

Expand, Not Cut, AmeriCorps: Asset for Economic Recovery

by Edward Spannaus

AmeriCorps, the national-service program launched in 1993 by President Bill Clinton, provides a ready-made institutional structure which could be rapidly expanded to involve hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of youth and others, in full-time programs of national reconstruction and service.

Especially appropriate, as an AmeriCorps program which could be enlarged almost overnight in size and scope, is the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), modelled on the 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps, and also on traditional military training, in which youth are trained and live in small units, which can be rapidly deployed for emergency disaster-response, or for construction projects.

But, as the result of an incompetent “cost-benefit” analysis, the NCCC program, rather than being expanded, is projected to be terminated under the Administration’s Fiscal Year 2007 proposed Federal budget.

AmeriCorps: A Bipartisan Effort

Except for a period of time during the “Gingrich Revolution” in the aftermath of the 1994 midterm elections, AmeriCorps has always received strong bipartisan support.

The idea of a large-scale national service corps was a key component of President Clinton’s 1992 campaign. Already under the George H.W. Bush Administration, Congress had authorized the National Service Act, which authorized funds for the Points of Light Foundation and a new Commission on National and Community Service. In 1995, when the existence of AmeriCorps was threatened by the House, President Clinton asked former Senator Harris Wofford to head the Corporation for National Service (the funding umbrella for AmeriCorps), and to reach out in a nonpartisan manner to his former Senate colleagues and to the Points of Light Foundation. Clinton told Wofford that he thought the Points of Light Foundation “was the best thing Bush did.”

The budget for AmeriCorps was cut—but not eliminated—in 1995, but it has increased almost every year since then, including under the current Administration. The program started out as 20,000 strong, and today has 70,000 enrolled in it. Many Republicans who initially opposed it, have come around to support it. When Clinton left office, 49 Governors signed a letter supporting the reauthorization and strengthening of AmeriCorps.

What AmeriCorps Does, and Can Do

Among programs incorporated into the newly established AmeriCorps were 1) the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program, created in 1964 as a “domestic Peace Corps” by President Lyndon Johnson; 2) the Senior Corps, including the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program; and 3) the National Civilian Community Corps, created as a bipartisan endeavor under Bush 41 a year earlier, to utilize military resources to involve young people in national service programs.

Title I of the 1993 law established the parent Corporation for National and Community Service, and gave it three functions:

- to make grants to states, Indian tribes, public or private nonprofit groups, and institutions of higher education, to carry out national service programs;
- to enter into contracts with Federal agencies to support national service programs carried out by those agencies; and,
- to provide national service educational awards to participants in these programs, which are available to repay student loans, to pay all or part of the cost of higher education, to pay for school-to-work programs, and so on.

The open-ended possibilities for expansion of AmeriCorps is shown by the bill’s definition of national service programs, as including:

“1. A community corps program that meets unmet human, educational, environmental, or public safety needs and promotes greater community unity through the use of organized teams of participants of varied social and economic backgrounds, skill levels, physical and developmental capabilities, ages, ethnic backgrounds, or genders.

“2. A full-time, year-round youth corps program or full-time summer youth corps program, such as a conservation corps or youth service corps . . . that— A) undertakes meaningful service projects with visible public benefits, including natural resource, urban renovation, or human services projects; B) includes as participants youths and young adults between the ages of 16 and 25, inclusive, including out-of-school youths and other disadvantaged youths. . . ; and C) provides those participants who are youths and young adults with . . . crew-based, highly structured, and adult-supervised work experience, life skills, education, career guidance and counseling, employment training, and support services. . . .

“4) A service program that is targeted at specific unmet human, educational, environmental, or public safety needs and that— A) recruits individuals with special skills or provides specialized preservice training to enable participants to be placed individually or in teams in positions in which the participants can meet such unmet needs; and B) if consistent with the purposes of the program, brings participants together for additional training and other activities designed to foster civic responsibility, increase the skills of participants, and improve the quality of the service provided. . . .

“9) A program in which economically disadvantaged individuals who are between the ages of 16 and 24 years of age, inclusive, are provided with opportunities to perform service that, while enabling such individuals to obtain the education and employment skills necessary to achieve economic self-sufficiency, will help their communities meet— A) the housing needs of low-income families and the homeless. . . .

“13) A community service program designed to meet the needs of rural communities, using teams or individual placements to address the development needs of rural communities, and to combat rural poverty, including health care, education, and job training. . . .

“15) Such other national service programs addressing unmet human, educational, environmental, or public safety needs as the Corporation may designate.”



U.S. Forest Service

The NCCC is modelled on traditional military training, in which youth are trained and live in small units, which are able to be rapidly deployed for emergency disaster-response, or for construction projects. Above is a team assigned to the Red Rock Ranger District in Arizona.

Don't Close Military Bases; Use Them for AmeriCorps

Within the overall AmeriCorps program, the NCCC provides a full-time, team- and residential-based program for about 1,100 youth per year, conducted largely under the direction of retired military personnel. According to a former NCCC official who is also a retired Army officer, the enabling legislation for NCCC is such that the program could be scaled up very easily. The structure is ideal for providing youth to work in projects directed by the Army Corps of Engineers, for example.

The NCCC program was created and authorized in 1992, at the point when the U.S. military was being significantly downsized after the end of the Cold War. The 1992 law allows for the director to be selected from among retired commissioned officers of the U.S. Armed Forces, and encourages the recruitment of its permanent staff from retired and discharged members of the Armed Forces. The Secretary of Defense is directed to assist in the recruitment of personnel for the NCCC staff, and to identify military installations and facilities which can be used for training and housing Corps members.

This could provide a valuable and productive use for military bases now being closed under the BRAC process, on a much larger scale than is being done so far.

According to the former NCCC official, this was how the NCCC was first set up in 1993-94. The structure and logistics were worked out by retired military officers, and its five regional locations were located on military bases or facilities



U.S. Forest Service

The National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) is one of the programs of AmeriCorps, which was launched by President Clinton, and was based on FDR's workforce-training programs of the 1930s. Here an NCCC fire crew is working in Arizona.

which were being downsized or shut down. On a crash basis, the retired military officers planned the operation in detail, down to the level of exactly how many shower stalls were needed for male and female Corps members.

A military-type structure is still used in the NCCC. Corps members are organized in small units, with teams composed of 10 to 12 members. They train, live, and work together, in locations away from their homes, and they have a 15-person van available for rapid deployment. Their training generally

includes first aid and public safety, construction skills including carpentry, and 25-30% are also trained in fire-fighting.

Dubbed the "special forces of the AmeriCorps Army," they keep their bags packed, and are rapidly deployable as trained units into disaster situations, such as hurricanes, floods, and fires. The same deployment principle holds true for non-emergency construction projects.

All NCCC members were deployed at some point into relief activities in the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, as were many other AmeriCorps members. The advantage of NCCC members, according to local leaders who worked with them, is that they are trained to handle disaster situations, and to work as a unit.

But despite this, the Administration is asking that NCCC be shut down under its 2007 budget; the only funds allocated are for closing programs down.

Restoring funds for NCCC is important, but Congress must go way beyond this. AmeriCorps and its various components should be quickly expanded, as part of an overall national reconstruction effort centered on the retooling of the automobile industry, and under the overall supervision of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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Clinton Recalls FDR, JFK In Launching AmeriCorps

These are excerpts of remarks by President Bill Clinton, at the Sept. 21, 1993 signing ceremony for the National Service and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, which established AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National and Community Service.

When the Vice President and I went across this country last year, I was deeply moved by forces that were both good and bad, that kept pushing me to believe that this was more important than so many other things that all of us do in public life. I saw the wreckage, the insanity, the lost human potential that you can find now not only in our biggest cities, but in every community. And yet, I saw even in the most difficult circumstances, the light in the eyes of so many young people; the courage, the hunger for life; the desire to do something to reach beyond themselves, and to reach out to others, and to make things better. . . .

Twice before in this Century, Americans have been

called to great adventures in civilian service. Sixty years ago, in the depths of the Depression, Franklin Roosevelt created the CCC, and gave Americans the chance not only to do meaningful work so that they could feed themselves and their families, but so that they could build America for the future. And down to this day there is not a state in this country that is untouched by the continuing impact of the good work done by the people who labored in the CCC. It is with special pride that I will use President Franklin Roosevelt's pen set, with which he signed nearly every piece of legislation as President, to sign our bill here today.

We also point with pride, as the Vice President said, to the enduring legacy and the continued vitality of John Kennedy's Peace Corps, created by legislation which President Kennedy signed 32 years ago tomorrow. I want to acknowledge, as the Vice President did, the wonderful work of Sargent Shriver, not only as the first director and guiding spirit of the Peace Corps, but for what he did with the VISTA program.

Thanks to the generosity of Sargent Shriver, I will also use the pen President Kennedy used 30 years ago—32 years ago—to sign the Peace Corps legislation to create a new national service corps for America. We will call it AmeriCorps. . . .