

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: The following passage is adapted from an essay originally published by Steven Muller in 1978.

OUR YOUTH SHOULD SERVE

Too many young men and women now leave secondary school without a well-developed sense of purpose. If they go right to work after high school, many are not properly prepared for careers. And if they enter college instead, many do not really know what to study or what to do afterward. Our society does not seem to be doing much to encourage and use the best instincts and talents of our young. Many are wonderfully idealistic: they have talent and energy to offer, and they seek the meaning in their lives that comes from giving of oneself to the common good. But they feel almost rejected by a society that has too few jobs to offer them and that asks nothing of them except to avoid trouble.

On the other hand, I see an American society sadly in need of social services that we can afford less and less at prevailing costs of labor. Some tasks are necessary but constitute no career; they should be carried out, but not as anyone's lifetime occupation. Our democracy profoundly needs public spirit, but the economy of our labor system primarily encourages self-interest. The federal government spends billions on opportunity grants for post-secondary education, but some of us wonder about money given on the basis only of need. We ask the young to volunteer for national defense, but not for the improvement of our society. As public spirit and public services decline, so does the quality of life. So I ask myself why cannot we put it all together and ask our young people to volunteer in peacetime to serve America?

I recognize that at first mention, universal national youth service may sound too much like compulsory military service or the Hitler Youth. I do not believe it has to be like that at all. It need not require uniforms or camps, nor a vast new federal bureaucracy, nor vast new public expenditures. And it should certainly not be compulsory.

A voluntary program of universal national youth service does of course require compelling incentives. Two could be provided. Guaranteed job training would be one. Substantial federal assistance toward post-secondary education would be the other. This would mean that today's complex measures of federal aid to students would be ended, and that there would also be no need for tuition tax credits for post-secondary education. Instead, prospective students would *earn* their assistance for post-secondary education by volunteering for national service, and only those who earned assistance would receive it. Present federal expenditures for the assistance of students in post-secondary education would be converted into a simple grant program, modeled on the post-World War II Bill of Rights.

But what, you say, would huge numbers of high-school graduates do as volunteers in national service? They could be interns in public agencies, local, state, and national. They could staff day-care programs, neighborhood health centers, centers to counsel and work with children; help to maintain public facilities, including highways, rail beds, waterways and airports; engage in neighborhood renewal projects, both physical and social. Some would elect military service, others the Peace Corps. Except for the latter two alternatives and others like them, the volunteers could live anywhere they pleased. They would not wear uniforms. They would be employed and supervised by people already employed locally in public-agency careers.

Volunteers would be paid only a subsistence wage, because they would receive the benefits of job training, not necessarily confined to one task, as well as assistance toward post-secondary education if they were so motivated and qualified. If cheap mass housing for some groups of volunteers were needed, supervised participants in the program could rebuild decayed dwellings in metropolitan areas.

All that might work. But perhaps an even more attractive version of universal national youth service might include private industrial and commercial enterprise as well. Private employers would volunteer to select a stated number of volunteers. They would have their labor at the universally applied subsistence wage; in return they would offer guaranteed job training as well as the exact equivalent of what the federal government would have to pay for assistance toward post-secondary education. The inclusion of volunteer private employers would greatly amplify job-training opportunities for the youth volunteers, and would greatly lessen the costs of the program in public funds.

The direct benefits of such a universal national-youth-service program would be significant. Every young man and woman would face a meaningful role in society after high school. Everyone would receive job training, and the right to earn assistance toward post-secondary education. Those going on to post-secondary education would have their education interrupted by a constructive work experience. There is evidence that they would thereby become more highly motivated and successful students, particularly if their work experience related closely to subsequent vocational interests. Many participants might locate careers by means of their national-service assignments.

No union jobs need be lost, because skilled workers would be needed to give job training. Many public services would be performed by cheap labor, but there would be no youth army. And the intangible, indirect benefits would be the greatest of all. Young people could regard themselves as more useful and needed. They could serve this country for a two-year period as volunteers, and *earn* job training and/or assistance toward post-secondary education. There is more self-esteem and motivation in earned than in unearned benefits. Universal national youth service may be no panacea. But in my opinion the idea merits serious and imaginative consideration.

ESSAY TOPIC

For what reasons did Muller think in 1978 that we should have a "voluntary program of universal national youth service"? To what extent do you find his proposal practical and worthwhile at the start of the twenty-first century? Write an essay responding to these two questions; to develop your own position, be sure to discuss specific examples. Those examples can be drawn from anything you have read, as well as from your observation and experience.