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A Public Service for the Twenty-First Century

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No simpler or more eloquent statement of the purposes of the Government of the United States has ever been expressed than these words in the preamble of the Constitution: "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. . . ."

Every time I read this noble introduction, I wonder how many citizens remember studying these objectives in school—or if they ever had any exposure to them at all. I wonder how many teachers have taken the time to pore over these words in their classes, to examine the meaning and implications of each phrase as it has been interpreted and elaborated upon in the actions of the government over our two-hundred-year history. How many dissect the full meaning of justice, analyze the ramifications of welfare, explore the significance of liberty, realize the variants on how we secure it, ponder the futuristic connotations of our posterity? What examples of current functions of government flow from or are explained by any one of these phrases? I am not alluding here to all the fine points of constitutional law but simply to the elementary fact that this preamble alone is the foundation of so much that has developed in two centuries, of so much that profoundly affects the daily lives of all of us.

And I also wonder what emphasis is placed on the opening phrase: "We the people. . . ." It should remind us that government is not only something that serves and controls our very existence but also is an instrument of all of us, a means that our forebears established and that we

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are expected to treasure, bring to fruition, and from time to time shape and refine—in short, that we are a democracy.

The thirst for democracy among long-repressed peoples of the world demonstrates how precious a concept it is. We Americans dare not take it for granted. We must equip ourselves to make it work and work in the interest of all. Our good fortune in having democracy as our heritage must not be wasted. We must savor it and nurture it.

Each age brings different threats to democracy and therefore different challenges to our citizenry. We cannot risk actions on the part of ourselves or of our leaders that threaten our joint interest together or the interest of those who follow us in the next and succeeding centuries. We dare not focus on short-term issues or goals and ignore ultimate effects—whether it be our security from military attack, from the threats to our public health, from environmental despoilment, from undermining of the economy, from failure to develop and cultivate the constructive talents of all our people, or from degradation of the human spirit. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt put it, our government must not only guarantee freedom of speech and freedom of religion—it must secure freedom from fear and freedom from want.

The overarching theme in these pages is that the preservation and enrichment of democracy require duties from all of us. It means that we cannot treat our privilege of voting lightly, that our sad record, among Western democracies, of the lowest proportion of eligible voters who exercise the privilege must be changed. It means that we must keep informed on public issues and not just in the superficial sense of scanning headlines or listening to the evening news. It means that we must be conscious of respecting the expenses of government as much as we respect our personal needs for food, clothing, shelter, and amusement. It means that we need to understand and give support to those who toil in the halls and remote outposts of government as much as we respect our own private interests and our own personal acquaintances. And it means that we must prepare our children and our grandchildren to do better than we have in living up to these civic responsibilities.

I. THE FOUNDATION FOR A STRENGTHENED PUBLIC SERVICE

When the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Peace Corps was celebrated in 1986, Public Television commentator Bill Moyers, a former Peace Corps Deputy Director, expressed this penetrating reminder:

The Peace Corps was born after a long season during which young Americans had been spiritually unemployed. Now, once again, a generation of Americans is tempted to live undisturbed, buying tranquility on credit while hearts atrophy, quarantined from any great enthusiasm but private ambition. [1]

Moyers felt it was time to get a little more nobility into our aspirations—an objective that relates closely to the subject of this chapter. It is a challenge to all of us, not just the young—for all of us in a democracy are responsible for how our young are developed and educated. It is a challenge especially to our public schools and universities.

A discouraging characteristic in our nation's public life is not demagoguery by so many unprincipled leaders who prey on the body politic, but by the number of otherwise intelligent people who are so susceptible to it, so ripe for exploitation. It is a sad commentary that after two centuries of practicing politics—by which I mean concern for public policy—we still have no definitive plan for preparing citizens to examine public issues, to take part, to vote, or even to be interested. It is too much a thing apart. It is not one of the essences of civilized life for so many of

us. It is not an essential part of our life curriculum. We have concentrated instead on schooling ourselves to "make a living," to interpret freedom as devoting our full energies to our own private pursuits and welfare. How can a nation that prides itself on freedom, pays periodic respect to its flag, boasts of its supposed superiority, and throws its weight around the world give so little attention to preparation for citizenship?

A. The Role of Education

Much of the answer lies in the educational system. Something is missing. The long separation of public schools from the rest of government, the preoccupation with keeping them "nonpartisan," are conditions that have contributed to insulation, to making them "unpartisan"—and, consequently, uninterested. There is an insensitivity to the fact that education itself is a part of government, that teachers are bureaucrats, that the very grist of education is vital to citizenship. Education cannot escape a major share of the responsibility for the decline of interest in public affairs and for the shameful levels of illiteracy and "functional illiteracy" among our population.

The major elements of educational curricula from secondary school through graduate study still appear to be: the arts, language and literature, science and mathematics, business and finance, physical fitness, and an elusive field with various labels that embraces history and social studies (under which government and politics is a stepchild subsidiary). Even at university level such subjects as political science, government, political affairs, political philosophy, and public administration are usually minor wings at most campuses. Where they exist, their funding and enrollments have declined in recent years. They remain the enthusiasm of only an isolated few.

There was an awakening early in this century to the need for the governmental aspect of a truly broad, liberal education, with the establishment of specialized schools and departments in many universities, including the landmark pace-setters such as the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse and later the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. But the sparkle of their founding has faded, and, most important, there never has been a recognition that at least some of their subject matter needed to be a part of the curricula in all branches of the university, just as such facilitative subjects as writing, mathematics, and science are woven into so many of the specialized schools' curricula. By its very nature, a matter concerning all citizens equally in a democracy, citizenship and government ought to be a required part of the curricula for engineers, business students, doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, scientists, and every other field of study directed toward living in a career-oriented society.

Considering its central importance in our lives, understanding of government and public affairs ought to be a major division of educational purpose—ranking alongside science, literature, and the arts. Why, for example, if we have National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities, is there not a National Endowment for Citizenship and Public Affairs? Is it possible that the reason politics is held in such low repute is because it has declined as a basic part of our educational system and as a pursuit of our intelligentsia? Could this be a reason that it seems to attract so many persons of venal instinct and that it is looked upon by so many as an avenue for exploitation? Does it fit too neatly as a companion piece with our overemphasis on profit and material success? Is the feebleness of education in the field a cause for our lack of a public philosophy that ought to permeate every citizen's inner fiber, ranking along with his religion, his sense of morals, his sense of human values?

Important as it is, to work in government or be associated in some substantial way with public affairs is only one part of this educational need. But, in my zeal to broaden appreciation for the responsibility of all citizens in a democracy, I do not mean to slight it.

B. Public Service as an Occupation

There are so many ways in which individuals can devote all or major parts of their lives to public service that it is impossible to catalog them all. Participation in political campaigns for office or causes and entrance into careers in government departments are the most obvious avenues for public service. But the gradual increase of associations and enterprises of a nonprofit character, pursuing professional or public issue agendas, adds greatly to these opportunities. Of course, we should consider all branches and forms of education as a public service, which is all the more reason that public-service education should be a part of it everywhere.

The relationship of this obligation on the part of education to the needs of the public service is highlighted by the National Commission on the Public Service in four of its recommendations:

- The President and Congress must ensure that federal managers receive the added training they will need to perform effectively;
- The nation should recognize the importance of civic education as a part of social studies and history in the nation's primary- and secondary-school curricula;
- America should take advantage of the natural idealism of its youth by expanding and encouraging national volunteer service;
- The President and Congress should establish a Presidential Public Service Scholarship Program targeted to 1,000 college or college-bound students each year, with careful attention to the recruitment of minority students [2].

As a means toward all these purposes, the Commission also urged that schools of public affairs enrich their teaching with opportunities for practical experience for their students. To this end, it suggested a Public Service Fellows Program, modeled on successful programs already in existence for White House, Congressional, and Judicial fellowships.

Occupational choice is ordinarily neither totally random nor predetermined. It is, however, often heavily influenced by circumstances beyond the individual's control. It depends on where one was born and raised; the parents' occupations, interests, and economic status; educational choices; entertainment or other extracurricular experiences; and the like. We prefer to think that physical appearance, ethnicity, or sex has nothing to do with choices, but undeniably such may have a decided impact, especially in some environments. Of course, personal inclinations, preferences, and aptitudes can influence choices markedly.

Regardless of all other influences, at some point fairly early in one's life, an individual begins to think about what he or she would like to do—what activity or subject matter he finds interesting, challenging, or even exciting, something for which the individual senses a talent, something he feels he can master. It has been my observation that this attraction to an occupation, skill, or field of knowledge is by far the most potent force directing the person's choices. I reject the prevailing mythology—so casually articulated by people who do not even analyze their own motivations—that mankind is driven entirely by prospects for financial reward.

Therefore, this is the most malleable point for influence by public officials, educators, parents, friends, and citizens in general. This is why the "climate" for a particular employment area is all important. Personnel policies of government agencies and the attitudes of counselors in school and college can make or break a young person's intuitive desire for identification with one activity or another. Mere information may not be enough. A detection of sincerity and enthusiasm, or lack thereof, on the part of the advisor may tip the decision one way or the other.

This is also why there is hope in the forthright assessment and recommendations of the Volcker Commission. This is why it is heartening to hear the opening comments of a recent

appointee to the directorship of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management at her Senate confirmation hearing. Constance B. Newman informed the Senate Government Affairs Committee that she was proud to be returning to "an honorable profession—one that allows its members to work for the common good, one that charges its members with preserving the democratic form of government, and requires that its members serve the public with excellence." She reminded them that this was the profession where "its members have won almost two-thirds of the Nobel prizes for medicine and physiology in the last twenty-five years." Noting, however, that the efforts of public servants are often not appreciated, she concluded:

This situation leads to the challenge of convincing the public that there is a difference between public service and public servitude and only the former can be expected of any person. One challenge of the director of the Office of Personnel Management then is to communicate to America about the dignity and worth of public servants. [3]

Would that this insight could have been expressed earlier in the decade of the 1980s. It is certainly grounds for hope that the methods and financial support will be forthcoming to enable OPM to play the role that Ms. Newman envisages.

II. THE "NATIONAL SERVICE" IDEA

The most exciting idea on the horizon for turning the nation's attitudes around is the proposal advanced from several quarters to provide, as a natural part of the development of every young man and woman in America, a period during which he or she could serve in some junior capacity in civilian, military, or foreign posts, working for the government. Modeled in part on conscription for military service in time of war but even more pointedly on the magnificent Peace Corps experience begun over a quarter of a century ago, it would at one and the same time enlarge young people's appreciation for public service and also provide extra hands and minds to perform at modest expense the many public chores for which there appears always to be a shortage of funds.

Certainly the Peace Corps already proved that altruistic motivations could be counted on to get jobs done in some of the most poverty-stricken corners of the world and with only token compensation. But the rewards in developing civic and altruistic awareness were testified to by practically every participant. Of course, the prospects for all national service opportunities might not be as exotic or entail as much exciting travel. Nevertheless, they would all share in teaching value and in exposing the "cadets" to the public service atmosphere and to the satisfactions of performing needed and worthwhile duties. An extraordinarily high proportion of Peace Corps graduates, incidentally, wound up becoming civil servants later in their careers. In fact, the promise of a more enduring and life-sustainable job could be one of the lures attached to service in such a national service corps.

It may take some time to work out all the debatable issues that arise in planning a national service program. Most proposals suggest voluntary enlistment, but some argue for making it mandatory, although the latter would probably be prohibitive in cost unless it were for very short periods. Duration is another issue, with ideas ranging from six months to two years. Then comes the question whether service must be limited to the young only. The Peace Corps was not confined to young people, so that more and more older persons enlisted as the program developed. (Many will recall that a then-future President's mother was among them—Lillian Carter.) Likewise, some feel that some proposals place too much emphasis on military service, while others would confine it to civilian endeavors. The actual amount that would be practicable

for compensation remains to be worked out. A particularly intriguing idea is for linkage with student aid, whereby an individual could pay off a loan to get a college education by spending a specified period in national service.

Several organizations and private groups are promoting the basic idea for national service. In a comprehensive book on the subject, Charles C. Moskos proposes a voluntary, decentralized program that links civilian and military service to foster civic participation and commitment through engagement in crucially needed social and human services. Hailed as a pregnant notion of shared responsibility for society that must once again be instilled in young people and a call to America to restore civic vision, the Moskos book is a significant contribution [4]. Among the variants on the basic idea is the suggestion that the locales of national service might well include nonprofit charities and foundations, as well as governmental organizations.

Certainly, proposals of this caliber are worth a try. They would provide a splendid supplement to a beefed-up program of instilling greater civic awareness and sense of societal obligation in and by our educational institutions themselves. The National Service Act of 1993, initiated by President Clinton, is a modest but valiant step to meet this objective.

III. RESTORING THE PUBLIC SERVICE

To energize the public service to cope with the anticipated problems of the twenty-first century will require implementing not just the recommendations of the Volcker Commission, not just the ideas of several professional associations and academies, not just the suggestions in this and several other books of recent years, but many proposals yet to come as America regains its sense of civic consciousness. A few admonitions and urgings from my other writings deserve reemphasis or amplification here because they relate so intimately to the "rebuilding" of the public service:

1. Above all, the climate for public administration needs to be improved dramatically. If this means more changes in our basic educational system and more attention to civic virtue on the part of the general population, then we must muster the fortitude to face up to it and begin action.

2. The government personnel system and organization require a host of modifications, especially a regirding of the principle of merit in public employment, a drastic reduction in the use of political appointees and a systematic improvement of their caliber, giving careerists more clout in policy debates, making greater use of training opportunities (including the Executive Exchange program for career and private sector top people, and expanded orientation of new political appointees), substantial increases in government salaries, and more rational definitions of ethical performance.

3. More urgent study is called for, with a view to early action, on the idea of a system of national service, especially for young people. The present status of this intriguing idea is too academic and leisurely. (See above, concerning recent progress.)

4. More forthright attention should be given to the fundamental problem of how public policy is affected by the inordinate influence of money from special-interest groups in financing candidates' campaigns for legislative and executive posts in government. None other than former President Jimmy Carter in mid-1989 published this bit of information, going back to his own administration:

In November 1979, the U.S. House of Representatives rejected hospital cost containment legislation that the U.S. Senate had passed by a 3-to-1 margin. Two hundred and two of the House members who voted "nay" had accepted an average of more than \$8,000 from the American Medical Association, plus additional sums from the American Hospital

Association. A number of these members of Congress acknowledged to me that the bill would have saved patients at least \$10 billion annually, that hospital costs had been rising 50 percent more than the national inflation rate and that the legislation was good for our country. However they were obligated to vote against it. The "obligations" were to generous medical doctors and hospital owners and operators in their home districts. The bill was defeated. Americans lost. Greed triumphed. [5]

Carter than reminded us of the more recent experience with the relaxed controls "bought" by defense contractors, savings-and-loan operators, and others. The only solution on the horizon for ridding the body politic of this scourge is public financing of all political campaigns for Federal office.

5. To give some continuity to creating a greater American awareness of the importance of restoring prestige and performance quality to our public service, one more recommendation of the Volcker Commission deserves citation: "The President and Congress should establish a permanent independent advisory council, composed of members from the public and private sector, both to monitor the ongoing state of the public service and to make such recommendations for improvement as they think desirable" [6]. The Commission felt that, since the "quiet crisis" problems are many and complex and have been long in the making, corrective action must be part of a coherent and sustained long-term strategy. Actions of a permanent body would help ensure that the state of the public service remains high on the national agenda.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is arguable whether the dispositions of so many victims of mythology about government can be readily changed. Ingrained prejudices and long nurtured habits of thought may be too solid to tolerate alteration. It is surprising, however, that sometimes people en masse, whole cultures of human beings, can display remarkable resilience that seemed impossible under different conditions.

I remember how quickly attitudes changed during the Great Depression from a period of antipathy and suspicion about government to one of warm embracing of government's deep involvement in so many aspects of daily living. I remember how readily people adapted to collaborative efforts during the two World Wars. And I witness now what is happening in so many countries around the globe—where totalitarianism and repression had stifled dissent and independent thinking for generations—once exposure to new ideas and some novel facts of life occurred. Miraculously, even in the citadels of communism, when shackles were relaxed even slightly, there was an outpouring of new thinking and fresh expression that had been assumed impossible a scarce few years before.

In the United States, our problem is somewhat different. Being a free society, we have such a plethora of information and openness that we tend to ignore all except what pleases us. Our very freedom leaves us susceptible to the easy way out—relying on prevailing myths, shibboleths, and prejudices to substitute for study and reflection in formulating our opinions about conditions around us.

Yet, in our nation, too, we can free ourselves of such habits as mindless trashing of government programs and personnel—programs that a majority of our representatives voted to put in place, and personnel who have been trying valiantly to bring them to a realization of their objectives. We have the advantage of being accustomed to free speech and to opportunities to express and vote our preferences. What we have to guard against is succumbing to distortions of reality that inhibit us from acting in our own best interest collectively as a society.

Respect for our symbols of patriotism—the flag, the pledge of allegiance, the Constitution—is a vital part of our civic life. But it is superficial and without depth of meaning if at the same time we demean our governmental institutions and discourage good people from devoting personal energies and resources to their maintenance at optimum levels.

Fourth of July fireworks, commemorative parades, and strident shouting at political rallies about the flag and freedom (in the abstract) are scarcely the full content of patriotism and freedom. Patriotism is a reverence for the laws that ensure freedom and give it meaning, for the rights of others, for the general collective welfare, and for the institutions that promote these values. Freedom is exercising the right to vote, to keep informed, to put our civic responsibilities high on our life's agenda [7].

This is the message that younger generations most need to remember. This is the message that public servants and those who are considering the public service for employment most need to remember. In a speech in Washington in 1989, a distinguished career public servant with vast experience at home and abroad, Ambassador Robert M. Sayre (later Assistant Secretary for Management of the Organization of American States), observed that the world is approaching a stronger consensus on the proper relationship between the people and government. He also reminded Americans of the increasing interdependence of nations, with consequent impingement on sovereignty and national independence. The public servant of the twenty-first century, he concluded, will be expected to have a broader perspective and be more knowledgeable of relationships with and among our neighbors.

Our immediate obligation as a society is to imbue more young people with a selfless vision, with the excitement and satisfaction that derives from most governmental activity. Recruits in all fields—engineers, technicians, social scientists, even clerical workers—must be infused with a sense of mission, an ethical passion for the public interest. Dedication to such ideals should be among the criteria for judging performance and according recognition. For, this is how we support democracy.

NOTES

1. Bill Moyers, as reported by Sandra Saperstein in "Peace Corps Honors Its Living Ideals," *The Washington Post*, September 22, 1986, p. A4.
2. *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service*. The Report of the National Commission on the Public Service, Paul A. Volcker, chairman, 1989, p. 7.
3. Constance B. Newman, testimony at confirmation hearing, U.S. Senate Committee on Government Affairs, June 6, 1989.
4. Charles C. Moskos, *A Call to Civic Service*, The Free Press, New York, 1988.
5. Jimmy Carter, "Congress for Sale," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 1989, op. ed. page.
6. *Rebuilding the Public Service*, p. 8.
7. One of government's most senior and respected practitioner/scholars, Dr. Marshall E. Dimock, eloquently presented the significance of citizenship in a democracy in a brilliant article: "The Restorative Qualities of Citizenship," *Public Administrative Review*, January/February 1990, pp. 21–25.