

## **Our America – Service Year Alliance Launch in New York City**

November 14, 2016, John Bridgeland

The election is finally behind us, together with its dispiriting national dialogue that revealed disturbing divisions in our country and even questioned the legitimacy of some of our democratic traditions. The uplifting stories of service and shared commitment we just heard from these extraordinary corps members and alumni are good reminders of who we are as Americans... and who we can be.

Many in our bipartisan service year community may be unsure how the nation's new Republican leadership will respond to national service. As a Republican who served during the Florida Recount of 2000 and 9/11 and has devoted 20 years of my own life to promoting national service, I know that history is on our side and should harden our resolve to advance this big idea at all levels of government and across every sector.

My ancestors fought in the Battle of Gettysburg and the Wilderness Campaign, which personalizes Republican President Abraham Lincoln's words: "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

It was Republican two-termer Teddy Roosevelt, whose bespectacled face appears on Mt. Rushmore for his national parks and conservation legacy, who said, "in the long run, success or failure will be conditioned upon the way in which the average man, the average woman, does his or her duty, first in the ordinary, everyday affairs of life, and next in those great occasional cries which call for heroic virtues." His cousin would create the most extensive civilian national service experiment in our history.

Richard Nixon advanced the Senior Corps, some of our largest national service programs; Ronald Reagan, who as Governor founded the California Conservation Corps under the oddly inspiring motto “hard work, low pay, miserable conditions” told the 1980 Republican National Convention that this tradition of service was “a spirit that flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation.” It was President Bush 41 who asked President Clinton to carry forward just one initiative from his entire administration – the Points of Light and the pilot program and commission that would become AmeriCorps and the Corporation, run today by the inspiring Republican Wendy Spencer. It was President Bush the 2<sup>nd</sup> who after 9/11 grew AmeriCorps by 50 percent, Peace Corps to its highest levels in 40 years, and created a new Medical Reserve Corps, Fire Corps, Volunteers in Police Service and disaster preparedness corps in more than 1,000 communities across the United States.

Republicans and Democrats alike have been united in advancing this idea and it has elicited sheer poetry in the calls to service – Kennedy’s “Ask Not”; Johnson’s “to guide the young, comfort the sick, encourage the downtrodden, teach the skills to a more satisfying and rewarding life”; Bush 41’s “a brilliant diversity, spread like stars, like a thousand points of light”; Clinton’s “to revive America’s commitment to community and make affordable the cost of a college education for every American,” Bush 43’s “we need citizens, not spectators”; and “building on the millions of acts of kindness and goodness and decency;” and Obama’s “when you serve today, you connect your own improbable story to American history.” Every president in modern times has issued the call and awakened us to our golden thread of American democracy. And every President since 6-star General George Washington, who gave nearly 50 years of service to the nation, has viewed citizen service as fundamental to what it means to be an American.

On 9/11, I was in the President's Emergency Operations Center below the White House, as terror gripped the nation. But our response was ultimately not fear, but serving and caring for one another in deeper ways that made us recognize we were one nation.

In our most recent national service advance, it was conservative Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, whose own Mormon two-year mission inspired him to be a strong advocate of national service policy, who led the floor debate on, and named the bill, the "Edward M. Kennedy Service America Act" in an act of bipartisan statesmanship and friendship. It's that spirit we need to reawaken today.

In his book, "Gratitude," conservative darling William F. Buckley recalled how his war experience united the "Laramie cowboy" and the "Litterateur in Greenwich Village." National service, he argued, can "ever so slightly elevate us from the trough of self-concern and self-devotion." And we imagine the healing the service year elixir could bring in places like Ferguson, Baltimore, Chicago, and Dallas.

As my good friend, conservative columnist Michael Gerson has written, "the conservative instinct – and America's shared republican tradition – heads toward gratitude for our patrimony and affection for our traditions and institutions, expressed in service to the country and to one another. We honor and cultivate such responsible citizenship because it makes our country, in Buckley's words, 'safer, lovelier, and more precious'. And because it strengthens something valuable and unavoidably national: our national character." Republicans are often skeptical of big government, but supportive of the little platoons of civil society that national service and big citizenship represent. You could easily envision national service tying into the renewed interest among Republicans in infrastructure, boosting educational outcomes, assisting our veterans, engaging the young and unemployed in productive work, and more.

As it was in the ugly and highly controversial elections of 1800, 1876, 1928, 1964 and 2000, our 2016 election was not pretty. But the outcomes of elections are always a new beginning -- a decisive moment in which a democracy has a window for healing and the renewal of national purpose – and it will be our job, together with other Americans who seek to inspire us to great national purpose -- to encourage the sources of shared calling - the invisible strands of patriotism and civic purpose that make us an exceptional nation... a great nation....a single nation.

So in closing, let me get specific in a call to action:

- If you're a leader of a nonprofit or higher education institution and can start a service year program — commit to start one.
- If you're already leading one, commit to grow it.
- If you're a business leader, commit to supporting this work and making a service year relevant to getting a job.
- If you're a young person, do a service year.
- If you've already done one, recruit a friend.
- If you're blessed with resources, please support this work.
- And if you have reach into local, state and national policymakers, remind them of America's bipartisan national service tradition and hold their feet to the fire until they act.

We need each of you — today, tomorrow, and for the years to come – to seed every generation with opportunities to serve their neighbors and nation.

Thank you.