

# AmeriCorps the Beautiful?

*Harris Wofford &  
Steven Waldman*

*say conservatives should love Bill*

*Clinton's national-service program;*

*Doug Bandow says it's  
hollow at the corps.*

## **Habitat for Conservative Values** *by Harris Wofford & Steven Waldman*

Let's conduct what Charles Murray might call "a thought experiment." Imagine it's 1993 and Newt Gingrich has been sworn in as president. In his Inaugural Address, he pledges to "dismantle the welfare state and replace it with an Opportunity Society." He appoints a task force of the party's most creative conservatives to ensure that citizen action will fill the void left by the withdrawal of government.

There is, by no means, unanimity. The Cato Institute's Doug Bandow argues that as government recedes, charities and volunteer groups will naturally fill the gap. Arianna Huffington says that the nonprofit sector must become more effective and less bureaucratic. Gingrich agrees and advises the task force to look at Habitat for Humanity as a model for truly effective compassion—inexpensive, nongovernmental, and faith-based.

From Switzerland, William F. Buckley Jr. faxes in a chapter from his book *Gratitude* calling for a national-service program to engage young people in solving problems outside of government bureaucracies. Jim Pinkerton urges the re-creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps on a massive scale. Colin Powell reminds the group that the most successful race- and class-mixing program has not been busing or quotas but service in the U.S. Army.

William Bennett argues that all government benefits ought to require something of the beneficiaries in turn, shattering the entitlement mentality created by years of Democrat-created welfare programs. Senator Dan Coats suggests

that government's role should be confined to helping local community-based institutions solve their own problems.

The task force decides unanimously that there should be no big federal program, with armies of Washington bureaucrats telling communities what to do. Instead, Washington would give money to states to help local community groups help themselves.

And, inspired by Buckley, the members of the task force hit on an innovative idea. Instead of just giving grants to nonprofit groups, thereby creating nonprofit bureaucracies, they could model it after programs like the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, to which committed young people devote themselves for a year or two of service. The federal government would in turn provide that young person with a "service scholarship." This would, someone points out, establish a principle that the "educrats" in the higher-education lobby have always opposed: financial aid awarded not on need but merit, merit in this case defined as a willingness to serve one's country.

Pollster Frank Luntz tells Gingrich that even though it's a decentralized, community-based program, the young people it engages should be linked together with a national spirit—and name. Haley Barbour suggests "RepubliCorps" but Gingrich believes that might deprive it of bipartisan support. He asks his advisors to come up with a better name and gives them one bit of advice, "Don't be afraid to make it sound patriotic. Unlike the other party, we are not embarrassed to be Americans." So Luntz has a brainstorm: Let's call it "AmeriCorps."

The reality, of course, is that Bill Clinton thought of AmeriCorps first, and most Washington Republicans ended up opposing it as typical

Big-Government liberalism. Republicans in Congress are now on the wrong side not only of the politics—AmeriCorps is popular with voters—but of their own ideology.

There is, however, a striking difference between the comments of Beltway Republicans and those in the rest of the country. New Hampshire governor Steve Merrill has called AmeriCorps “a great success in the state of New Hampshire.” Michigan governor John Engler has said AmeriCorps “captures the promise found in all citizens.” Arizona governor Fife Symington said he was “enthusiastic and impressed with the work of AmeriCorps.” And Massachusetts governor William Weld called it “one of the most intelligent uses of taxpayer money ever.” Let us explain why we think these Republican governors are right.

Readers of *Policy Review* will not need much persuading that government cannot solve many of our problems. But just as liberals have to be more realistic about the limits of government, conservatives need to be more realistic about the limits of the volunteer sector. One of the most common criticisms of AmeriCorps is that it is not needed in a nation in which 90 million people are volunteering. That is a weak argument.

First, one-third of the volunteering done by those 90 million Americans consists of serving on committees, baby-sitting, singing in the church choir, or other activities that are beneficial but hardly a substitute for the welfare state.

Second, while the potential power of the volunteer sector is awesome, the trend is in the wrong direction. Just as a social consensus against government solutions has begun to emerge, Americans have been volunteering *less*, according to estimates by the Independent Sector.

As women have moved into the labor market, the composition of the volunteer force has changed. Most people now are free only on weekends or evenings. That limits the types of volunteer work they can perform. Most important, harnessing the power of volunteers is not easy. Volunteers need to be trained, supervised, and deployed well to be effective. As former Michigan governor George Romney said, “There is no free lunch when it comes to volunteering.”

Some conservatives argue that even if the charitable sector has limits, governmental solutions will only make matters worse. “Paying” AmeriCorps members, the argument goes, subverts the idea of volunteerism—labor given for love, not money. In an article for the January-February 1996 issue of *Policy Review*, John Walters of the New Citizenship Project argued that AmeriCorps’s “very premise—using federal resources to promote voluntarism—contradicts the principle of self government that lies at the heart of citizenship.” Paid volunteerism, he wrote, would sap the strength of the nonprofit sector at precisely the moment when it most needs to flourish.

This argument ignores the experience of the past two years. Many of America’s most respected nonprofits, from Big Brothers/Big Sisters to the YMCA to the American Red Cross, participate in and staunchly support AmeriCorps. A year ago, leaders of 24 volunteer groups wrote that AmeriCorps is an “enormously beneficial addition to the traditional voluntary sector. This program has not undermined our position, rather it has enhanced our efforts and strengthened our institutions.”

To understand why, consider the case of Habitat for Humanity, one of the most successful faith-based volunteer groups. The founder, Millard Fuller, was wary of any involvement with AmeriCorps precisely because he feared a government program would distort the religious nature of his effort. But on the urging of his board, Habitat brought in some AmeriCorps members.

Fuller used AmeriCorps to solve a particular problem. Habitat was

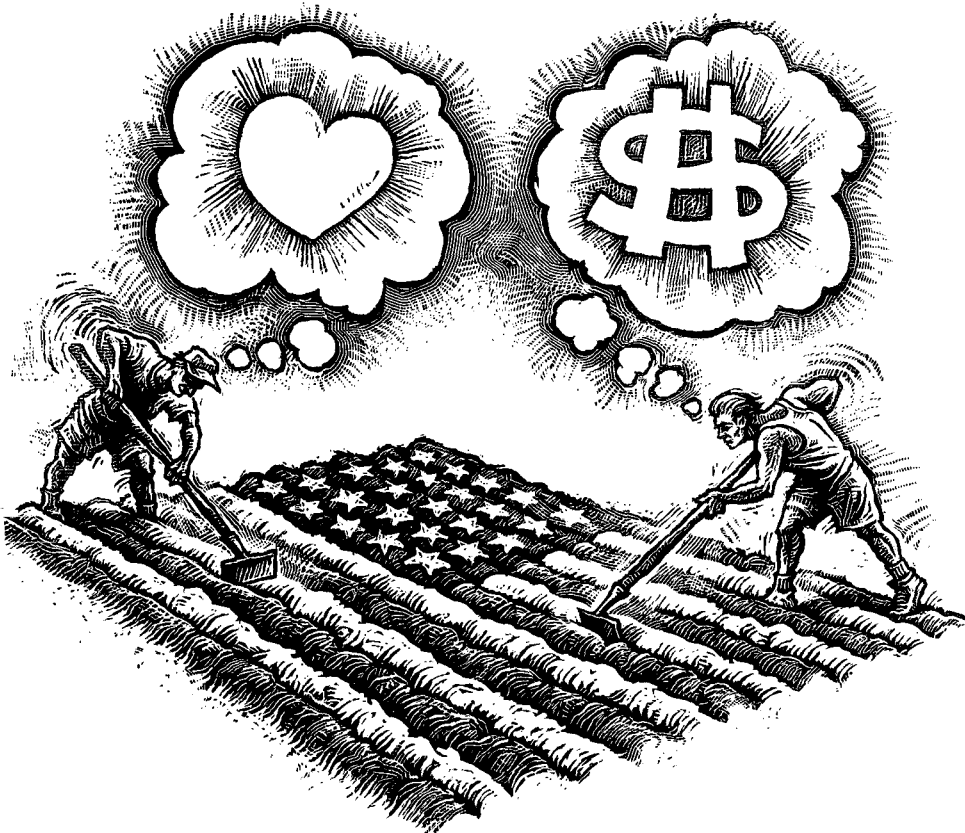


Illustration by Phil Foster

flooded with good people who wanted to help build houses but didn't have enough full-time crew leaders to organize the volunteers. They selected AmeriCorps applicants who they thought might help. These full-time AmeriCorps members dramatically increased the number and effectiveness of the unpaid volunteers. In Miami, for instance, two dozen Habitat-AmeriCorps members coordinated, organized, trained, and worked alongside about 5,000 unpaid volunteers, who together built 50 homes in a little more than a year.

Now Fuller is a fan. "As AmeriCorps members gain in construction skill," he says, "our affiliates are able to expand the number of occasional volunteers through increased capacity to supervise and manage volunteers. We at Habitat for Humanity feel privileged and honored to have AmeriCorps people with us, and we want more of them."

Habitat's experience is instructive, not only because it is Newt Gingrich's favorite charity, but because it is a faith-based organization that did not have to alter its spiritual mission to make use of AmeriCorps members. This has been the experience of all the religious groups—from the nuns of the Notre Dame de Namur mission to the Greater Dallas Community Churches—that have brought on AmeriCorps members. The reason for their confidence is simple: *they* choose the AmeriCorps members, *they* train them, and if they're not working out, *they* send them home.

The Habitat story is not unusual. One independent study has found that each AmeriCorps member has "leveraged" 12 unstipended volunteers. It was a recognition that volunteer groups need a cadre of full-time people to organize volunteers that led George Romney to refer to full-time stipended service and unpaid volunteers as the "twin engines of service."

Even if one accepts the idea that volunteers need to be organized, why not just give the money to the nonprofit to hire its own full-time staff person? Because charities are quite capable of becoming bureaucratic. We need an infusion of people who plan to work only a year or two and have not, therefore, developed a careerist mindset. Besides, AmeriCorps members are much cheaper than full-time staff.

Service programs also provide a nonbureaucratic alternative to traditional government. One of the reasons the Peace Corps has enjoyed bipartisan support is that the money funds volunteers directly. Someday conservatives will view domestic national service as the antidote to bureaucracy.

Consider what AmeriCorps members have accomplished in rural, impoverished Simpson

County, Kentucky. Over nine months of service in 1995, 122 second-graders served by 25 AmeriCorps members saw their reading comprehension scores improve by more than three grade levels. Thirty-seven percent improved by four or more grade levels. The reasons for success are quite simple. AmeriCorps volunteers can develop intense, one-on-one tutoring relationships and become familiar with the academic and emotional problems of the child. Just as important, AmeriCorps members visit each student's home every other week to show parents their child's classroom materials and suggest ways for them to help. Parental involvement has increased dramatically. Would this have happened if the federal government had given the grant to the state education agency?

Simply put, the nonprofits that use AmeriCorps members can provide services more efficiently, humanely, and cost-effectively than government can.

There has been a great deal of confusion about the costs of AmeriCorps. The standard AmeriCorps living allowance is \$7,945—about \$160 a week—of which \$6,700 comes from the federal government. Those members with no health insurance also get a health plan valued at \$1,200. So direct compensation is just more than \$9,000. If they finish a year of service, they get a \$4,725 scholarship.

On top of that, the Corporation for National Service gives grants to local programs to help manage the AmeriCorps members. If the program builds low-income housing, that might include the cost of supplies. If the program establishes crew-based corps, that might include the cost of supervising them. If the corps helps a disaster-struck area, this would include travel costs. Then there are the administrative costs, which are distributed between the headquarters staff and the governor-appointed state commissions that distribute much of the money. The total cost to the Corporation per AmeriCorps member averages \$18,800.

Programs are encouraged to raise outside money to supplement that provided by the federal government. Indeed, they can choose to add extra training, supplies, or supervision if they feel that enriches the quality—but only if they raise the money from somewhere else.

At first blush, \$18,000 "per corps member" sounds like a lot of money. But think about it. This is direct compensation plus all the other costs associated with the program. If you used the same calculus for Microsoft Corp.—the total budget divided by the number of employees—the average "cost per employee" would be about \$150,000.

It's easy to see that this methodology has lim-





ited value, for it doesn't tell what you are getting for your money. We know what "benefit" or "product" the Microsoft investment produces. The truth is \$18,000 could be a lousy deal—or a real bargain—depending on what the AmeriCorps members do.

**AmeriCorps members help solve problems.** According to partial results from a study by Aguirre Associates, an independent consulting

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firm, 1,353 AmeriCorps members in 12 states restored 24 beaches, enhanced 338 miles of river banks, planted 200,000 trees, constructed 440 dams, and cleaned up 139 neighborhoods. In all, they estimated these Corps members working on environmental issues in those states "affected the lives" of 469,000 people.

Three separate independent evaluations of the cost-benefit ratio of the program predict measurable returns between \$1.54 and \$2.60 for every AmeriCorps dollar invested. Each study concluded that AmeriCorps's full value is understated because the benefits of safer streets, better schools, stronger communities, and more active citizens are difficult to quantify and not seen immediately. The high return is part of the reason that more than 600 companies—from Microsoft to G.E. to local grocers—have supported local AmeriCorps programs. Stanley Litow, an officer of the IBM International Foundation, summed up his company's satisfaction by stating, "IBM expects a return on investment, and it bases its funding decisions on demonstrable results. . . . This program works."

Consider a program called L.A. Vets, which helps homeless Vietnam veterans become sober and independent. This nonprofit, established with the help of groups like the Disabled American Veterans, runs a 210-bed transitional home that provides 24-hour-a-day support, counseling, and job placement. Program managers conduct drug-testing regularly and expel those who flunk, a tough-love policy beyond the capacity of government bureaucracies. They require the veterans to maintain Westside Residence and pay \$235 in rent, a demand that is both cost-effective and therapeutic. AmeriCorps didn't create this program but the 11 corps members at the Westside Residence, according to L.A. Vets' founders, have enabled them to start small businesses staffed by the veterans, stock a library, and

make effective use of outside volunteers—including employees of a local computer business who teach the veterans how to repair computers. AmeriCorps members, in other words, have helped veterans become independent of government aid. As of this spring, only about one-quarter of the vets who moved in a year ago were back on the street. One-quarter were in treatment programs and half remained in transitional or independent housing, more sober and hopeful than they've been in years. And it's a good deal for taxpayers. The program has helped move more than 200 veterans out of veterans hospitals, where they would have cost the government \$20,000 per year each.

About two-thirds of AmeriCorps projects address the problems of the young. AmeriCorps members tutor, operate after-school programs, work with gangs to reduce violence, create safe havens and safe corridors, and organize students to volunteer. Our record in these areas is one reason Governor Pete Wilson turned to the California Commission on Community Service to help reach his goal of providing at-risk youth in California with 250,000 mentors by the year 2000.

**AmeriCorps changes those who perform the service.** Full-time service, whether in AmeriCorps or in the armed forces, is a rite of passage that helps create well-rounded adults and citizens. They are expected to be resourceful and show leadership. On a more mundane level, they might learn practical skills—how to build a floor level, how to calm a crowd in an emergency, how to lead a team, or even how to show up on time.

For low-income youth, service provides a different experience than traditional government make-work jobs or training programs. AmeriCorps implicitly accepts conservative arguments against indiscriminate aid to the poor. All major religions teach that it is more blessed to give than receive. This is not only a moral instruction but a statement about human psychology: If you treat someone as a dependent, they will view themselves as such. Low-income citizens, who make up about a quarter of AmeriCorps volunteers, are earning a government benefit by serving, instead of being served. The principle was illustrated by a young high-school dropout, who left a street gang to join the Philadelphia Youth Service Corps. "Look, all my life people had been coming to help me," he said. "For the first time, this Corps asked me to do some good."

**AmeriCorps teaches the right values.** AmeriCorps challenges young people to give something to their community and country. It teaches them, in the words of William Buckley, to have "gratitude" for being given so much. It instills core values of hard work, discipline, and

teamwork that make young people not only more productive workers but also better citizens.

**AmeriCorps combats balkanization.** By bringing people of different backgrounds together, AmeriCorps can combat ethnic and social fragmentation. Members who come to AmeriCorps from college quickly realize that the separatism they learned on campus has to be replaced by teamwork. Here again, the goal is to replicate some of the successes of the military. The World War II draft was the nation's most effective class-mixing institution. The modern army is the most effective race-mixing institution. Because they are so focused on staying alive or achieving a military objective, soldiers inevitably have to focus on individual characteristics rather than group traits. National service can be the most effective means we have for dealing with our nation's racial problems. National service may ultimately replace affirmative action as the primary means for bridging the racial divide.

**AmeriCorps expands educational opportunity.** This is often cited as the main benefit of AmeriCorps, but it really doesn't make sense to spend \$18,000 per member if the only benefit is extra college aid. However, the education award is proving to be an effective way of drawing people into service. And the AmeriCorps experience expands educational opportunity in a more subtle way—by raising the aspirations of those who serve. We have seen many individuals who decided to go to college because their service convinced them that they were capable of greater things. Many of them in turn impart this sense of broad horizons to elementary or high-school students they tutor.

Some conservatives have argued that even if AmeriCorps does worthwhile things now, it will inevitably evolve into a bloated bureaucracy that smothers local initiative. This is the strongest argument against AmeriCorps. Many an enterprise, public and private, that started out lean and flexible eventually became ossified.

AmeriCorps, though, will likely improve, not worsen, because of its basic structure. It is locally based and relies on a competitive grantmaking process. Two-thirds of the money goes directly to state commissions, which choose among competitive proposals from local nonprofit groups.

AmeriCorps is nonpartisan. By law, the state commissions comprise an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, appointed by governors—three-fifths of whom are currently Republicans. AmeriCorps supporters must acknowledge that the success of this program stems in no small part from the leadership of some Republican governors. And those who dislike this program must also recognize that "Bill Clinton's pet project," as it is so often called, is

being shaped in large part by Republicans.

We at the Corporation have been willing to learn. The traditional government posture—cover up problems as quickly as possible—may work for a while, but it does not make for good programs. Among our mistakes:

We have taken too long to switch from an old-style government accounting system to a more rigorous, private-sector model. As a result, our books were recently found "unauditable" using the new accounting standards. We are now

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bringing in outside financial experts to make the Corporation a model of government financial accountability.

We funded a grant to Acorn Housing Corp., which is closely associated with an advocacy agenda. When we found out that Acorn had crossed the line into political advocacy, we pulled the plug. (Among our 400 programs and 1,200 sites we have found only a handful that have engaged in political advocacy.)

We saw that some of our programs were spending too much money on management and overhead. So, we have told AmeriCorps's national and state grantees with above average costs that they must cut costs by 10 percent. And as part of our cost-cutting agreement with Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, we've committed to specific average cost targets—\$17,000 per member next year, \$16,000 the next, and \$15,000 in 1999.

In our first years, the programs raised \$41 million from the private sector—\$9 million more than the authorizing legislation required from all nonfederal sources—but some programs were relying too heavily on school districts, police departments, and other units of local government. So this year, we have required *all* of our programs to raise some money from the private sector.

Despite our efforts to make all our programs models of excellence, some did not succeed. So the Corporation for National Service or the state commissions stopped funding them. Fifty of the first-year AmeriCorps programs were not renewed—15 percent of the total. We realize that such a statistic can be used against us by our opponents. However, since the difference between business and government is the willingness to correct mistakes, this is probably the most businesslike thing we have done.

Having argued the substance of national service, I would like to close on a political note. House Republicans last year put themselves in an awkward position on AmeriCorps. They placed themselves on the wrong side of their own ideology, and played right into the old Democratic argument that Republicans are heartless and uninterested in solving social problems.

Republicans need not compound the error by giving this issue to Democrats. Voters do not automatically associate civilian service with Democrats. If Republicans embrace it, and put on their own imprint, people will look back 10 years from now and say AmeriCorps was a program that Democrats created and Republicans improved. Republicans could then be known as tough *and* compassionate, skeptical *and* wise. And along the way, Republicans will have truly helped transform the country from one that relies on government to solve problems to one that relies on citizen service.

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## National Service— or Government Service? by Doug Bandow

Service has a long and venerable history in the U.S., and it remains strong today. Three-quarters of American households give to charity. About 90 million adults volunteer; the value of their time has been estimated by the Independent Sector at nearly \$200 billion.

Impressive as this is, it isn't enough to meet all of the pressing human needs that face our society. For example, Harris Wofford and Steven Waldman worry that the entry of women into the work force will reduce the number of volunteers. Hence, in their view, the need for a government program like the Corporation for National Service.

The desire to give Uncle Sam a senior management position in the service business goes back at least a century, to *Looking Backward*, a novel by lawyer and journalist Edward Bellamy. He envisioned compulsory service for all men and women between the ages of 21 and 45, resulting in a peaceful and prosperous utopia. *Looking Backward* was the best-selling book of its time and inspired the establishment of some 165 Bellamy clubs to push his egalitarian social system.

Two decades later, William James advocated

the "moral equivalent of war," in which all young men would be required to work for the community. He argued that "the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods," and that national service could instill those same values in peacetime.

Most national service advocates today eschew such far-reaching utopian visions of social transformation. Nevertheless, the desire to create the good society through service lives on. Some advocates have seen national service as a means to provide training and employment, to encourage social equality, to promote civic-mindedness, or to expand access to college. Margaret Mead even saw it as a way to help liberate children from their parents. The legislative process always shrank such grandiose proposals into much more limited programs, such as the Peace Corps and, in 1993, the National and Community Service Trust Act, which established the Corporation for National and Community Service. But many of the grander goals remain—and are expressed by Wofford and Waldman: transforming participants, teaching values, combating balkanization, and expanding educational opportunity.

Thus, the heritage of national service—this desire for government to promote ends other than service—is critical to understanding today's program and recognizing the pitfalls of government involvement. When we evaluate the Corporation and the thousands of AmeriCorps members, we must ask: service to whom and organized by whom?

Americans have worked in their communities since the nation's founding. Businesses, churches, and schools all actively help organize their members' efforts. Service in America is so vital because it is decentralized and privately organized, addresses perceived needs, and grows out of people's sense of duty and compassion. Any federal service program must be judged by whether it is consistent with this vision of volunteer service. Wofford and Waldman think yes. I'm less sanguine.

The mandatory variants of service obviously do not share this vision. In fact, the explicit goal of advocates of mandatory service programs was (and remains) to create a duty to the state rather than to the supposed beneficiaries of service. Moreover, service is to fit into a larger social plan implemented and enforced by government.

Of course, AmeriCorps is not mandatory, and Wofford and Waldman amass an impressive list of testimonials from private groups that welcome the Corporation's support. But, no one should be surprised that volunteer organizations might wel-

