole youthful population . . . to coal and iron mines, to fishing fleets in December, to dish-washing, to clothes washing," and various other challenging, constructive, and energy-consuming jobs. "Such a conscription," James said, "would preserve in the midst of a pacific civilization the manly virtues which the military party is so afraid of seeing disappear in peace."

James looked forward to the day when a force other than war could discipline a whole community. To date, there have been only isolated, short-term examples such as the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, which James witnessed first-hand a few weeks after giving his "moral equivalent" speech at Stanford University. Similar expressions of community spirit and service have been seen in the wake of major floods and hurricanes.

The closest the U.S. has come to a "moral equivalent of war" on a sustained level has been the Civilian Conservation Corps with three million enrollees from 1933 to 1942, and the Peace Corps with 90,000 enrollees from 1961 to 1983. In talking with those who served in the CCC or the Peace Corps, one often gets the feeling that they as individuals absorbed James' objective.

If the U.S. adopts a youth service program, it will most likely offer a number of options to young men and women. They may live at home and work in senior citizens' centers and nursing homes, in hospitals and health clinics, in schools and day care centers, in recreation and other municipal programs. They may leave home to work in conservation and public works projects, in native American and migrant programs. A limited number may join the Peace Corps.

Upon completion of service, young men and women would be given an educational entitlement, similar to the old GI Bill, to support their further study and training.

While in service, they will be encouraged to extend their education by linking up with service-learning programs of the kind pioneered by the NASSP in the early 1970s. Upon completion of service, young men and women would be given an educational entitlement, similar to the old GI Bill, to support their further study and training.

The local service aspect of national service was described in the March 1974 *NASSP Bulletin*. Several hundred young people in the Seattle area received vouchers entitling them to a year of payment at nearly the minimum wage in return for a year of full-time service in about 1,000 different positions. The sponsoring agencies—state, municipal, and nonprofit—provided the necessary training, supervision, and \$150 in cash in return for the services they received.

Almost all of the young people who sought positions found them, from a mentally retarded young woman working in a nursing home to a bright college graduate working for the American Civil Liberties Union. The majority of volunteers served in schools as tutors and teachers' aides, or in social service agencies as counselors, child-care aides, recreational assistants, and the like.

This experimental national service project in Seattle was funded by the federal agency, ACTION, under a grant to the State of Washington, and was

evaluated as highly successful. The unemployment rate among participants fell from 70 percent at time of entry to 18 percent six months after completion of service. One participant in four reported a service-learning linkage. The value of the work performed was appraised by the sponsoring organizations at double the cost to the federal government.

A clue to the quality of the service experience—for the participant as well as the client—was the investment required of the sponsoring organization. Rather than being paid to take needy youth off the streets, the required investment of supervision, training, and cash led the sponsors to integrate the youthful participants into the work of the sponsor and to insist on a good performance.

The Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s is the best-known example of the away-from-home type of national service. From 1933 to 1942, a total of three million young men transformed the American landscape into a more beautiful, useful, and productive land. In the Capital Forest area near Olympia, Wash., CCC members reforested 90,000 acres of land at a cost of \$270,000. In 1981, the timber value of the 45-year-old trees was estimated conservatively at \$630,000,000.

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The latest example of the educational entitlement for youth service participants is a private sector initiative launched at Brown University in 1982. Under the National Service Scholarship Program funded by a one million dollar grant from the C. V. Starr Foundation, 13 students were awarded \$1,000 to \$2,000 scholarships for having contributed a significant amount of time to voluntary public service.

TWO FUTURES FOR NATIONAL SERVICE

The merits of national youth service are sufficient to justify its immediate establishment. The President should draw attention to national needs such as taking care of the very young and the very old, catching up with the conservation work that has been piling up since the days of the CCC, helping to rebuild the nation's infrastructure, and being prepared to defend the nation in the armed services. He should invite young people to volunteer to meet these needs, assuring to all who do a decent stipend and financial credits for further education and training.

The Congress should appropriate sufficient funds to permit the gradual buildup of civilian service, from 100,000 participants at the end of the first year, to an estimated plateau enrollment of one million persons three years later. In 1983 dollars, the cost per work year would be \$8,000 and the set-aside for national service scholarships would be another \$2,000 per work year. The program should be initiated by competitive grants to cities, states, counties, and selected coalitions. Various assumptions would be tested during the early years to permit an efficient operation when youth service reaches full size.

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If civilian youth service is not adopted on its merits, it may arrive through the side door in the event the draft is reinstated. The draft law requires that conscientious objectors perform two years of civilian service contributing to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest. To qualify as a conscientious objector, a young man would have to convince his draft board of his objection to participation in war.

This was a relatively easy determination to make during World War II, the Korean War, and most of the Vietnam War because the objection had to be based on the person's religious beliefs. Conscientious objector status was assigned almost automatically to Mennonites, Quakers, and Church of the Brethren members. The testimony of a pastor, priest, or rabbi could convince the draft board that a young Methodist, Catholic, or Jew deserved to be a conscientious objector.

The 10,000 volunteers who comprise the local draft boards that were reconstituted last year would have a much more difficult time deciding among those claiming to be conscientious objectors in the future. If the draft were reinstated today, young men could claim conscientious objector status on religious, moral, or ethical grounds. Neither church membership nor good behavior would be required of conscientious objector applicants. The mere assertion of one's moral or ethical beliefs in opposition to war could result in a local draft board awarding him conscientious objector status.

What could happen in the United States is revealed by the situation that exists in West Germany today. The basis for conscientious objection is found in the West German Constitution: "No one may be compelled against his

conscience to render war service involving the use of arms." The great majority of young men who apply for conscientious objector status receive it. Currently, some 35,000 conscientious objectors are performing alternative service, and a reported 100,000 others have made application for conscientious objector status. These figures compare with approximately 230,000 conscripts in the armed services.

The young man forced to make a decision may not make it in the way the law intended. The civilian service options in West Germany are perceived by some young men as more useful and more interesting than the armed forces.

The alternative service options open to West Germans include overseas service, disaster relief service on a part-time basis for a 10-year period, and full-time domestic civilian service for a period of 16 months. The period for conscripts is 15 months plus a reserve obligation. Most of the young men in alternative service are in full-time civilian service, working in such places as hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, and homes for the aged, handicapped, and mentally retarded. Alternative service official Franz Strube said in 1980 that, "civilian service was becoming so important that there would be public pressure to continue it if conscription were ended."

The nation that tells its young people they are not needed except in time of war; that denies valued services to the very old, the very young, and the disabled when such services are readily available; that fails to conserve its natural resources, not from ignorance but from some vague economic construct, is a nation that is failing to meet its responsibility to the future.

Whether in West Germany or the United States, the problem of assessing someone else's most personal attribute—his conscientious beliefs—is not the only factor making conscientious objection a sticky public policy. The young man forced to make a decision may not make it in the way the law intended. The civilian service options in West Germany are perceived by some young men as more useful and more interesting than the armed forces.

Draft counselors in the United States report that some young men are much more interested in the consequences of the conscientious objector

The Case for National Service

The legislative history of national service suggests that one cannot successfully make the case for national civilian service independent of its relationship to the draft and military service. Still, it is worth a try. I would like to approach this point by drawing an analogy that may be far removed in time, but not in principle.

Let us go back several generations, to a time when there were only a handful of colleges in this country, and suppose none had been added since that time. We can be sure there would be advocates of a major higher education initiative. These advocates would say that the United States needs more higher education to strengthen its economy and improve its technology for both peaceful and military purposes. They would also contend that young people would benefit from higher education by having the potential to attain higher living standards and greater appreciation of art and literature.

The advocates would disagree on a number of points. Some would call for a major federal initiative; others would say that the private sector should lead the way. Some would recommend a series of large institutions with 25,000 students each; others would argue for limiting enrollment to 1,000 students per institution. Some would say that the higher education system should be set up without reference to the draft; some would argue for student deferments or exemptions; others would require all students to spend a year or more in military training and service.

Common to all higher education advocates, however, would be an insistence on the promise of higher education. Together with already existing opportunities for military service and civilian employment, they would ask that higher education become a cornerstone of the nation's youth policy.

The analogy with national service is a strong one. Harvard and Yale were to higher education what the Peace Corps and VISTA are to national service.

Just as broad opportunities for higher education have benefited both the nation and the students, so do the nation as a whole, as well as the youthful participants, stand to benefit from national service. Like higher education, national service needs to be examined not as an adjunct to military service, but as a cornerstone of our unwritten youth policy.

choice than in the religious, moral, or ethical basis for it. If the draft were reinstated, particularly during peace time, young men might come to view the conscientious objection provision in the draft law as a way to choose a preferred form of service.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The groundwork is being laid for the forthcoming debate about national youth service. Presidential candidates Reubin Askew and Alan Cranston are advocating comprehensive national service opportunities for young people. Rep. Edward Roybal has submitted legislation for a Civilian Conservation Corps II, in which young people doing conservation work for two years would be exempt from military service during peace time.

Sen. Paul Tsongas and Rep. Leon Panetta have proposed legislation that would establish a presidential commission to study national service. Panetta said earlier this year that he is "optimistic on the prospects for quick action."

The moral issue is more fundamental than the political one. The nation that tells its young people they are not needed except in time of war; that denies valued services to the very old, the very young, and the disabled when such services are readily available; that fails to conserve its natural resources, not from ignorance but from some vague economic construct, is a nation that is failing to meet its responsibility to the future.

I am convinced from the young people I meet and from the extensive data in existence that young people are ready and willing to meet their share of this future responsibility.

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Education in Comparison

In comparing the recommendations of the 1893 Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies and the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education, S.A. Moorhead, dean of the school of education at the University of Mississippi notes that both committees felt that there should be a common curriculum core, whether students were or were not bound for college.

The 1893 Commission wrote: "The secondary schools of the United States, taken as a whole, do not exist for the purpose of preparing boys and girls for college . . . a secondary school programme intended for national use must therefore be made for those children whose education is not to be pursued beyond the secondary school . . . at the same time, it is obviously desirable that colleges and scientific schools should be accessible to all boys and girls, who have completed creditably the secondary school course."

The 1983 Commission wrote: "Whatever the student's educational or work objectives, knowledge of the New Basics is the foundation for success for the after-school years and, therefore, forms the core of the modern curriculum."