Mandatory Service Learning Limits Freedom of Choice

National Service, 2011

"The freedom for our kids to volunteer—or not—and to choose where and how long they volunteer, is ... vital."

The editors of Practical Homeschooling maintain in the following viewpoint that there is nothing voluntary about mandatory voluntary service. Plans to require middle and high school students to perform community service at government-approved volunteer sites in exchange for an educational tax credit are inappropriate in challenging economic times. Moreover, the authors argue, calls for a civilian national security force, even couched in terms of voluntary service, are reminiscent of youth enlistment programs used by Adolf Hitler. In a free country, the authors reason, children should be free to choose whether they want to volunteer.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. In the opinion of the editors of Practical Homeschooling, what dictator other than Adolf Hitler enlisted young people as enforcers?
2. What two American philosophers invented the concept of service-based learning, according to the authors?
3. What fields of service would be part of the curriculum at the proposed US Public Service Academy?

Above the gates of the Auschwitz concentration camp, where over a million prisoners were killed during World War II, is this motto: "Arbeit Macht Frei." This is German for "Work Makes (You) Free." The illusory promise: Do whatever the government says, no matter how servile, and you will be liberated. The truth: The only "liberation" Germany offered those unfortunate prisoners was death by gassing, starvation, medical experimentation, and overwork.

Concentration camps like Auschwitz were used to house Jews, gypsies, dissenters, and other "un-German" elements. To control the German population itself, Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers Party (the word "Nazi" comes from "Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei") had other tools: a totally compliant media, compromised churches (uncontrolled churches were outlawed), the Gestapo, and of course, the Hitler Youth Brigade.

Using the Young as Enforcers

First established in 1922, enlistment in Hitler Youth became mandatory for all young Germans, with compulsory attendance at all meetings by 1939. For 10- to 18-year-old boys, it started out with enjoyable Boy Scout-like activities, but quickly moved to training in military discipline and tactics. Older boys were encouraged to be cruel to the younger ones, in order to "toughen them up." For girls, it was mainly about becoming physically fit to be good Aryan mothers. Both groups were encouraged to idolize Hitler and support him in every way possible, including informing on "unpatriotic" family members.
Other dictators had their own ways of enlisting young people as enforcers. In China, Communist Party Chairman Mao [Zedong] bypassed the Communist hierarchy and set up his own personality cult, the infamous "Red Guards." These young adults and teens were originally charged with tearing down the "Four Olds" of Chinese society (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas). However, they quickly began denouncing, attacking, and executing people they considered counterrevolutionary.

With this background in mind, those who know history became nervous when, in a July 2, 2008, campaign speech, Democratic [presidential] candidate Barack Obama said, "We cannot continue to rely on our military in order to achieve the national security objectives that we've set. We've got to have a civilian national security force that's just as powerful, just as strong, just as well-funded."

A Civilian National Security Force

The reference to a "civilian national security force" mysteriously was scrubbed from the official transcript of the speech shortly after it was posted, but by then millions had already seen that part of the speech on YouTube, including your editors.

Later that year, Obama's Republican "opponent," Senator John McCain, joined him at the September 11 ServiceNation summit. There, they both helped "kick off the movement to inspire an America in which, by 2020, 100 million citizens will volunteer time in schools, workplaces, and faith-based and community institutions each and every year (up from 61 million today), and that increasing numbers of Americans annually will commit a year of their lives to national service ... one million Americans a year in full-time service by the year 2020."

Ah, volunteering! That's all the "civilian national security force" lingo was about. Now we can all relax. Not exactly. This won't be your father's volunteering.

Mandatory Voluntary Service

I read about this 15 years or so ago in Chronicles magazine. It made such an impression on me at the time that I still remember it.

The topic was "mandatory voluntary service," and if you think that's a contradiction in terms, I couldn't agree with you more.

It all actually started back in the early 1900s, when American philosophers William James and John Dewey (yes, that John Dewey—the fellow who switched American public schools from "education" to "socialization") invented the concept of "service-based learning." In 1910, James wrote a famous essay, "The Moral Equivalence of War," in which he called for national conscription in the cause of vigorously implementing socialist ideals.

World War I and the Great Depression came along and knocked this idea off the front list, but it came surging back in 1993, when President Bill Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act.
This created AmeriCorps—a vehicle for paying young people to "volunteer" in government-approved organizations—and the Corporation for National and Community Service—an organization set up like a foundation, to give money to advance the cause of mandatory volunteerism.

After 1993, a number of attempts were made to force mandatory "service" on the American people. Senator [Ernest] Hollings (D-SC) tried and failed to push his Universal National Service Act through in 2003. Congressman [Charles B.] Rangel (D-NY) introduced his Universal National Service Act in 2006 and 2007. Like most bills, it went nowhere. However, support was growing on both sides of the aisle.

Neoconservatives envisioned mandatory service as a way to teach discipline and fair play to ghetto youth in camps far away from their drug-riddled neighborhoods. Liberals loved the idea of getting millions of kids off in camps where they could be indoctrinated in good liberal thinking. However, events such as 9/11 [the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks] and the Iraq war took center stage, while the political debate centered on issues such as immigration and homosexual rights. There was no time or political energy to push through an unpopular mandatory plan of civilian service.

Things perked up for mandatory national service in 2007. In September ... of that year, Time published an entire issue pushing the idea. Then, in early 2008, the ServiceNation Campaign kicked off. The founders of City Year and the Peace Corps, the first director of AmeriCorps, 106 private organizations, and some well-placed corporate partners, all "spontaneously" decided that now was the time to make their dream of drafting all American kids—and eventually, everyone else as well—a reality. That's when both presidential candidates, one of whom was bound to get elected, joined in.

Obama Will Require Students to Work

In a February 3, 2008, speech at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], Michelle Obama said:

Barack Obama will require you to work. He is going to demand that you shed your cynicism. That you put down your divisions. That you come out of your isolation, that you move out of your comfort zones. That you push yourselves to be better. And that you engage. Barack will never allow you to go back to your lives as usual, uninvolved, uninformed.

Mere over-the-top political-speak? Not so. Below is what the original "America Serves" page on Obama's official "President-Elect" transition website, change.gov, used to say. (After a number of bloggers and speakers commented on it, the page was changed to remove the word "required," which has been highlighted in the direct quote below from the original page).

The Obama administration will call on Americans to serve in order to meet the nation’s challenges. President-Elect Obama will expand national service programs like AmeriCorps and Peace Corps and will create a new Classroom Corps to help teachers in underserved schools, as well as a new Health Corps, Clean Energy Corps, and Veterans Corps. Obama will call on citizens of all ages to serve America, by developing a plan to require 50 hours of community service in middle school and high school and 100 hours of community service in college every year. Obama will encourage retiring Americans to serve by improving programs available for individuals over age 55, while at the same time promoting youth programs such as YouthBuild and Head Start.

That went over like a lead balloon, so a carrot was added in place of the too-obvious stick. Here's what the updated page currently says: Obama and Biden will call on citizens of all ages to serve. They'll set a goal that all middle school and high school students engage in 50 hours of community service a year, and
develop a plan for all college students who engage in 100 hours of community service to receive a fully refundable tax credit of $4,000 for their education.

Great! Since our economy is doing so well, let's dish out $4K per student for "volunteering." But at approved volunteer sites only, of course....

**Well-Indoctrinated Leaders**

This is already being implemented. The "GIVE Act," H.R. 1388 [renamed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act], was signed into law on April 21. It massively expands and funds the [Corporation for National and Community Service], in a bid to "manage" up to 8 or 9 million "volunteers." H.R. 1444, the "SERVE Act," also establishes a Congressional Commission on Civic Service, among whose tasks are figuring out "whether a workable, fair and reasonable mandatory service requirement for all able young people could be developed, and how such a requirement could be implemented ..." [H.R. 1444 did not become law.]

Now comes the "Tuition-Free Public Service Academy Bill" [H.R. 2102] sponsored by Rep. Jim Moran, D-VA. In his own words, it would create a new four-year academy "modeled after the current military service academies at West Point, Annapolis and Colorado Springs." The idea? To "cultivate and groom a new generation of young leaders dedicated to public service. The Public Service Academy would offer four years of tuition-free education in exchange for five years of civilian service following graduation. Eligible fields of service would include public education, public health, law enforcement and government."

Since four-year colleges already offer degrees in public education, public health, law enforcement, and government, we have to wonder why a special quasi-military academy is needed for this. Unless the goal is to force every kid, and eventually everyone of all ages, to "volunteer." Then it will certainly help to have well-indoctrinated "leaders" for the "volunteers."

The freedom for our kids to volunteer—or not—and to choose where and how long they volunteer, is as vital as the freedom to homeschool.

We've won other political battles; God willing, we'll win this one, too.

Let "Freedom of Choice in Volunteering" become our watchword. It sure beats "Arbeit Macht Frei."

**Further Readings**

**Books**


Periodicals


• Kathy R. Fox "Children Making a Difference: Developing Awareness of Poverty Through Service

- Andrew Furco and Susan Root "Research Demonstrates the Value of Service Learning," Phi Delta Kappan, February 2010.


